

**INSIDE
HIGHER ED**

April 25, 2008

Becoming American

By Thomas Lindsay

We have besides these men descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, ... if they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, ... but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and then they feel that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.

—Abraham Lincoln, Speech in Chicago, 1858

What does it mean to be an American citizen?

From all the heat generated of late over immigration, one might have supposed that some light would have been cast on this crucial question. Given the need to elevate our national dialogue over this issue, it is disheartening that this has yet to happen. It appears that the *idea* that is American citizenship is all but lost on America's citizens themselves. Here our universities can be of invaluable assistance, through introducing their students to the perennial questions and issues that define American democratic theory and practice.

Any attempt to perform this task ought to begin at the beginning, with the very justification for our existence as a country—the Declaration of Independence. Its claims are meant to be universal, addressed not only to King George III, but to a “candid world.” The Declaration argues that, in the new American order, blood, creed, and national origin—the constituents of citizenship throughout history—have been dethroned. Instead, U.S. citizenship entails adherence to moral and political principles the truth of which, says the Declaration, is “self-evident” to those who reason rightly. These principles, which form what can be called the “American theory of justice,” argue for human equality; for the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; for government established by popular consent; and for the right of the people to rebel should government cease to fulfill the purposes for which it was instituted. On this basis, the United States is more than a mere address, more than its history, and more than its demographics. It is, in its essence, an idea.

Yet how many of us today, native-born no less than newly arrived immigrants, can recount the Declaration's four self-evident truths? More crucial, how many of us have even a rudimentary grasp of the moral and intellectual foundations of the “American theory of justice”? For years, surveys have told us that the answer to both questions is

precious few. This cannot help but alarm those of us who believe, with the Declaration's author, Thomas Jefferson, that no nation can expect to be "both ignorant *and* free." But neither should we be surprised at the surveys' results, says Derek Bok. The former president of Harvard University argues in his recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges* that American higher education is not providing the democratic or civic education on which he and Jefferson deem democratic health to depend.

Bok's title conveys an unhappy thesis: Our universities are underperforming on a number of fronts, one of which is preparing students for citizenship. He laments the fact that most colleges today do not require even an introductory course in American government, the result of which, according to Department of Education statistics, is that only one-third of undergraduates ever complete such a course. He is yet more concerned about why this might be the case, citing Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, who reports that "after five years of active discussions on dozens of campuses ... I have been persuaded that there is not just a neglect of but a resistance to college-level study of United States democratic principles."

With such a paucity of college courses, concerns over the Americanization of newly arrived immigrants need also to take account of the fact that native-born citizens are nearly equally challenged at "becoming American," that is, at the task of understanding the principles that established and largely continue to define this country. Even those born in America are failing to become American in this, the deepest sense.

While university-bashing has become something of a cottage industry of late, this is not my intention. As a former dean and provost, I know too well that today's colleges and universities face a multitude of challenges that are little understood by those outside academe. My intent is, rather, to persuade our universities that they will be the first to benefit from requiring that all their students undertake the serious study of the character and foundations of American democracy.

Having spent the bulk of the last quarter-century teaching in universities, I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of professors choose their profession for the very best of reasons—out of the conviction they share with Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Not the desire for wealth or fame, but the desire for knowledge, unites the professoriate at its best.

Socrates also argues that our quest for knowledge of the whole cannot take place in a vacuum. It requires that we simultaneously examine our act of examining. That is to say, it requires that we study the context in which we pursue the life of rational inquiry. This is why Socrates turned away from the study of what today is called the "natural sciences" solely and toward the "human things," politics chief among them. Simply put, the particular study of the intellectual and moral foundations of the American republic is not merely an exercise in antiquarianism or filial piety, but rather an essential element in our pursuit of knowledge of the whole of existence. As such, it is no less essential that, like Socrates, we share the fruits of our inquiry with our students.

This is not to deny, but to place in perspective, Bok's lesser yet legitimate point that, because our universities benefit from tax exemptions and federal financial aid, they have a duty to provide civic education as part of their claim to providing a public good. On this point, a *New York Times* essay published last year, "Revisiting the Canon Wars," reminds us how Bok's thesis echoes in some respects the late Allan Bloom's commentary on Alexis de Tocqueville, which takes the form of a sub-chapter in Bloom's 1987 bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bok's title, itself, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, is reminiscent of Bloom's subtitle: *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Of course, no one would equate Bok with Bloom. For this very reason, we need to give both a hearing. When educators who are otherwise so different agree on so critical a point, it suggests that we owe it to ourselves to examine their arguments earnestly.

Bloom elaborates on Tocqueville's insights into modern democracy and the importance of the university within it. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argues that, in the marketplace of free and equal citizens, the opinion of the majority takes on a power previously unimaginable, threatening us with a new form of despotism: "soft" despotism, which is not imposed by force but rather submitted to almost without being noticed. In the absence of any authority outside the majority, it becomes nearly impossible for the solitary democratic "individual" to conceive of ways of life contrary to those esteemed in popular opinion. We own the power of Tocqueville's diagnosis when we reflect on the immense power public opinion surveys hold over us today. This hold hinders the development of intellectual freedom, the *sine qua non* of the "examined life." If such freedom is not to be swallowed whole by democratic conformism, what is to be done?

In this, American higher education, and perhaps it alone, has both the obligation and the privilege to play the role of liberator. Part and parcel of democratic conformism is its unending thralldom to the demands of commerce and utility. This is understandable. The Founders and their intellectual forefathers — Locke, Montesquieu, and Bacon, among them — understood these demands to be important to ensuring individual liberty and domestic tranquility, as well as prosperity. A people whose government limited itself largely to physical security and material comfort (the "relief of man's estate," as Bacon has it) would be less likely to fall prey to the civil strife that had devastated Europe and caused many of its inhabitants to immigrate to the new American colonies in the first place.

But this very focus on utility, so valuable from the perspective of domestic peace, tends ineluctably to lower our gaze from attention to the highest and deepest — what some would call the truly human — questions, e.g., "What is a noble life and how might I achieve it?"

In short, our democracy urgently requires asylum from the merely urgent. It needs a place where it can transcend, for a time, its endemic attention to narrowly practical concerns in order to ask the most important questions, the questions whose examination, says Socrates, makes life worth living. Our universities, armed with intellectual courage and

shielded by academic freedom, can help us declare our independence from the tyranny of utility and the seductions of conformism.

To establish such an education, the professoriate must dare to tread territory still scorched from the campus “culture wars” of recent decades and revisit the discussion of a required core curriculum. To do this, perhaps we can begin by agreeing that there are at least certain core *questions* that all students should examine. Here, I offer a half-dozen, along with some of their ancillaries.

First, what is the meaning of human equality as articulated in the Declaration’s assertion that “all men are created equal”? Equal in what respects? What view of human nature does this presuppose? Does the Declaration mean to include African-Americans, as Abraham Lincoln, along with Frederick Douglass and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., insisted?

Second, what does the Declaration mean by asserting that we possess rights that are not “alienable”? Who or what, precisely, cannot alienate our rights? Are all rights deemed inalienable, or only some? And why?

Third, why does the Founding generation consider government just only when it is instituted by the consent of the governed? Is justice for the Founders merely consent-based? If not, what might trump consent?

Fourth, why did the Founders opt for representative democracy over the “pure” version of democracy practiced in ancient Athens? What did *The Federalist* (penned by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) assert was the inadequacy of ancient democracy?

Fifth, how does the Constitution seek to reconcile democracy, which means rule by the majority, with the rights of minorities? Stated differently, how do we do justice both to the equality of all and to the liberty of each?

Sixth, and finally, what economic conditions make American democracy possible? Why does the Constitution protect property rights? Why do its critics, such as Marx, believe private property to be the root of injustice? How would Madison and Hamilton have responded to Marx’s and his followers’ critique?

Implicit in these questions are at least ten fundamental documents and major speeches that every American citizen should study. The questions regarding the meaning of human equality, inalienable rights, popular consent, and the right of revolution clearly require an examination of the Declaration, along with Frederick Douglass’s “The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro,” and Chief Justice Taney’s infamous opinion for the majority in the *Dred Scott* case (where Taney denies that African-Americans have any rights that whites are bound to respect). Against Taney, Frederick Douglass’s and Lincoln’s scathing critiques of the *Dred Scott* opinion need to be taught.

The Declaration needs also to be scrutinized in its relation to the pro-woman's-suffrage, 1848 Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on the National Mall in 1963. Why did Elizabeth Cady Stanton look to the form and substance of the Declaration of Independence in crafting the Seneca Falls Declaration? What did the Reverend King mean by asserting that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution constituted a "promissory note to which every American was to fall heir"?

The Constitution, of course, must be taught to our students. As both critics and admirers of the Constitution agree, there is no more authoritative commentary on that document than *The Federalist*, the series of 85 newspaper essays defending and explaining the Constitution, written during the period that the states were debating its ratification. Specifically, the questions regarding representation, minority rights, and the economics of democracy require examination of the Constitution and *The Federalist*, along with Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt's writings and speeches on economic democracy.

Finally, for reasons already articulated, all students need to be introduced both to Tocqueville's defense of democratic equality and to his concerns over the intellectual conformism to which American democracy lies exposed. Needless to say, these questions are not exhaustive; others should be added. (Professor Gary D. Glenn's syllabus for his "Democracy in America" course at Northern Illinois University is the deepest and broadest that I have yet to find.) But my chief point is that these questions and concomitant sources are necessary to any attempt to educate our students in American citizenship. They begin to focus our attention on the deepest issues regarding "Americanism."

To this end, there may in fact be something of a ferment already under way to establish new college programs providing civic education. Here I refer to the recent growth of faculty initiatives to establish disciplinary and multi-disciplinary programs of civic education. Among these is Princeton's Madison Program, which sponsors courses on the American Founding, statesmanship, and political philosophy; organizes conferences on the foundations of constitutional government; and hosts a regular forum for undergraduates to discuss the philosophy, history, and institutional structures of democracy. Similar programs and measures, tailored to institutional missions and faculty strengths, recently have sprung up at Georgetown, Williams, The University of Virginia, the University of Texas at Austin, Dartmouth, and Colgate, among others.

While some will be encouraged by this development, others will point to the "ghettoizing" of a subject the study of which should be required of all students, regardless of major. But neither this concern, nor a related worry over the bulky machinery of Center-building should blind otherwise sympathetic faculty and administrators to the fact of just how easily and inexpensively (in comparison to so many other subjects) such a course as I propose could be implemented: the texts themselves are all available in paperback, and professors across the humanities and social sciences all have the intellectual background to teach them. As for pedagogical approach, a discussion-focused seminar of approximately twenty students accomplishes the desired

objectives nicely. Moreover, this initial, required seminar could spawn a series of seminars focusing on other great questions/issues, and could culminate in a capstone course reflecting the particular strengths and mission of each institution.

Again, as a former dean and provost, I know that *any* effort to change the curriculum is always a bumpy ride. Yet, we have a better chance of completing such an odyssey when we recognize that the questions constituting the core of my proposal for democratic education spring not from mystical, filial piety but, rather, from the requirements of the Socratic life to which we academics have committed ourselves. Filial piety is contrary to the rational inquiry to which universities at their best are devoted. It also is contrary to what the Founders intended. The Declaration's appeal to a "candid world" makes no demands based on faith, or tradition, or blood lines. Instead, it asks us to reason about—to argue with—its assertions that equality and liberty are the grounds of justice. The Founders offer this invitation to free debate hoping, perhaps even expecting, that the world would come to see the reasonableness of their claims.

Through instructing our students in the questions that I have outlined, we continue the debate proposed by the Founders. Socrates argues that human goodness, at its peak, may well consist primarily in investigating the question, "What is human goodness?" Socrates taught Plato, who in turn taught Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle honors both Plato and Socrates when he takes Plato to task: "Plato is dear to me," writes his best student, "but dearer still is truth." In a like manner, we pay tribute to the Founders when we subject their radical reinterpretation of citizenship to the most searching scrutiny. But such tribute is far from filial piety. It is, instead, the quest demanded by the desire to know ourselves.

For the sake of the integrity of both our universities and our politics — for our citizens both newly arrived and native-born — let us begin this quest, and let us do so in the civil, fair-minded, and magnanimous manner that defines university life at its noblest.

Thomas K. Lindsay is deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and a former university provost. His views do not represent those of the endowment.

This article can be found online at
<http://insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/2008/04/25/lindsay>

© Copyright 2008 *Inside Higher Ed*