



The Peril of the Republic: The Decline of Civic Education

by John Hendrickson

Of that spirit of constitutional morality there is little evidence today and it is this that has made me so pessimistic as to the perpetuity of our form of government.¹

James M. Beck

In *The American Cause*, Russell Kirk wrote that “many Americans are badly prepared for their task of defending their own convictions and interests and institutions against the grim threat of armed ideology.”² President Ronald Reagan, in his Farewell Address, offered a similar warning about the eradication of the American spirit and memory. Both Kirk and Reagan were reflecting on the decline of civic education — the understanding of our nation’s history, principles, and government. The crisis in civic education has escalated nationwide and many students, at all levels of education, as well as the general population, demonstrate ignorance in understanding American history, government, and Western Civilization. Without a clear understanding of American principles and the history of our nation we will not be able to solve the policy problems that confront the nation today. Civic education is necessary for a moral and virtuous republic as well as for implementing sound public policies.

“The word ideology means political fanaticism, a body of beliefs believed to point the way to a perfect society,” wrote Kirk in defining the word ideology.³ Ideologies have been the scourge of history, with the examples of the French Revolution, communism, Nazism, and others all claiming a set of beliefs that would create a perfect society. All have failed. At its heart ideology rejects humanity’s fallen nature which is corrupted by original sin. The American Founding was the opposite of ideology. The American Revolution was a conservative or constitutional revolution based upon principles and the Founders at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 understood that they could not make a “perfect” government. The Framers — who did not always agree — for the most part had an understanding and respect for history as well as a respect for the sovereignty of God. They understood that the Constitution was not a perfect document, nor would it perfect society. In fact the Constitution was a series of political compromises.

The crisis in civic education provides a prime opportunity for Americans to fall or get caught up in an ideology. “The propaganda of radical ideologues sometimes confuses and weakens the will of well-intentioned Americans who lack any clear understanding of their own nation’s first principles. And in our age, good-natured ignorance is a luxury none of us can afford,” wrote Kirk.⁴ “How does one sever a people’s roots? Answer: Destroy its memory. Deny a people the knowledge of who they are and where they came from,” wrote Patrick J. Buchanan in *The Death of the West*.⁵ *The Death of the West* is an important book which addresses the decline and attack on American history as well as the attack on our Christian heritage. “Destroy the record of a people’s past, leave it in ignorance of who its ancestors were and what they did, and one can fill the empty vessels of their souls with a new history...” wrote Buchanan.⁶

A number of studies have appeared recently that demonstrate the decline in civic education. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) has published several studies that clearly proves that our educational system is failing to teach American history, government, economics, and Western Civilization. Students across the nation are graduating from high schools and colleges/universities without even a basic understanding of our heritage. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is also providing groundbreaking research in the alarming decline in civic education on many of our nation’s colleges and universities.

ACTA’s recent report, “What Will They Learn: A Survey of Core Requirements at our Nation’s Colleges and Universities,” illustrates the sad reality of the failure of higher education to teach civic education:

Ignorance of American history and the institutions of American government is no laughing matter. When

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77 percent of college seniors do not recognize James Madison as the father of the American Constitution, and 78 percent fail to recognize the words of the Gettysburg Address — as a 2000 ACTA survey revealed — there is a clear lack of civic literacy that bodes ill for the preservation of free government. What Will They Learn? Helps to explain why college students know so little about the country in which they live and vote: their colleges fail to require it. Only 28 percent of the public institutions and a shockingly low five percent of the private colleges and universities require even a single broad survey course in American history or government.⁷

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) issued a similar report, *The Vanishing West, 1964-2010: The Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum*. The NAS report focuses on the decline of Western Civilization courses as well as American history courses required for graduation.⁸ The study argues that while Western Civilization and American history courses are on the decline, courses in World history, globalization, and sustainability are on the increase.⁹ Many colleges and universities are suffering from the ideologies of globalization, political correctness, multiculturalism, radical secularism, and relativism, among others. As a consequence, students are not learning about the Constitution or The Federalist Papers or other crucial aspects of American history and Western Civilization.

The national decline of civic education is leading the nation down a path of self-destruction. In order to confront the policy challenges of today, citizens must have an understanding of our heritage. It is also a moral responsibility. Individuals, communities, schools, civic groups, and even businesses all need to realize the importance of civic education. The decline of civic education is a moral crisis that must be solved. James Beck, a constitutional scholar, warned in the 1930s that Americans must be watchful that they do not fall to the same fate as the Roman Republic. Beck wrote that “instead of relying upon themselves,” people “are beginning to look to the central government to be fed and amused.”¹⁰ “We can only hope and pray that the American Republic... will yet escape the fate of Rome,” wrote Beck.¹¹

The prescription to avoiding the fate of the Roman Republic is to return to constitutional principles, which will not only require policymakers to be grounded in our history and principles, but also the citizenry. As President Warren G. Harding stated, “it is good to meet and drink at the fountain of wisdom inherited from the Founding Fathers of the republic.”¹² “I wonder what the great [President George] Washington would utter in warning, in his passionate love of the republic and his deep concern about future welfare, if he could know the drift today,” noted Harding.¹³ Harding’s question is something that the nation must take seriously and address the crisis in civic education, which is leading the republic down a perilous road.

Endnotes

¹James M. Beck, *Our Wonderland of Bureaucracy: A Study of the Growth of Bureaucracy in the Federal Government, and its Destructive Effect upon the Constitution*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1932, p. 251.

²Russell Kirk, *The American Cause*, edited by Gleaves Whitney, Wilmington, Delaware, ISI Books, 2002, p. 1.

³Ibid., p. 2.

⁴Kirk, p. 1.

⁵Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*, New York, Thomas Dunne Books, 2002, p. 148.

⁶Ibid.

⁷American Council of Trustees and Alumni, “What Will They Learn? A Survey of Core Requirements at our Nation’s Colleges and Universities,” Washington, D.C., 2010, p. 17, <<https://www.goacta.org/publications/downloads/WWTL-2010-Final.pdf>> accessed on May 23, 2011.

⁸Glenn Ricketts, Peter W. Wood, Stephen H. Balch, Ashley Thorne, “The Vanishing West, 1964-2010: The Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum,” The National Association of Scholars, <http://www.nas.org/polimage.cfm?doc_Id=1983&size_code=Doc> accessed on May 23, 2011.

⁹Ibid., pp. 15-19.

¹⁰James M. Beck, *Our Wonderland of Bureaucracy: A Study of the Growth of Bureaucracy in the Federal Government, and its Destructive Effect upon the Constitution*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1933, p. 270.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Warren G. Harding, *Rededicating America: Life and Recent Speeches of Warren G. Harding*, The Bobbs-Merill Company, Indianapolis, 1920, p. 139.

¹³Ibid., pp. 140-141.

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