

Civic Education for a Madisonian America

An Essay in Honor of Ronald L. Heinemann

David Marion

A decades-long failure to pay serious attention to civics education not only has left many Americans with a poor understanding of American history and government, including the country's constitutional history, it has damaged the perception of a common heritage and identity that is essential to national strength and prosperity and undermined trust in both governmental and non-governmental institutions.

We have done a poor job of telling the full story of the American Founding, and especially the most significant part of the Founding. Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier may have been important to Washington, Jefferson and Madison, but their homesteads did not define their lives in the way that the cancel culture movement and many educators would like us to believe.

From a material point of view, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and other leading Founders, could have had productive lives under British rule. It is very likely that Washington's plantation and Adams' law practice would have prospered if there had been no American Revolution. These Founders, and others like Patrick Henry, intentionally risked their possessions and professions in order to advance the cause of "republican liberty" and what they believed was necessary for genuine human flourishing. The hollowness of the claim that personal possessions and private affairs were their principal concerns is exposed by the considerable sacrifices

that they made during extended periods of public service, lifetime commitments in some cases.

We diminish the Founders when we reduce the “way of life” that they were looking to secure for themselves and other Americans to the enjoyment of material possessions, or to the kinds of things that are now commonly associated with the “middle class” lifestyle—nice homes and cars, get-away vacations, tickets to NFL or NBA games, etc.

Leading Founders such as Washington invited the American people to commit themselves to a cause greater than themselves. At the heart of that cause was a way of life that was rooted in human freedom and the potential for human flourishing that comes with the rational and vigorous exploitation of fundamental human liberties.

We have done a poor job of articulating the way of life that Washington and other leading Founders believed the American people had a real shot at realizing for themselves and their descendants. Civic education in America should begin with the commitment of the Founders to human liberty, and the way in which their greatest achievement, the American constitutional order, protects fundamental freedoms and promotes rational and decent existence by encouraging personally and collectively rewarding exertions through protection for expressive, associational, and religious freedom, among other rights.

Madison, the person we call the “father” of the American constitutional republic, was not simply interested in liberating selfish desires. When he argued in Federalist Paper No. 10 that the “first object” of government was to protect persons in the exercise of their “faculties” he was effectively saying that a defensible

government gives people a real shot at being all that they can be. And when he declared in Federalist No. 51 that “justice is the end of government,” he clearly was referring to a conception of justice that comprehends the right of persons to be protected in the exercise of their faculties, and also to be protected in the enjoyment of the fruits of their physical and intellectual labors, but not without attention to the common good and the requirements of a healthy social and civic culture. In this context, Madison’s insistence in Federalist 51 that “ambition” must be made to “counteract ambition” should be read as an appeal for constitutionalized ambition or ambition “rightly understood” that connects the natural desire for distinction to the advancement of the safety and happiness of the people. It is noteworthy that shortly after the appearance of his Federalist essays, in a 1789 speech in the House of Representatives, Madison referenced “republican manners” and “rational dignity” to capture the full richness of the “way of life” that he envisioned for the American people.

What Madison wanted was a political community that would affirm personal dignity in a way that promotes the kind of human flourishing that can come when persons have the freedom to exercise their faculties in ways that are personally gratifying and consistent with proper “republican manners”—for example, civility, moderation, a commitment to justice and the rule of law. In rather striking fashion, Madison observed in his May 1789 speech that people “acquire rational dignity” by their mastery and exercise of “republican manners,” the mastery of which requires a considerable degree of self-awareness or self-consciousness and, by extension, an openness to criticism as well as a beneficial dose of self-discipline. While there was never an insistence by Madison that a respectable life requires philosophic wisdom or saintliness, he clearly signaled that crass selfishness, coarseness of manners, and indolence would not suffice.

Madison's political science is highly prescriptive and points us to the kind of republic that is worthy of rational beings who desire material comforts but who aspire to a life that is defined by more than the gratification of selfish interests. The kind of "virtue" or human excellence that Madison envisioned is inseparable from the fullest exercise of natural "faculties" in ways that end up enriching the larger community of which each person is a part. It is impossible to understand what Madison and Washington, along with other leading Founders, wanted for the American people if we forget the heightened attention that they gave to securing a healthy social and civic culture along with thoughtfully designed political institutions. They were not moral or cultural relativists. Madison in particular wanted to accommodate the human desire for security and comforts, but not at the expense of the larger common good and he never equivocated when it came to advancing a social ethic and culture that would promote "rational dignity" and a "quality" democratic republic.

That the Founders were not perfect in their personal lives or that the promises of the American republic were not evenly distributed does not mean that there was not something exceptional about the convictions and sacrifices of the Founding generation or about the republic that they were instrumental in launching on a path of historical greatness.

Multiple surveys over a period of several decades have tracked the diminished acquaintance of American school children with fundamental facts related to the nation's history and its system of government. Where they are especially deficient, however, is in understanding the reasoning that informs the Constitution and the ethical and cultural features of the "way of life" that the new republic was intended to promote.

Appreciating what it was that Founders like Washington and Madison wanted for themselves and their fellow countrymen requires a familiarity with the evolution of Western Civilization and how due process of law, respect for religious and expressive freedom as well as for the protection of property rights came to be seen as indispensable to a way of life that promotes human flourishing.

Students who have little or no acquaintance with Western and American history as well as the U.S. system of government are likely to be hard pressed to articulate what it means to be an American or to be prepared for the difficult job of self-government, that is, being prepared to be citizens in a self-governing nation that is committed to promoting “rational dignity” and protecting the “blessings of liberty” for all.

Civic education in America should be education for a people who value freedom and who are thoughtfully prepared to protect their fundamental liberties. As such, sound civic education should be Constitution-based education, that is, an education rooted in the foundational principles of our democratic republic.

Sound civic education in a democracy also must include a wholesome dose of character education, with an emphasis on respect for the rule of law, an appreciation for the importance of self-discipline and personal courage, and a recognition that while ambition is a valuable human impulse it must be tempered by a commitment to justice and the common good, moderate or non-factional politics, civility and public-spiritedness—the habits that Madison associated with “republican manners.” Civic education of this sort can result from engagement in collective civic activities, but it also needs to be part of the education curriculum at every level, including higher education. In sum, sound civic education, broadly understood as comprising more than the mastery of historical facts, must permeate the social culture.

It is a mistake to believe that the nurturing of responsible citizens occurs naturally in democracies or, alternatively, that nurturing citizens is an undemocratic activity. Sound civic education should not be confused with indoctrination, but it also is not simply the disinterested treatment of the history and government of the US--the examination of American history and government should begin with the conviction that the study of these subjects must be serious and a matter of self-interest among persons who are part of a self-governing body of people.

America is paying a steep price for failing to invest in sound civic education—the evidence is everywhere to be seen, especially in the prevalence of power politics over constitutional politics along with the resulting factionalization of America. Citizens whose way of life is shaped by an appreciation for the rule of law, religious and expressive freedom, and other defining features of the way of life advocated by leading Founders are less likely to be tempted to engage in power politics than persons who have little appreciation for our constitutional history and politics.

Founders like Madison and Washington were knee-deep in the civic education business for the very good reason that they understood that the knowledge and habits required for a people to be up to the task of preserving a decent and competent democratic republic require careful, very careful, nurturing.

(Ronald L. Heinemann [1939-2020] devoted more than half of his life to Hampden-Sydney College or, more to the point, to several generations of Hampden-Sydney men. Ron and I debated the merits of the Electoral College in late October, his last public appearance—as always, he was a worthy adversary. He was a gifted teacher, a serious scholar, and a proud American with deep moral convictions.)

David E. Marion is Elliott Professor Emeritus of Government and Foreign Affairs and a Faculty Fellow at the Wilson Center for Leadership in the Public Interest at Hampden-Sydney College

