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# The Problem: Democracy at Risk

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**T**he future of the American experiment, and the life of the democratic republic that is the United States, is at risk. American citizens have endangered the republic by failing to educate new generations of citizens about civic responsibility. Elders have told new generations that they have rights and freedoms but have done little to help them understand what is required to protect those liberties, both for themselves and for future citizens. Civic responsibility has been reduced to the act of voting, but voting is only a small part of the civic engagement that every citizen must contribute to secure the future of the American republic.

To understand their responsibility, citizens must first embrace the idea that the legitimacy of government is found in the individual. The founders of the American republic endorsed Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Montesquieu, who emphasized individual rights and personal virtue. The founders of the new republic understood that each person living under a monarchy was a dutiful subject. However, the republic required citizens of character—informed, engaged, and caring critics of the republic.

Even today, the belief that people can govern themselves is not gener-

ally accepted. A quick survey of world governments demonstrates the predominance of monarchy, dictatorship, aristocracy, and theocracy. Many governments grant a grudging nod to the people by allowing them to vote, but that is a far cry from the principles on which the American republic was founded. The people of the United States are not subjects. Understanding that American citizens must live in common society together, individuals grant rights and privileges to their government.

When the republic began, moving from subject to citizen required a fundamental transformation of personal identity and a change in obligations and duties. However, this new identity was not activated by birth or immigration. The individual had to learn to be a citizen. Not only schools but also other institutions of society and within communities taught civility, courage, integrity, concern, and curiosity—in short, virtue or character appropriate for daily participation in democratic principles and republican responsibility.

## Loss of Community and Connection

America is an ideal expressed in the Declaration of Independence and implemented through the U.S. Constitution. Some people argue that the nation con-

tinually strives for but never achieves that ideal of a democratic republic anchored in character and virtue. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1844/1937) worried about the breakdown of communities and loss of dependable morality. He wrote that the state of society “is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (419).

As early as the nineteenth century, the tension between individualism and American republican principles was evident. Americans often act out of self-interest without regard for community interests. Economic and technological advancements have increased social fragmentation, segmented communities, dispersed families, and left individuals increasingly isolated. Twenty-first-century technology such as television, the Internet, and electronic headsets may heighten this isolation. Engaging in civic discourse is hard work and is more difficult when means for opting out are easily available. With a population of more than three hundred million people (Phillips 2002), the United States has an increasing number of citizens who have little or no tradition in understanding democracy.

Thomas Jefferson's republican ideal of engaged citizenry in small rural communities gave way to increasingly larger urban areas. By the mid-twentieth century, more people struggled to remain connected and maintain community in sprawling suburban settlements and enclaves (Morison 1965). Some small villages and towns still exist in many regions of the nation. Also, within larger cities or urban centers, small neighborhoods bring people together socially, culturally, and politically. However, there are also people such as airline pilots who live in the United States but consider their communities to be New York, Paris, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, where their jobs take them regularly. Such individuals may have homes in America, but they otherwise have little connection with the community and civic life. This condition is not unique; people increasingly work for multinational companies in the global economy.

In modern corporate America, large organizations—businesses, the government, the news media, and foundations—play a powerful role in making economic and political decisions that often transcend national borders. Although people often are aware of the situation, they choose to allow these entities to make decisions. When people do this, they act as subjects, not citizens. Individuals normally do not like to engage in argument and debate on complex issues. This type of debate requires considerable effort, time, and courage. Too often, it is easier to go along with the will of experts or specialists.

Unchecked, the state or government tends to take on a life of its own and act individually. This personification of a political entity can be a direct and serious affront to the individual's freedom to act as a citizen. When this occurs, democracy is gradually diminished, and it becomes more important for citizens to assume a watchdog responsibility and challenge the actions of the state.

### Working Together

In a democratic society, the individual is extremely important. Foremost, citizens serve as a countervailing force to

inform or check on the state. The role of a citizen is simultaneously to be loyal to the state and to criticize its actions—to both love and discipline government—because the people are both the government and the governed. Most citizens do not understand this dual role, but it is critical. The ability to exercise these two responsibilities is an essential characteristic of the democratic citizen.

Maintaining the office of citizen requires energy, intellect, and a keen awareness of mutual interests. The work of democracy cannot be done alone; democracy involves continuous debate. Civil and respectful debate is often the most productive, but even when debates become rancorous, citizens must remain engaged. Democracy requires that citizens constantly monitor the progress of debate and engage it to represent their interests and opinions. It is easy to revert to the role of a subject. Serving as a vigilant citizen requires effort and is even risky when it places the individual in a political spotlight.

Citizens also abdicate their responsibilities when self-interest trumps public interest. Plato and Aristotle concluded that democracy is corrupt (Held 1996), and they believed that ordinary humans are incapable of the discipline required of a democratic citizen. Many American founders held similar doubts (Morison 1965). George Washington referred to commoners as “the grazing multitude,” John Adams referred to them as the “common herd of mankind,” and Alexander Hamilton doubted people's moral capacities (Wood 2002, 101). However, these students of the Enlightenment also believed in the power of learning and education. This belief created in them a more optimistic attitude toward human potential.

Some pundits argue that the American public today lacks a sense of civic responsibility. Cultural observers throughout American history have similarly questioned whether their generation or the next generation was capable of bearing their civic responsibility (Lasch 1995). For example, the nation's physical infrastructure is in need of repair, as evidenced by bridges collapsing, steam pipes exploding, and schools

deteriorating. Rather than cope with the civic issues many U.S. cities face, many citizens have abandoned them for new facilities in suburban communities (Lasch). However, because the nation has prevailed and advanced, there is hope. Experience suggests that current and future generations can meet social, economic, and political challenges. However, with each new era, people face new cultural conditions. Today's Americans face an ever-increasing organizational or institutional society whose goals can conflict with the welfare of the individual.

### Changing Education

The key to reactivating American civic life lies in education. This has long been the view of learned people, including many who laid the political foundation of the United States (Jefferson 1816). Early Americans faced a profound challenge: how to create and preserve community, morality, and social order without destroying individual liberty. The nation's founders knew that the aim of education in a republic was to give people purpose by providing them with the opportunity to understand the cultural heritage and possess the knowledge that would make it possible to act rightly and lead happy lives. Educated citizens are engaged citizens.

We believe that only enlightened individuals are capable of carrying out the duties of a citizen. This ability is acquired through an education based on powerful ideas that, in a democracy, must be accessible to all on equitable terms. What people want for the best and brightest should be provided for all children. This is the responsibility of adults to the youths in society; it is the essential passing on of cultural heritage. For the most part, this heritage can be conveyed by a critical study of history, the humanities, literature, art, and natural and social science. History, and in particular American history, plays an important role in the education of democratic citizens. The ideal is an educated society in which all institutions and individuals understand that it is their responsibility to serve as teachers.

The condition Americans find today differs from this perennial purpose of education. Today's educational system focuses almost completely on work-force preparation. Work has an important, even central, place in the education of older students. Developing appropriate skills is a requirement of useful employment, but increasingly, schools, colleges, and universities focus on skills and information students will need to acquire a job, status, and money at the expense of educating students about civic participation and responsibilities. When the purpose of schooling is primarily for skill building, information acquisition, and job preparation, civic education has been replaced with job training.

Citizens must understand that there is only one purpose for education in the republic: to educate citizens to know about and participate in issues important to the flourishing of the republic. Everything else flows from this core purpose. Without qualified citizens, there are no individual freedoms, accumulations of private wealth, or innovators creating economic opportunity, and there is not a capable workforce to support businesses and institutions.

### The Challenge of Democracy

Contemporary America faces significant challenges, and the only way

to meet those challenges is to have an informed and engaged citizenry. The best way to ensure that is through education, and particularly American history education with a focus on civic engagement. U.S. history has long been a mainstay in the curriculum of American schools. Throughout much of the nation, students study the subject in grades five, eight, and eleven. However, the emphasis is often on facts, events, dates, and personalities and is based on standards set by curriculum authorities, including corporate publishers of textbooks. The approach taken by these authorities is largely based on didactic historical chronology. In the quest to cover all events in American history, historical themes and trends are neglected and critical thought is minimized.

A successful curriculum should emphasize how past generations of American citizens have engaged civic debate in their communities, states, and nation while helping students acquire (a) the ability to challenge opinions and value statements and (b) the skills needed to debate current issues in their communities. A successful curriculum should engender affection for the nation's history and the civic responsibilities of individual citizens.

For many people, the study of history ends with high school education. College students in many fields never

return to an investigation and understanding of deeper lessons in history. Also, continuing education in history is rare for adults, except for those who pursue this subject through reading and civic engagement. If Americans are to meet the challenges of modern society, citizens must recommit themselves to the historic reality that the United States is an idea sustained through an enduring debate of the issues, challenges, and opportunities that face its citizens.

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