Civic Education and the Common Good  
The Hon. Lee H. Hamilton  
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On September 11, 2001, nineteen men crashed four airplanes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. Their goals were to strike at symbols of American power, and to kill as many Americans as possible.

On the 9/11 Commission, we looked at this event from many different vantage points – from airport security to intelligence, emergency response to foreign policy. One question we looked at was: Why did they do this? Why take the lives of so many men, women and children? Why attack us?

A short answer often given is that they attacked us because we are Americans.

Looking outward – at the terrorists – there is a long and complex explanation. It involves history and policies and religion and ideology. I won’t go into that today.

Looking inward – at our own country and ourselves – 9/11 has forced us to ask anew questions that are very important to you and me. We have all found ourselves in a conflict that brings a range of challenges to all Americans. We need to consider: What are we defending when we defend America? What does it mean, individually, to be a part of America?

I was part of a group that met with students about this question. Some of the responses we got are rather disappointing:

-- “Being an American is no big deal.”

-- “There’s really nothing all that special about being an American.”

-- “Everyone I know is an American – so it doesn’t really matter much.”

These statements may not be typical, and are certainly not universal. But they are not uncommon, and they are worrisome. How could these young people be so disconnected from what it means to be an American? How can they have no better appreciation for being American? How can we do a better job of conveying to our citizens what it means to be an American, and why it is important?

I want to talk to you today about how you and I must answer these questions when we defend America.

1. Beliefs

We defend America when we defend our beliefs.
Of course we defend our land and resources – but so does every other country. As Americans, we define ourselves by more than the mere fact that we were born within American borders. Belief is an essential part of what it means to be an American.

-- We believe, as we often recite, that we are one nation indivisible, under God, with liberty and justice for all.

-- We believe that democracy, and more specifically representative democracy, is the best form of government.

-- We believe in the opportunity for all citizens to become the best that they can become.

-- We believe in reasoning together, working together, and building a consensus so we can live together peacefully and productively in this huge and diverse country.

-- And we believe that with freedom comes obligation, and with liberty comes duty – because a democracy is always building a more perfect union.

2. Teach What We Believe

We defend America by teaching what we believe.

As Americans, this is our obligation. When we defend America, we do so by honoring and teaching our cherished ideals here at home. We cannot take our freedoms and our beliefs for granted.

As the ancient Greeks pledged at the birthplace of democracy: we must “transmit this country greater, stronger, prouder, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.” We must, as Lincoln implored, constantly seek a “new birth of freedom.”

We want to instill in ourselves, in our young people, and in all of our citizens an understanding and appreciation of our political heritage.

We need to learn the robust American story – the full, truthful, unvarnished account of our successes, our failures, our ideals, our flaws, our progress, and our heroes.

And we need to learn and to teach the techniques of a healthy democracy – participation, consensus building, compromise, civility, and rational discourse.

You and I want to do all we can to strengthen our schools’ efforts to impart this wisdom and these values to students. But the education of all citizens is too great a task for schools alone – it should be the business of all our institutions: our families, churches, courts, universities, research centers, corporations, and governments.

Lincoln had it right when he said:
“Let the reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother to the lisping
babe that prattles on her lap. Let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, in colleges. Let
it be written in primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs. Let it be preached from the
pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short,
let it become the political religion of the nation.”

We are not born democrats – we have to learn how to live in a democracy. And
democracy cannot rest on institutions alone – it depends upon each individual citizen.

Justice Brandeis said: “The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is
the title of citizen.” If that is so – and you and I believe that it is – then we must learn and
teach what it means to be a good citizen. We must do this in the examples of our institutions –
and in the examples of our own lives.

3. Dialogue of Democracy

We defend America by strengthening the dialogue of democracy.

When I traveled through my southern Indiana district, I could always count on one
thing: whatever the town, every morning I would find locals gathered at some coffee shop or
café to discuss and resolve the great issues of community, state, and nation. In a good-natured
way, they always kidded me that they could solve the country’s problems better than
Congress.

I came away from these sessions with a larger lesson – democracy is sustained by this
dialogue, carried on in countless venues across our country, wherever Americans gather:

-- At barbershops, PTA meetings, community functions, religious events, and on little
league sidelines;

-- On television programs, radio call-in shows, and newspaper pages;

-- And, of course, in the halls of government.

Public discourse is interwoven into our daily lives. The participants may not always be
aware – but they are a part of what Jefferson called “the dialogue of democracy” – the
perpetual exchange that allows us to resolve our differences in a huge and complicated
country, with huge and complicated problems.

May I suggest that the dialogue of democracy is on dangerous ground in this country.

Look at how poisonous, how toxic, the public forum is today:

-- Look at Congress, where too often extreme partisanship and the art of winning are
honored far above the art of compromise and the art of governing;

-- Look at the media, where talk radio and television talk shows prize raised voices
and open disdain for the other side;
-- Look at the bestseller lists, where a steady stream of books provides attacks and counter-attacks from the fringes of the political debate;

-- Look at our political campaigns, where barrages of negative advertisements and distortions are paid for by ever-growing campaign war-chests;

-- Look at our culture, where vulgarity and combativeness seem to have eclipsed civility and compromise.

I wonder whether we, as a Nation, are still capable of talking with one another constructively about the issues that confront us.

I think about those students who feel that being an American is “no big deal.” How can we teach them about our deepest beliefs – the virtues of our political heritage – when everywhere they turn they see a poisonous partisan atmosphere? Are we showing them, in our dialogue of democracy, what is right with America or what is wrong with America?

Those of us who care about civic education need to reexamine the quality of the dialogue of democracy. We must teach and demonstrate how we can encourage a more rational discourse in this country:

-- We need to stop fearing differences and dissent, and get back to embracing it as a vital part of democracy. Our political differences may be stark, but they are not irreconcilable; we live in one nation indivisible – not caricatures of two nations: one red, one blue.

-- We need to stop prizing aggressive advocacy and conflict as a way to resolve differences, and get back to discussion and deliberation. Deliberation is the only way to build a consensus behind solutions that can unite this country. As Isaiah said: “Come, let us reason together.”

-- We need to focus on the facts. John Adams said that, “facts are stubborn things.” Facts are not ideological. We should begin our deliberations from our understanding of the facts of a problem – not from entrenched ideological positions.

-- We need to keep an eye on the target – which is to resolve differences and reconcile views – not to exacerbate differences and demonize opposing views. The Founders designed an intricate system of checks and balances so we would be forced to seek compromise – we should seek it, not run from it.

-- We need to always keep in mind that we might be wrong about something. Ben Franklin pleaded with his fellow delegates at the Constitutional convention to “with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own fallibility.”

-- We need to cherish civility. We need not agree with another – quite the contrary, we can and must air our differences in the dialogue of democracy. But without civility we cannot find common ground.
Civic education depends upon civil discourse – a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind.” It does us little good to pass on what Americans have preached throughout our history if we do not practice it ourselves.

4. Common Good

And we defend America by working on behalf of the common good.

When I was still in Congress, I used to make the rounds of voting precincts in southern Indiana on Election Day. Once, I ran into an older woman I’d never met. I asked her whether she voted. She said she had, and then added: “You know, I vote for my candidate, and then I go home and pray for the winner.” I asked her what she meant. She said: “Well, I want him or her to work not just for a few, but for everyone.”

I think that is what most of us want – elected representatives who work not just for a few, but for everyone. A system of government and a dialogue of democracy that works not just for a few, but for everyone.

This lesson is deeply embedded in our history. Think of the great American statesmen: they worked primarily on behalf of the national interest, not any special interest or narrow partisan interest.

We have just come through a divisive election – one of the more divisive elections in recent memory. Another of our most divisive elections – the election of 1800 – pitted John Adams against Thomas Jefferson.

They were rivals in campaigns, but they were not enemies. Time and again they recognized the need to serve the common good. Adams wrote that those who make policy should maintain a, “disinterested attachment to the public good, exclusive and independent of all private and selfish interest.” Jefferson– on the heels of that divisive election – urged all Americans in his first inaugural, “to unite in common efforts for the common good.”

Whether spoken by Adams, Jefferson, or my former constituent, I cannot help but think that this is the remedy for much of what ails this divided country. Each of us – ordinary citizens and elected officials alike – must restore in our lives and our dialogue of democracy a sense of the public good, to ask ourselves not what’s good for any person or party, but what’s good for the country.

Conclusion

On the 9/11 Commission, we learned a lot about a terrible day in the life of our Nation. We also learned about how this Nation responded in the immediate aftermath. We recalled acts of heroism. We recalled a Nation coming together. We recalled a unity of purpose.
After 9/11, people in all corners of this country felt transformed by something that had affected a relatively small number of citizens. People a thousand miles from Washington or New York or Pennsylvania held vigils or blood drives or flew flags.

Why? I think the answer is that people understood that we had been attacked as Americans, they wanted to respond as Americans, and they were overwhelmed by a sense of what united us as Americans. People knew what it meant to be American.

We should be able to come together in more than times of tragedy. You and I must strive to inject that spirit into the daily life of our Nation – to teach what it is we believe; to elevate the dialogue of democracy; and to focus on the common good.

Abraham Lincoln once attended a church service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church here in Washington. As he walked back to the White House he was asked by his companion to appraise the sermon. He said the content was excellent, it was delivered with eloquence, and the pastor had put a lot of hard work into the message.

His companion said, “Then you thought it was a great sermon?” President Lincoln replied, “No.” He said the pastor forgot the most important ingredient: he forgot to ask us to do something great.

We should not make that mistake with the young student who thinks that it is no big deal to be an American. We should teach our students that being an American provides the opportunity to do something great: an opportunity, and a responsibility, unparalleled in human history – the opportunity, with each generation, to be part of a new birth of freedom.