

An impressionistic painting of a town square. In the foreground, a tree with yellow and green leaves stands on the left. A set of stone steps leads up to a building on the left. In the center, a large white building with a blue dome and a steeple is visible. Two figures are standing near a horse-drawn carriage in the middle ground. The sky is a mix of blue and white, suggesting a bright day. A solid red rectangle is in the top right corner.

# Can Civic Education Save Our Institutions?

**CONVERSATIONS FROM THE**  
2024 National Summit on Civic Education



#### COVER IMAGE

“Small Town Station” by Edward Hopper, 1918–1920, depicting a train station in Maine, where the artist spent some of his summers.

Image courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © 2024 Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo © Fine Art Images / Bridgeman Images.



The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit committed to solving the national crisis of uninformed citizenship by teaching America's founding principles and history.

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HANS ZEIGER

# Introduction

In his remarks during Civic Learning Week last March, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona issued a call for a “civics renaissance.” Thought leaders like author Alexandra Hudson and scholars Jenna and Ben Storey of the American Enterprise Institute have also taken up “renaissance” to articulate a new era devoted to the pursuit of civic purpose. Americans on the left and the right, in every vocation and every part of the country, are seeing the critical need for civic understanding. Fully 95 percent of voters say that civic education is important to the success of the nation, according to a recent U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation survey. Our country is ready.

We must be realistic about the scale of our challenges. The most recent eighth grade civics and history scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are dismal: 22 percent and 13 percent proficiency, respectively. These poor and unsurprising test scores only provide more evidence for what we see on our campuses, on social media, and in the news.

But a renaissance of civic education lies within and far beyond our classrooms. A civics renaissance encompasses our ongoing responsibility, as American citizens, to engage thoughtfully and effectively in the shared project of building and sustaining our country. Such work requires diligent and lifelong preparation. It encompasses K–12 and higher education, workforce and civil society, public institutions and media, even entertainment and popular culture.

**RIGHT** The Statue of Liberty as seen from its torch, which has been closed to visitors since 1916. Courtesy Library of Congress / George Grantham Bain Collection



Civic education ought to be the cause of our generation. If there is a movement we should rally around to celebrate the 250th birthday of America coming up in 2026, this is it. The survival and success of the United States of America—even our national security—depends on our capacity to understand and participate in the incredible work of self-government.

Parents, community members, and ordinary citizens can all do their part to teach our youngest citizens—and to enhance our own preparation for civic life. And we can commit to new collaborations across sectors and organizations as we grow the national movement for civics.

In this magazine, voices across the civic education spectrum make the case for a new era, one devoted to deeper learning and excellence in teaching. We hope it will inspire you for your own role in the burgeoning civics renaissance.

**Civic education ought to be the cause of our generation. If there is a movement we should rally around to celebrate the 250th birthday of America coming up in 2026, this is it.**

**Hans Zeiger** is president of the Jack Miller Center for Teaching America’s Founding Principles and History.



# About the Summit

The National Summit on Civic Education is an annual invitation-only event for top civic education leaders to collaborate and find solutions to the pressing challenges in civic education. The Summit brings together people from across the country and across the political spectrum to address these challenges from diverse perspectives.

Some attendees have long been dedicated to improving civic education, while others recently joined due to the pressing need. But all participants have one shared goal: to work together to get the teaching of America's founding principles and history into America's classrooms nationwide.

Scan the QR code or visit [jackmillercenter.org](https://jackmillercenter.org) to learn more.



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**RIGHT** A monument to Commodore John Barry, often called the “Father of the American Navy,” outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia.



JANE KAMENSKY

# Can We Talk?

**T**homas Jefferson may have been our most complex founder: A great thinker and statesman whose interests ranged from architecture to viticulture. A champion of modest rural virtues who practiced cosmopolitan luxury and died in crippling debt. And of course his central contradiction—the contradiction of an age—the great poet and thinker of American liberty who enslaved more than six hundred people during his lifetime.

Jefferson's inconsistencies—the height of his highs and the depths of his lows—shaped his beloved Monticello during his lifetime and shape it still, not least in the form of our audience. Guests make pilgrimages to Jefferson's "little mountain" because they revere him, and because they despise him. Some take selfies hugging his life-sized statue; some take selfies flipping him off; a fraction think the statue should be taken down. One person suggested we ban selfies altogether, as any delight in Jefferson's accomplishments and the beauty of his home inevitably obscures Monticello as a site of intergenerational trauma. Almost every week, somebody writes to tell me that we've tarnished



**RIGHT** "Automat" by Edward Hopper, 1927

© 2024 Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo © DeA Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

Jefferson by facing his contradictions, or that we've barely begun to plumb the depths of his evil. I'm guessing that the leader of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum gets less heated mail than I do.

Which is her loss. For the breadth of our visitorship represents a peerless opportunity for civic education. In a nation increasingly divided along ideological lines and sorted by generation, region, wealth, education, and creed, Monticello has the distinct privilege of engaging with ordinary Americans spanning the entirety of that spectrum.

I came to Charlottesville to think about what more we can do with the gift of our audience. How can we teach essential civic skills and dispositions as well as vital historical content? How can we marry a complete, rigorous, evidence-based history with a spirit of generosity and welcome, delivered in a language that meets people where they are and leaves them with a sense of inspiration and possibility?

As we look to the semi-quincentennial of Jefferson's Declaration in 2026, we're confronting the history of American party politics, arguably as vicious in Jefferson's day as in ours. We'll be piloting a tour centered on the nation's first party system, which Jefferson both forged and lamented, as its hot rhetoric built him up and cast him down. We'll ask guests to think about why the framers feared faction, and the ways a party system helped to organize coalitions that spanned the most natural and damaging lines of rupture, beginning with the cleavages of slavery and sectionalism.

An historic site is not a graduate seminar. We serve learners of every age and background. We share histories through objects—explaining, for example, why Jefferson displayed plaster busts of some of his arch combatants, like Alexander Hamilton, or what significance he may have attached to owning Oliver Cromwell's death mask. We also concentrate broad, abstract stories in the crucible of biography—hence our politics and partisanship tour will center on Jefferson's lifelong relationship with John Adams.

Jefferson and Adams disagreed over great matters of state, from the fate of the French Revolution to the freedom of the American press. They sacrificed that rich friendship on the altar of the bitterly contested election of 1800; Adams could not bring himself to attend his friend's inauguration. When Jefferson offered his

famous olive branch after that pitched partisan battle—"We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists"—Adams was not there to hear it.

But after an eleven-year gap in their fertile exchanges of ideas, Jefferson and Adams dared to share and air their differences, and to glory in the mutual love of country that transcended their disparate visions of America's past and future. In early 1825, after Adams's son John Quincy had been elected president in an election even more bitter than the "Revolution of 1800," Jefferson wrote the elder Adams: "I sincerely congratulate you on the high gratification which the issue of the late election must have afforded you. It must excite ineffable feelings in the breast of a father to have lived to see a son to whose education & happiness his life has been devoted so eminently distinguished by the voice of his country." Nor did Jefferson suppose the partisan strife would last, forecasting a quick "acquiescence in the will of the majority as if Mr. Adams had been the choice of every man." The prediction proved poor, but the friendship held—an example of what's possible when ideological combatants of good faith dare to listen to each other.

My colleagues and I hope Monticello's guests will take solace from this history. And more: we hope they'll be motivated to talk *to each other*, in all their vibrant diversity and disagreement. We plan to pilot facilitated conversations, modeled on the ways Jefferson used his own elegant dining room to encourage vibrant discussions that his granddaughter called "Feasts of Reason" ([monticello.org/exhibits-events/feast-of-reason](https://monticello.org/exhibits-events/feast-of-reason)).

Can we set the table in a way that encourages guests to take risks, in good faith, in order to know other Americans better? Jefferson, I think, would have liked the idea.

Can we set the table in a way that encourages guests to take risks, in good faith, in order to know other Americans better?

**Jane Kamensky** is president and CEO of Monticello.



GARRETT AND MICHELE EXNER

# We Love America, So Will Our Children

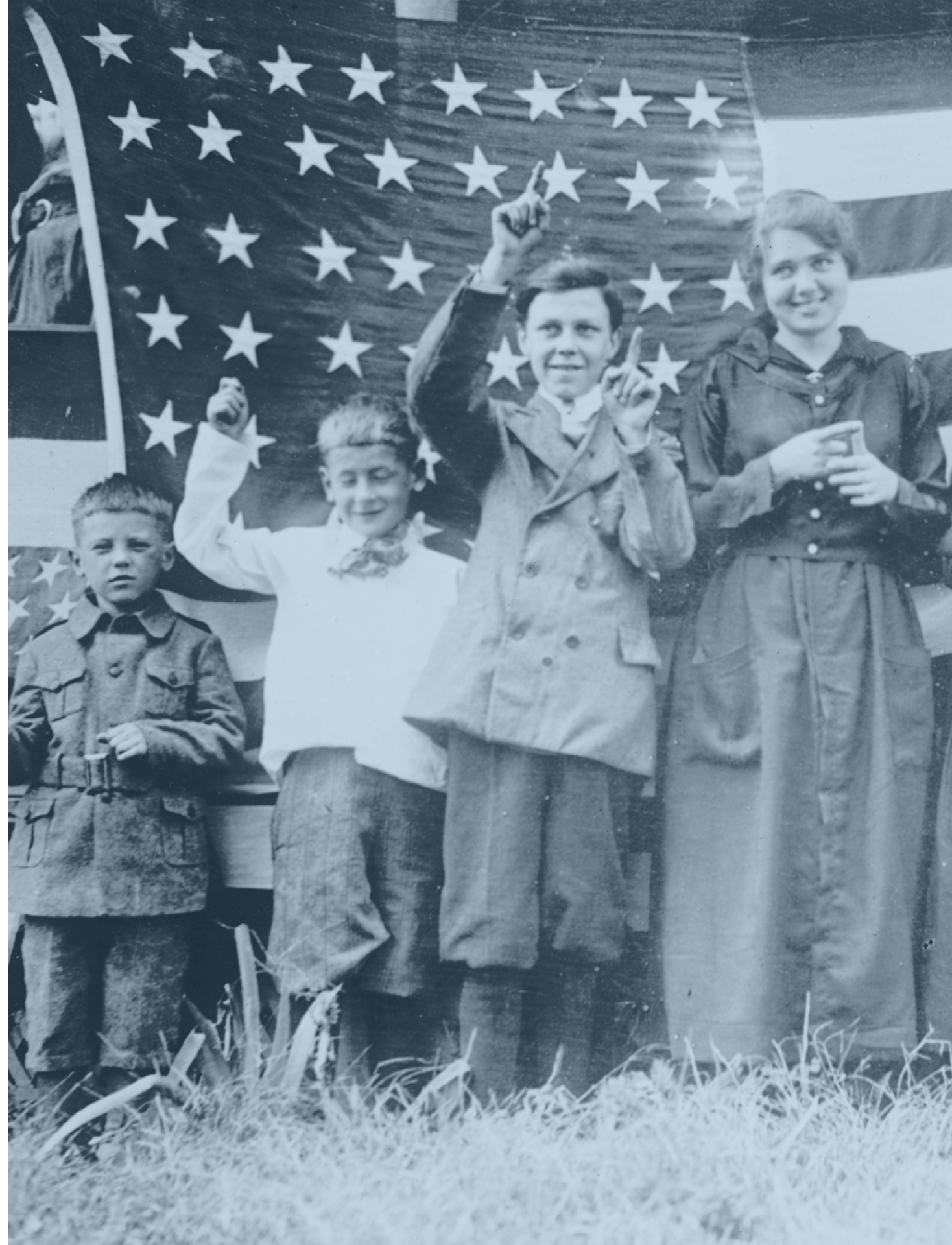
**T**his year we had the unique privilege of taking our children to see the beaches of Normandy. We talked our 3rd and 4th graders through the pinnacle moment in our nation's history, when American heroes were asked to do the impossible. We told them how 80 years ago young Americans, many still teenagers, parachuted into enemy territory while others stormed beaches covered with Nazi fortifications. We told them about America's heroes, the carnage they faced, and the victory they won.

We did this to teach them to love America and to know that real heroes are those willing to sacrifice their lives for freedom and risk everything to fight against

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**RIGHT** Deaf children of St. Rita's School, Cincinnati, Ohio, singing the "Star Spangled Banner" in sign language, 1918.

Courtesy Library of Congress / National Photo Company Collection, photograph by J.R. Schmidt



**Our nation is at a crossroads—we can choose inaction, allowing the education system to be hijacked by ill-informed individuals who want us to feel shame for being American, or we can teach our children why we have so much to be proud of.**

tyranny and terror. Unfortunately, these lessons are not widely taught. Our school district, like many in America, glosses over military history and civic education. This deficiency in the curriculum is widespread, and when coupled with a flood of aspersive social media trends, has resulted in falling levels of patriotism among the nation's youth. A problem now impacting military recruitment and national security.

A recent poll showed patriotism among younger Americans, now sits at a record low. Our schools have produced the least patriotic generation in our nation's history; only 17% of 18–26 year olds express any interest in military service. 2024 will be a record low for military recruitment, following a year when the department of defense missed its recruitment goals by 41,000.

But young Americans aren't just avoiding service, they are turning anti-American and anti-West. Following the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas, many young Americans sided with the terrorists instead of the innocent people who were slaughtered and raped. Weeks later, tens of thousands of young Americans on TikTok praised Osama Bin Laden—who murdered thousands on 9/11. There are even teachers in our schools denouncing the American flag as a “hate symbol.”

Over 185 years ago, Abraham Lincoln offered prescient advice in his Lyceum Address. At just 28 years old, Lincoln lamented the passing for the Revolutionary War veterans in whom, “a living history was to be found in every family—a history bearing the indubitable testimonies.” Theirs was a history of the fight against tyranny that could be understood by all, and was passing away from American memory. Lincoln implored the nation to remember the deeds of these veterans, their commitment to freedom and liberty, and the strength they provided the nation. “They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.” Simply put, teaching American children about American military heroes forms a bulwark against division.

This summer, when WWII veterans returned to France for the 80th anniversary of D-Day it was likely one of the last times to see veterans of that war at that solemn place. Soon, the last remnants of the greatest generation will have departed the physical world. Their passing should reinvigorate our desire to ensure their legacy lives on. Hollow rhetoric will not do this, it requires intentional actions. Actions that inspire our youth to ignore the propaganda fueled by those who hate America and instead dedicate themselves to patriotism and service.

As the “Greatest Generation” leaves this earth, it falls to us to teach our children of their achievements. It is, in fact, the greatest gift we can provide these heroes—to remember them and honor what they saved. If we love this nation, and we wish our children to do the same, we must actively pursue patriotism in education.

Our nation is at a crossroads—we can choose inaction, allowing the education system to be hijacked by ill-informed individuals who want us to feel shame for being American, or we can teach our children why we have so much to be proud of. As for our home and our family, we will choose to honor the legacy of the nation's heroes, we will celebrate the country they fought for, and we will teach our children that loving America is a great thing.

When our national anthem plays, our children will stop, stand up straight, and put their hand over their heart. They will know that we are blessed to have brave citizens willing to deploy and fight to protect us from evil. Our children will thank God every day for the blessing of being born in America and having freedoms millions of people around the globe are deprived of. We do this because we believe our nation will endure as long as parents and teachers dedicate themselves to this endeavor.

**Garrett Exner** is an adjunct fellow at Hudson Institute.

**Michele Exner** is a senior advisor at Parents Defending Education.







W. B. ALLEN

# Do We Want Civic Education?

**C**an civic education save our institutions? No. But healthy institutions can—indeed, necessarily must—foster civic education. If this seems counter-intuitive, simply consider that what defines healthy institutions is the robust participation of active citizens. On the other hand, hollowed-out institutions are vessels of arbitrary will which foster enslavement and dependence. We need citizens able to hold governing institutions accountable for the fair and impartial administration of the laws, which in turn requires citizens actively engaged in cooperative conduct in their communities. The performance of citizenship conditions the transmission of civic education.

The first lesson for the young will doubtless be the emulative example of the mature citizen.

Aristotle astutely observed in his *Politics*, Book II, that Larrisan makers had first to make themselves Larrisans. That remark amplifies what George Washington meant in his June 14, 1783 “Circular Address to the Governors and People of the Thirteen States” when he remarked that “we have a

**LEFT** “Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” by Grant Wood, 1931, depicts the American patriot during his midnight ride on April 18, 1775, through Lexington, Massachusetts. It was inspired by the 1860 poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

national character to establish.” The objective of civic education is the making of citizens. Accordingly, it must be directed to mature adults in the first instance.

**Where the arts of citizenship are not well developed in mature citizens it would be unreasonable to aim at developing those arts in the young.**

From this perspective to discuss civic education as the formation of the young as the fundamental objective mis-targets. For where the arts of citizenship are not well developed in mature citizens it would be unreasonable to aim at developing those arts in the young.

In 2003, I published “Making Citizens.” I noted “that the work of American politics is the making of citizens, and that means the making of governors . . . this means, to be precise, that the standard of analysis as of judgment must always be the American claim that men are capable of self-government, and, therefore that we appraise newcomers in terms of their readiness, not merely to submit to the rule of our laws but, more certainly, to give us laws.”

That account, however, has consistently met with cogent skepticism concerning the underlying foundations of liberal democracy, which go to the very root of the claim that human beings are capable of the rational self-government I described, as opposed to needing cultivation through tradition, custom, and authoritative direction. The long history of radical challenges to liberal democracy—from reactionaries and radicals alike—go much further, and question whether any principle other than mere strength exercises any leverage in human affairs. Hence, the question of civic education is first and foremost the question of the sufficiency of principles of liberty in human affairs. Moreover, the idea of “illiberal democracy” is itself the express denial of the possibility of civic education properly conceived.

I do not suggest an impossibility of training the young in patterned behaviors, including patterned recourse to historical and traditional authorities. Such training indisputably occurs. The relevant question, however, is whether it constitutes *civic education*. We may only call that kind of training “civic education” when it produces conscious acceptance of the obligations of citizenship.

At first blush it may appear that this standard is easily met. For do not educators and parents, among others, foster in the young participation in such practices

as voting, open discussion, appeals to legal process to resolve conflicts? All of that is true. Is it equally true, though, that these form the substantive content of citizenship? Such practices are certainly entailed by the fundamental right of consent that derives from the account of citizenship given above—namely, self-government. But we must note that consent is instrumental to an end and not an end itself.

Government by consent is one of our highest values, to be sure, but we derive it from an even higher principle. Americans have always believed each person has a superior obligation to any obligations that arise from membership in a consenting community and, therefore, from citizenship. We customarily describe such superior obligation as the obligation of *conscience*.

Now, if that be so, then it must also be the case that the development of citizens requires eliciting conscious awareness of conscience. To put a finer point on it, I would maintain that no one becomes a citizen properly speaking unless prepared to regard rights of conscience as superior to every other claim.

It is accordingly in this regard that I call into question accounts of civic education that fall in any degree short of this goal. By that I mean specifically that those who would undertake the civic education of the young must be, first, just such citizens themselves and, secondly, focused on fostering a like *devotion* in the young. Civic education consists more in the fullest acceptance of individual, personal responsibility to transcendent authority than acceptance of the mere procedures of democracy.

Nor should this argument be misunderstood as counseling a lack of respect for elders or traditions or orders, ranks, and titles. But it precisely means that there are no conventional indices of social value, the inculcation of which equals civic education. Therefore, the most effective civic education doubtless originates in the most authentic performance of citizenship. The first lesson for the young will doubtless be the emulative example of the mature citizen.

**William Barclay Allen** is dean and professor emeritus at Michigan State University.



JUSTIN DYER

# Embracing Civics Can Help Restore Trust in Higher Education

**A**t the dawn of a new year, administrators, professors, and students of elite universities stand raw and exposed before an increasingly dubious public. While university leaders appear weak and aimless and students ideologically adrift, it would be a mistake to give up on our universities. They are too important to freedom in America. For these institutions, part of the way forward now must be a return to civics and civic education to prepare the next generation to steward the American experiment.

Since the Founding, Americans who have thought deeply about how to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,” to quote the preamble to the Constitution, have emphasized the critical importance of higher education. In his Farewell Address, George Washington explained that American government is “the offspring of our own choice,” and the preservation of freedom depends on citizens

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**LEFT** The penny farthing was popular in the late 1800s and considered the fastest thing on the road, apart from trains, until it was replaced by a bicycle with a chain-driven rear wheel.

Courtesy Library of Congress / Platt Brothers, 1884

who perform the “duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty.” These “duties,” he said, include respect for the Constitution and laws that safeguard our liberty. In his last public appearance as president, Washington proposed to Congress the creation of a national university for the purpose of preparing a corps of civic leaders who would ensure that future generations know how to perform the duties necessary to preserve freedom in America.

Others carried Washington’s ideas forward by creating new state universities. Typical were the first commissioners of the University of Virginia, including

**Civics is an antidote to the cynicism that reduces everything to power and to the nihilism that seeks only to subvert and tear down. Its aim is to secure a prosperous future by preserving and building upon the wisdom of the past.**

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who envisioned higher branches of education that would “form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on which public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend.” In recent years, flagship public universities across the country have recovered this founding vision by launching new schools and institutes to prepare leaders who know and appreciate the principles of a free and prosperous society. These efforts, buoyed by support from concerned alumni and engaged governing boards,

are under way in Arizona, Texas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Utah, and Ohio. More will surely follow. Common to each is a renewed focus on the serious study of American civics.

Although civic education is an ancient concept, the idea of civics as a field of study is a 19th-century American invention. Civics—the study of the rights and duties of citizenship—is a word that comes from a group of citizens who contemplated the kind of education needed to sustain the rebirth of freedom after the carnage of the Civil War. Henry Randall Waite, a clergyman, editor, and journalist, was the first to use the term in 1885 when he founded the American Institute of Civics, an organization dedicated to the “special attention to Civics in higher institutions of learning” in order “to secure wise, impartial, and patriotic action on the part of those who shall occupy positions of trust and responsibility, as executive and legislative officers, and as leaders of public opinion.”

American civics draws on multiple academic disciplines, including politics, economics, philosophy, history, and law, but it is not reducible to any one of them. It is anchored in the study of Western civilization and American constitutionalism, and it fosters a patriotism that is spirited, thoughtful, and open to critical self-reflection. Civics is an antidote to the cynicism that reduces everything to power and to the nihilism that seeks only to subvert and tear down. Its aim is to secure a prosperous future by preserving and building upon the wisdom of the past.

At a time when alumni and legislators are fuming at campus activism and the faddish ideologies on display in social media and on the nightly news, conservative support for traditional civic education is something to celebrate. Teaching and studying civics allow us to conserve what is best in our political and intellectual traditions. Although it is not a value-free social science, neither is it partisan. If anything, it is pre-partisan. Before we can develop a reasonable outlook on the policy issues of the day, we must first acquire knowledge of the character and basis of the political institutions we have inherited and must now steward as Americans.

**Before we can develop a reasonable outlook on the policy issues of the day, we must first acquire knowledge of the character and basis of the political institutions we have inherited and must now steward as Americans.**

Civic education gives us this knowledge and in so doing prepares us for liberty. It is a central part of a liberal education in its original sense: the education befitting a free person. It rests on open inquiry, reasoned debate, and freedom of thought and speech, all in the pursuit of truth. Our students, who will soon be the custodians of the American experiment, deserve nothing less. And the American people, whose prosperity and happiness depend on leaders who understand and affirm that experiment, need nothing less.

**Justin Dyer** is dean of the School of Civic Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. This article is printed with permission from *National Review* where it was first published online on January 6, 2024.



CAROL McNAMARA

# How Classical Schools are Solving the Civics Crisis

Public education in the United States is suffering a crisis of seriousness. Much like the population of Ray Bradbury's dystopian society in *Fahrenheit 451*, American children are often no longer required to read the great books of history, philosophy and literature that form thoughtful human beings who can sort through the big (and small) human questions for themselves, in a way that prepares them to become responsible, self-governing individuals and leaders the country needs.

American children are often no longer required to read the great books of history, philosophy and literature.

The appeal of K–12 classical education is growing simply because many parents want academic excellence to be the standard for education. Parents

**LEFT** “Arbor Day” by Grant Wood, 1932, depicts the artist’s one room schoolhouse and is reproduced on the back of the Iowa state quarter. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

want their children to love school and to acquire the foundational skills of the mind and habits of heart that prepare them for clear reasoning, strong writing, and the ability to express themselves well in the robust exchange of ideas.

With this growing interest in classical education and the liberal arts, many wonder precisely what it is and, further, what support it might provide for the necessary

**What support might classical education provide for the necessary renewal of a civic education that prepares students to be thoughtful participants in American civic life?**

renewal of a civic education that provides students with the knowledge and dispositions that prepare them to be thoughtful participants in American civic life. Classical liberal arts education is conducted through the close reading, study, and discussion of texts and ideas across the curriculum—including the humane letters (literature, philosophy, and history), mathematics, science, the arts, and classical and modern languages, to which students are introduced in an order that corresponds with the natural stages of learning.

In *The Lost Tools of Learning*, Dorothy Sayers, calling for a revival of the medieval “Trivium” of “grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric,” argues that we should dedicate the first stages of learning—what we would call K–12 education—to inculcating the “tools” of learning. Sayers’ argument (in 1947) is that education had

become formulaic and value neutral: we teach children to read, and about the facts of “subjects,” without teaching them how to learn, how to think through a problem and formulate their thoughts into a sustained argument. Sayers explains that education begins with the fact accumulation and memorization that young children find so easy and pleasurable. It proceeds to an argumentative, competitive and dialectical stage, ultimately leading to what she calls the “Poetic Age,” a challenging and restless period of youth, characterized by an obsessive desire to possess and synthesize knowledge into a whole.

This order of learning becomes a classical liberal arts education when it is paired with a curriculum that corresponds to the child’s stage of development. Great Hearts kindergarten students read *Little Bear*, *Mr. Popper’s Penguins*; third graders begin the Narnia series; by fifth grade, the students have embarked on Shakespeare; and in high school, they tackle the great epics, novels, and philosophic texts of

the Western tradition, among them the works of the American Founding, U.S. literature, rhetoric, and political thought that form them into thoughtful participants in the American experiment. Along the way, they learn how to take up a text on their own *and* together with others in Socratic seminars.

The pattern of education characteristic of the Great Hearts classical charter network, and other classical schools, was introduced to ensure that students encounter the greatest ideas available across the curriculum. The result of such an education should be that students are unwilling to rest content with the unexamined opinions and conventions of our times, and instead become determined to think through all the serious alternatives for themselves in pursuit of the truth.

Perhaps that shouldn’t be radical, but it is always radical to have an independent mind. We want students to possess the skills and knowledge to challenge convention, not for its own sake, or even to be on the “right side of history,” but to take seriously the alternatives in front of us and proceed on the basis of prudence. This disposition to learn and judge wisely is the one students will need to become thoughtful American citizens and leaders in a world that is throwing at them the greatest challenges.

**We want students to possess the skills and knowledge to challenge convention, not for its own sake, or even to be on the “right side of history.”**

**Carol McNamara** is director of the Great Hearts Institute.



TED HADZI-ANTICH, JR.

# Starting the Conversation at Community Colleges

**R**ecently, a student at Austin Community College shared with me that our seminar on the political philosophy of the U.S. Constitution was the only consistent opportunity he had to speak in-person with others. Outside of this seminar, most of his interactions were online, mediated through screens. Although his experience might be on the extreme end, many educators today notice that students increasingly feel isolated and deprived of in-person, human engagement. As Tocqueville identified many years ago, isolated individuals are not only unhappy, but ill-suited as citizens of a

**Community colleges have an unprecedented opportunity to bring together a polarized nation and isolated individuals through discussion-based learning.**

**LEFT** “Family Doctor” by Grant Wood, 1940. Modeled after the artist’s personal physician, Dr. A. W. Bennett, this lithograph was made for Abbott Laboratories, which gave free copies of it to physicians. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of Park and Phyllis Rinard in honor of Nan Wood Graham

free, representative democracy, whose health requires connection, collaboration and an understanding that compromise is necessary for achieving common goals. If civic education is to help repair our nation's institutions, which are founded on the premise of an informed and engaged citizenry, discussion-based pedagogy stands as the most effective method today.

In too many history and political science lecture-based classrooms, students are passive observers of the foundational ideas in the American political tradition.

**At their best, discussion-based classrooms mirror how citizens work together in a healthy democratic society.**

Students gain a better understanding of the content and a deeper insight into its continued relevance in discussion-based settings. They not only discover their own voices but also learn to listen to and engage with perspectives that may challenge their own. At their best, discussion-based classrooms mirror how citizens work together in a healthy democratic society.

In a recent class I taught, students were tasked with organizing a public facing event where attendees participated in small, guided group discussions on selections of texts from the American political tradition. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon, "Loving Your Enemies" seemed to be the most popular. Students needed to overcome *many* difficulties in pulling this event off, including deciding leadership roles, delegating responsibilities, and holding each other accountable while maintaining the peace. Several students shared that navigating their differences during this low-stakes project gave them a deeper appreciation for the progress made on significant social issues throughout history. It also made them more sober-minded about the kind of effort and skill required for successful advocacy in a pluralistic, democratic society. Publius argues in *Federalist 55* that civic virtue is necessary for self-government; but a sermon-like lecture on civic virtue could not have conveyed the importance of patience, honesty, and resilience as effectively as the opportunity to practice these virtues and experience their fruits for themselves.

While discussion-based learning is the most effective pedagogical approach for civic education today, investing in it at community colleges, where nearly 41% of undergraduates are enrolled, should be a top priority for those working towards

improving the health of our polity.

Community colleges have an unprecedented opportunity to bring together a polarized nation and isolated individuals through discussion-based learning. Approximately half of all four-year degree recipients complete at least some of their general education at community colleges, with this percentage rising to 75% in Texas and 61% in California. Given that roughly 20% of general education courses are in history and political science, disciplines ideally suited for engaging students in discussions of American political and social thought, supporting curriculum development and discussion-based pedagogy in these areas at community colleges represents a critical, yet often overlooked, opportunity.

**While discussion-based learning is the most effective pedagogical approach for civic education today, investing in it at community colleges, where nearly 41% of undergraduates are enrolled, should be a top priority for those working towards improving the health of our polity.**

This year, the Great Questions Foundation is partnering with the Jack Miller Center on a Teagle Foundation-funded community college faculty development initiative. Faculty members who complete our Community College Course Redesign Institute in American Political and Social Thought will redesign a course that meets general education requirements in history, political science, American studies, sociology or related disciplines, where at least 20-30% of the content will include discussion-based study of transformative texts in American political and social thought. We expect up to 45 faculty members at 10 different institutions to complete this work in our pilot effort, and about 3,000 community college students to be impacted by it. This is a first step in an important, new direction for civic higher education, and one which I hope will inspire the support of those who believe in that mission, and will help our all-too-many isolated undergraduates connect more deeply with their peers in finding their place in the unfolding American political tradition.

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YUVAL LEVIN

# How the Constitution Can Unify Us

Americans in our time feel divided and estranged, and yearn to be more unified. Yet the tenor of our political rhetoric—even when it consists of calls for greater solidarity—suggests we have lost sight of what unity actually means in a complex free society.

We have lost sight of what unity actually means in a complex free society.

We talk as if our disagreements are themselves the problem to be solved, so that the obstacle to unity in our society is the existence of people who do not think as we do. Among other things, this has made us frustrated with our system of government, because that system forces us constantly to deal with people who differ from us. Too many Americans are therefore persuaded that our Constitution is unsuited to our contemporary circumstances—that it assumes

**LEFT** “East and West Shaking Hands at Laying Last Rail” by Andrew J. Russell. For six years, two railroad companies worked toward each other—one from the east, and one from the west, until the two sides met in Promontory, Utah in 1869. The completion of the transcontinental railroad made cross-country travel easier and more accessible.

Courtesy Yale University Libraries

a more unified society than we now have, makes it too difficult to adapt to changing times, and so in this divided era can only make our problems worse.

But the Constitution is not the problem we face. It is more like the solution. It was designed with an exceptionally sophisticated grasp of the nature of political division and diversity, and it aims to forge more common ground in our society. It looks to do that precisely by compelling Americans with different views and

**We talk as if our disagreements are themselves the problem to be solved, so that the obstacle to unity in our society is the existence of people who do not think as we do.**

priorities to deal with one another—to compete, negotiate, and build coalitions in ways that drag us into common action even (indeed, especially) when we disagree.

And we will always disagree. Americans do have some basic principles in common—especially those laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Although these widely espoused ideals impose some moral boundaries on our political life, there is also enormous room for disagreement within those boundaries, including some profound

disagreements about exactly what the Declaration's principles actually mean, as well as disputes about more mundane matters of policy. Our politics is unavoidably organized around these differences, and requires us to take on common problems while continuing to disagree about questions that matter a great deal to us.

But that disagreement does not foreclose the possibility of unity. A more unified society would not always disagree less, but it would disagree better—that is, more constructively, and with an eye to how different priorities and goals can be accommodated.

That we have lost some of our knack for unity in America therefore does not mean that we have forgotten how to agree, but that we have forgotten how to disagree. The parties to our various disputes now tend to talk *about* each other more than they talk *to* each other. And so even very engaged citizens actually spend relatively little time in active disagreement with others, let alone in efforts to overcome such disagreement for the sake of coming to address some common problems in practice.

This is the sense in which we have forgotten the practical meaning of unity: In the political life of a free society, unity does not mean thinking alike; unity means acting together.

How can we act together when we do not think alike? The United States Constitution is intended in part to be an answer to precisely that question. And it is a powerful and well-honed answer.

It calls for creating some space for competing governing approaches to coexist; compelling opposing factions to bargain, negotiate, and seek accommodations; administering the government in steady, predictable ways in accordance with those accommodations; and enforcing clear boundaries on the power of majorities and of public officials. This is the work of federalism, Congress, the president, and the courts, respectively. And it all requires a citizenry well formed in core republican virtues by the very experience of acting together even when we do not think alike.

We do none of this as well as we should now. And that does mean that we are living in an era of constitutional failure. But by considering the logic and history of our system, we could see that most of that failure is a failure of constitutional practice, not of constitutional design.

A renewal of our politics, and of our capacity for greater cohesion, would therefore require us not to recklessly discard our Constitution as an antiquated relic but to rediscover its fundamental purposes, grasp how powerfully it speaks to some of our most serious contemporary problems, and reform our worst civic vices in its light.

Facilitating that understanding, and with it the habits required to act together when we don't think alike, is now the crucial task of civic education.

**The Constitution was designed with an exceptionally sophisticated grasp of the nature of political division and diversity, and it aims to forge more common ground in our society.**

**Yuval Levin** is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.



PAUL CARRESE

# A New Birth of Freedom

## Civics Renewal to Meet the American Crisis

This essay was first presented as the dinner keynote at the Jack Miller Center 2023 National Summit on Civic Education on November 9, 2023, at the Union League in Philadelphia.

I am grateful to the Jack Miller Center, and to Union League Legacy Foundation. What an honor to be speaking at this summit organized by these two great American institutions, and to be in this historic building, in this historic city. It is a further honor to address this splendid gathering of citizens, breaking bread and discussing urgent issues across divergent views. We also gather on the eve of Veterans Day 2023; we think of great Americans, living and passed, who served their country in uniform—risking their safety and lives, and taking the moral burden of war. So, on this inspiring evening in this historic place, with a model of duty and service on our minds, I urge this group of citizens, educators, and leaders to take up our intellectual and our civic duty to confront anew the sobering fact: that America faces a crisis in our politics and our civic culture. The crisis of our time is not as great and grave as faced President Lincoln and the Union in 1862, eight score years ago, when the Union League began its work. It also is true that if we today face significant labors to rescue our country and our educational institutions from civic ignorance, civic ingratitude, and civic

LEFT “Spring in the Country” by Grant Wood, 1941 Courtesy ARTGEN / Alamy Stock

indifference, our work and risk nonetheless pales in comparison to that undertaken by our founding fathers in declaring American independence, 12 score and seven years ago, giving their reasons to a candid world—that the equal natural rights of all human beings to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness were worth pledging their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor.” Our risk and toil today also will be less than that of the founding framers a decade later, who in the Preamble to our Constitution called all American citizens to commit to a constitutional polity that “secures the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Yet for all that, we do face grave risk, and must toil today to forge a consensus view on widespread renewal of American civics. The hour is late as we witness further civic decay.

Of course, some Americans are living up to and serving our founding ideals, commitments, and duties; but a great many are not; and arguably the vast majority of our educational institutions, at every level, are not. Given the prominence of educational institutions in America, we need educators at all kinds of institutions, and civic leaders in support of education, to ask difficult questions. I will point the finger first at my own profession: very few college and university leaders and professors can say that they understand or truly care about America’s crisis of civic ignorance, of civic apathy and lack of patriotic concern for our constitutional polity, or our consequent civic disintegration. Most professors and institutional leaders in higher education think this is somebody else’s problem; or, that by offering a cafeteria menu of elective courses and experiences in civic engagement, or civic activism, or social justice anger, they’ve done their part. This view is wrong. My discipline, political science, not many decades ago, did provide to a range of college and university students one part of the core of civic knowledge needed for all graduates pursuing a bachelor’s degree, such that they were minimally prepared as leading citizens; regardless of their particular majors and intended professions. Most colleges and universities now simply fail to do so, and we have failed for decades. Graduation requirements in only a minority of institutions, public or private, require anything like an adequate American civic education in the knowledge, as well as the civic virtues, and sense of civic duties to our republic, that are minimally required for informed and committed citizenship.

Two prominent higher education leaders—Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, and Ronald J. Daniels, current president of Johns Hopkins University—have raised this concern about higher education’s failure in recent books. In effect, each calls out our educational institutions for failing to do their duty to

their country, and to their students. Bok (*Higher Expectations*, 2020) and Daniels (*What Universities Owe Democracy*, 2021) observe America’s steady decline in civic health and an obvious parallel decline in civic knowledge and virtues, and they sense we can no longer deficit-spend in these domains of our common life. We must take up their example, as educators and supporters of education—to ask what we are doing or failing to do such that America continues to spend down our civic and social capital, failing to replenish it in each new generation of citizens.

**We need educators at all kinds of institutions to ask difficult questions.**

I need not rehearse for this gathering the ample evidence of America’s angry polarization and our civic decay in politics. We also see the continuing steady decline in public confidence about many American institutions and professions. All save the military profession now are persistently underwater, including higher education and K–12 public education. For higher education, the precipitous decline in legitimacy from a decade ago now is fueled by the decline among self-identified Independents, along with the steady decline among conservatives and Republicans. Further, in recent weeks on many university and college campuses we have seen demonstrations and statements openly praising brutal terrorism against Israeli civilians, and excitement at the targeting of civilians as itself a justified aim to provoke horror, terror, and humiliation; even professors have voiced such brutal views. All of this entirely reverses or repudiates the spirit of reason, truth-seeking, equal dignity, and peaceful disagreement that is the core of a university. Those in this hall also know the surveys and statistics measuring widespread deficits of civic knowledge, only steadily worsening across recent decades. We recall surveys showing that while a great majority of older Americans find it essential to live in a democracy, or are proud of America, the positive responses to such questions plummet for those under 30. America itself is underwater with our younger generations. Indeed, we should recall the poll from spring 2022, shortly after Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, asking Americans if they would stand and fight if invaded as the Ukrainians clearly had done. For Americans under 34, a majority replied no—America was not worth it; they would flee or surrender.

As President Daniels of Johns Hopkins—the nation’s first research university—argues in *What Universities Owe Democracy*, the fact of the widespread abandonment of rigorous, knowledge-based civic education across most

universities and colleges in the past half-century suggests that higher education's failure by omission has been a major contributor to the widespread civic ignorance

**Higher education's failure by omission has been a major contributor to civic ignorance.**

and concomitant civic dysfunction afflicting America. A parallel failure is the lopsided emphasis he notes on civic engagement and civic participation that is inadequately grounded—or not grounded at all—in fundamental American civic and constitutional knowledge. This emphasis on engagement, particularly on activism for redress of one's own (or one's professor's) political grievances, contributes to a civic culture that

elevates anger and passions over the sober civic virtues of civil disagreement and civic friendship across party and philosophical beliefs.

All praise, then, to the Jack Miller Center, and institutions of similar spirit and approach across our country, for emphasizing fundamental civic knowledge of America's constitutional order, our civic principles, our historical development; and also for emphasizing the civic virtues one develops through discussion of the contending views and voices on these crucial topics. This balanced approach restores the liberal arts spirit appropriate to American civics, especially in the upper grades of school and in universities and colleges: addressing foundational ideas and ideals, and the perpetual American debate about them. This approach develops virtues of civil disagreement and civic friendship across diverse viewpoints through the very study of, and discussion about, such essential topics.

This is the spirit of American citizenship and patriotism that Alexis de Tocqueville observed, and praised, in the 1830s in *Democracy in America*; a new kind of patriotism in the new world. The Americans practiced a “reflective patriotism”—blending gratitude for their country and its principles with insistence upon argument and questioning, pointed toward government and toward fellow citizens. Our colleges and universities today should follow Tocqueville's insight and example, and the example of the Union League and its motto—*Amor Patriae Ducit*—Love of Country Leads. In an American reflective patriotism, we can alternate between shedding a tear from love of country and arguing about just what America means, about whether we are living up to her ideals, arguing with the government and with each other. Our schools and universities indeed should teach us why it makes sense to shed a tear at hearing the version of America the

Beautiful made famous since the 1970s by Ray Charles, descendent of slaves; Ray having imbibed the spirit of a Frederick Douglass, who emphatically deemed the Constitution even before the Civil War amendments as “A Glorious Liberty Document.” Ray thus opened his classic version of this American hymn, which he first recorded shortly before the Bicentennial celebrations culminating in 1976, with what originally is the third verse—so that he could begin with the beautiful example of “heroes proved” in the “liberating strife” of the Civil War: “who more than self, their country loved / and mercy more than life.”

Of course, Tocqueville also documented the American spirit of civic activity, by citizens and associations, to address community and national needs; and the Jack Miller Center and Union League, along with many private associations represented at this national summit on civics, are embodying this civic spirit. I am grateful to have been asked in 2019 by colleagues from Harvard and Tufts universities, and iCivics, who represent the center-left and center of American civic thought to join the national study *Educating for American Democracy*, which when released in 2021 proposed national-consensus guidelines for states and localities to use in developing their own improvements to K–12 history and civics education. Danielle Allen of Harvard and Louise Dubé, the director of iCivics, both were here earlier today; by inviting a known conservative professor like me to join the lead author group of the study, they sought to transcend the polarization that is swamping civics and history education itself. For two years we argued, and deliberated, and forged agreement on a statement of America's shared civic culture and civic norms, and the needed civic and historical knowledge that grounds these; so as to educate future generations in the rich, complex, *e pluribus unum* of our history, our constitutional principles, and the civic virtues we must inculcate.

As the study developed we saw the battle unfold between the 1619 Project of *The New York Times* and the Trump presidential 1776 Commission Report. We avoided those polarized and polarizing approaches. Instead we argued that a civics and history education in schools should better prepare adult citizens for debate and discussion across divergent viewpoints about America, an America they should love in the characteristically reflective, rational American way. Study of great American statesmen and stateswomen can reveal this character of American self-government and of preparation toward mature citizenship: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and Abraham Lincoln all promoted critical reflection about the American experiment by balancing love of country and knowledge

of its principles with criticism about failure to live up to our high ideals, thus demands for reform. The 1963 “I Have a Dream” address by Martin Luther King, Jr. balances demand for improvements and remedial measures with praise for “the architects of our republic” and their “magnificent words” in the Declaration and Constitution. The department I have helped to found at Arizona State University these past 7 years, the School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership, has produced a distinctive pocket constitution to capture this approach to civics—and we distribute it to our own students; to any interested ASU students, faculty, and staff; and to the broader Arizona community that attends our ongoing speaker series, the Civic Discourse Project. We add, to the Declaration and Constitution, the Gettysburg Address of 1863 and then King’s 1963 I Have a Dream Address; making for an inspirational packet of American ideals and debates, a primer of reflective patriotism.

It is an important philosophical question, and an urgent practical one in our day—whether a free polity can be sustained and perpetuated if a large proportion of its citizens do not love it; thus are not fundamentally grateful for it, failings and all. The *Educating for American Democracy* report and its *Roadmap* for K–12 schools therefor emphasizes civic and historical knowledge and also civic virtues; three civic virtues in particular: civil disagreement, civic friendship, and reflective patriotism. Only fellow American patriots, sharing a basic civic friendship, can blend gratitude for America and its ideals with perpetual yet civil argument about what those ideals mean, how they fit together, and how to live up to them.

The Jack Miller Center and like-minded partners in civic education thus are wise to emphasize national consensus approaches to reviving study of American’s constitutional principles and of the main historical moments of this last best hope for liberty and equality in the great human saga. The Reverend Doctor King deployed the then-national consensus on high regard for America’s framers and our founding documents in his 1963 call to enact deep reforms needed to live up to our ideals and foundational laws. If educators on the left or right cannot now, a half-century later, find similar grounds for consensus, then we will fail to heed the prescient warning of the great American “in whose symbolic shadow” King chose to stand to deliver his great address. We should recall in our current crisis that Lincoln had warned, two decades before a civil war erupted, that a deficit of fundamental civic education was leading to increasingly polarizing and violent political rhetoric and action. We should heed his 1838 warning, in his Lyceum

Address on the perpetuation of our political order. If America someday fell, Lincoln argued, it would not be by foreign conquest but by “suicide”—caused precisely by civic ignorance about our laws and Constitution, and decline in the civic virtues needed to sustain civil disagreement and civic friendship amid the divergent views in our republic.

Only fellow American patriots, sharing a civic friendship, can blend gratitude for America and its ideals with perpetual yet civil argument.

Yet, as the grim aftermath of Lincoln’s prophetic warning reveals, when the threat or the failing lies within, it is difficult for Americans to mobilize a national consensus to redress it. The Sputnik threat of the early Cold War era drew forth a consensus on education reform, and priority resources, from 1957 onward; but only in the early phases of that effort was funding and support for American civics included along with support for STEM subjects. Later, with the report of the early 1980s on *A Nation at Risk*, the focus shifted to the new external threat of economic competition from countries America had re-built after the Second World War including Japan, West Germany, and South Korea; and any priority for civics and history education, in K–12 public schools or in higher education, fell even further.

So, today, we must support the efforts of the Jack Miller Center and like-minded educators and institutions to throw ourselves into a full, energetic commemoration of America 250, 1776 to 2026; so that our era will not disgrace ourselves as ungrateful free riders in this extraordinary country that has brought more equality, more liberty, more opportunity, more prosperity—and arguably all this through less injustice and error, as well as more achievements of correction, atonement, and improvement—than any political entity in the known history of humankind. I close by urging us to learn from the commitment to reflective patriotism and civic education so strongly evident in the two American statesmen who still stand, after 230 years, as our greatest presidents: the founder, Washington; and the renewer, Lincoln. Lincoln’s efforts as statesmen-educator, inculcating patriotism and civic virtues, are more familiar to us—in his First Inaugural address calling forth our common patriotism and “the better angels of our natures;” in the Gettysburg Address, forging “a new birth of freedom” fully dedicated to equal liberty for all, and that as a nation “under God” we must “be dedicated” ourselves to save this form of government for ourselves and for all “the earth.” Then, what Lincoln left

in the background in the Gettysburg Address, alluding to Biblical faith by echoing Psalm 90 on the scores of years in man's life and in his invocations of consecration and dedication—this became the explicit theme of his Second Inaugural address; recounting our national sins of slavery and greed; calling forth “charity for all” and deploring “malice” or vengeance; asking God for guidance so that we might “see the right”, and might “strive on . . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Lincoln's rise to a civic theology shows, in the phrase from Richard Brookhiser's splendid biography (*Founders' Son*, 2014), that he is the Founders' son. He learned this profundity from Washington and other founders. This is a surprising view to us in 21st century America, for we tend to neglect Washington's writings—as less serious or as semi-aristocratic, insufficiently democratic. We should rediscover that Washington featured prayer in all of his great state addresses and letters. His First Inaugural address, in 1789, opens with “fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe,” “the Great Author of every public and private good,” and with gratitude to divine Providence for America's unbelievable success in a war for independence against a global superpower and then in constitution-making: “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States.” His Farewell Address in 1796 also opens with similar invocations of the divinity and prayers for America: “that heaven may continue to you the choicest tokens of its beneficence.” Consider how Lincoln's great addresses echo these profound themes on reflective patriotism and civic virtue from Washington's texts. Washington's First Inaugural urged the first Congress to deliberate and govern according to the highest moral and civic virtues, given the immense importance of their duties—because “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” In his Farewell statement, he explicitly linked civic virtues and civic education in parting counsels to his friends and fellow citizens—first noting that our civic culture should support religious belief, because “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Shouldn't we look at America in 2023 and ask, soberly, whether reason and experience validate precisely such a concern? Washington then counsels that “virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government,” indeed, “the foundation” of such governments. This leads to his concluding point on education: “Promote then, as an object

of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.” Then in closing the Farewell, he asked pardon of his countrymen for the “errors” he may have committed during his eight years as President of the United States—also noting “I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend.”

We must recall today that these great statesmen were largely self-educated figures; neither Washington nor Lincoln attended college. Then we must charge ourselves: if they could teach themselves the importance of civic knowledge and civic virtues, and a reflective patriotism, so as to found and perpetuate the American republic, then we surely can rouse ourselves to take up such work. We should be grateful that, given their labors, our time is more comfortable than either of theirs; yet that comfort is dulling us to the degree of danger we face from internal and external threats to the perpetuation of free government. In his 1862 Annual Address to Congress Lincoln called fellow citizens to action, stating “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.” I've worked for seven years to build a new approach to civic education at the university level, starting at Arizona State University; and with partners and fellow citizens across America who sense similar danger to our republic, that reform effort has now spread to a total of eight states; with state governments funding departments and colleges of civic thought and leadership on thirteen different public university campuses—in Arizona, Florida, Ohio, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah. The Jack Miller Center has gathered several directors, deans, and department heads from across these eight states to this national Summit; some of us are speaking tomorrow morning. So, my closing charge to you: a small group of us took courage to innovate and build given the example of leaders in our day like Jack Miller; and the Union League of Philadelphia as well. Legislators and governors in eight states have stepped forward to support such urgently needed reforms. The need is great. The hour is late. If we can do it, you too can act. Your country, and our posterity, needs you.

**Paul Carrese** is founding director of the School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University and senior fellow for Civic Thought and Leadership at the Jack Miller Center.



MARTHA MCGEARY SNIDER

# A New Stage for Civics

**J**ust months ago, millions around the globe witnessed the Games of the 33rd Olympiad in Paris, France. The American flag was raised 40 times in celebration of our gold medal achievements. Each time our athletes stood on the highest podium, hand over heart and eyes moist with emotion, the sounds of our majestic National Anthem stirred us with a unifying energy. The long years of feeling the stark division within our country seemed to dissolve into an uplifting, collective sense of patriotism.

Our athletes are modern-day heroes, inspiring countless young people who dream about their own possibilities and connecting with them in personal ways through the stories told about their remarkable sacrifices, tenacity, and determination to win against the most challenging odds.

These same words can be used when describing the compelling, against-all-odds heroics of our Founders and the growth of our nation. How do we inspire our young

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**RIGHT** James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens, an American track and field athlete, was the most successful competitor at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, bringing home four gold medals and refuting Chancellor Adolf Hitler’s concept of “Aryan superiority.”

Courtesy Library of Congress / Die Olympischen Spiele, 1936





citizens to feel the same passion about their role in our democracy? Our teachers need innovative ways to help reach our future leaders. Perhaps we might look to enlist influential social forces outside of the traditional teaching environment to support what is accomplished in the classroom.

Combining the mediums that our young people relate too most; hip-hop, rap, R&B and soul and with witty, sophisticated words, lyrics and storytelling, Lin Manuel Miranda brought history to life and inspired millions with his Broadway hit, *Hamilton*. He proved that the *content* of civics education is not a “barrier to entry” when it comes to reaching young. Yet civics education as a subject can sound daunting, or perhaps “boring,” to a child—and even to an adult.

Without sacrificing the integrity of our cause, can we find ways to add relatable and familiar words to identify what we so importantly need our children to embrace? Much like impactful words, music has the power to shift social change, inspire



**Our athletes are modern-day heroes, inspiring countless young people who dream about their own possibilities and connecting with them in personal ways through the stories told about their remarkable sacrifices, tenacity, and determination to win against the most challenging odds.**

**ABOVE** Medalists from the Women’s Platform Diving Event, Berlin Olympics, 1936.  
Courtesy Library of Congress

hope and define moments in our collective history. Just as powerfully, the voice of those who deliver a message can impact how well a message is received. Can we find relevant words, compelling stories and enlist the right musicians, sports figures, celebrities and influencers to help us reach our children? I believe we can.

2026 will mark the 250th birthday of our independence. It will be a milestone opportunity for Americans to rally around the values and ideals that give meaning to our citizenship. And if there is any one cause that is worthy of our enthusiasm, it is the cause of civic education.

With this timely opportunity to hold the nation’s attention and with the urgency of our cause, I founded We250, a spectacular, multimedia concert event that will be globally live-streamed and held at Philadelphia’s Wells Fargo Center on July 2, 2026. America’s leading musical artists, sports figures, influencers and award-winning producers will excite audiences and support programs in our community and our nation to benefit civics education.

As we draw encouragement and fresh energy from this National Summit on Civic Education, I look forward to sharing innovative ideas that will advance our mission to make civics all that it can be. We have our work cut out for us in the coming months leading up to America’s 250th, and I know that we are on the cusp of an extraordinary moment in our country’s history. I trust that each of us will do our part to preserve this amazing experiment in freedom we call America.

And what could be more exciting than that?

**Martha McGeary Snider** is the founder and chief visionary officer of We250 and served as Policy Advisor on Arts and Culture to Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell from 2003 to 2011. She is vice chair of the Museum of the American Revolution board and a board member of the Jack Miller Center.



**How do we inspire our young citizens to feel the same passion about their role in our democracy? Our teachers need innovative ways to help reach our future leaders.**

JEANNE ALLEN

# Why America?

**M**any struggle with the question of how to educate students—especially those poorly served by American schools—about the nation’s Founding and its history. A few years ago we delved into this challenge and the answer we received led us to a program that taught us much about how civics education might be conducted. It started with a fundamental question—

“It seems to me every student should be able to answer, ‘*Why America?*,’” said political scientist and former U.S. Deputy Education Secretary, Dr. Eugene Hickok. “Why is it that this nation is worthy of their attention, their study and appreciation, over and above others?”

His advice led us to create “Why America?,” a small but powerful program funded generously by the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation,

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**RIGHT** Amanda Smith, an African-American woman employed in the Long Beach Plant of the Douglas Aircraft Company, ca. 1939–1945. The caption on the back of the photo reads: “The six plane factories of the Douglas Aircraft Company have been termed an industrial melting pot, since men and women of 58 national origins work side by side in pushing America’s plane output . . .”

Courtesy Library of Congress / Office of War Information



designed to help teachers convey and students answer—*Why? Why the Constitution? Why the Presidency? Why Congress? Why the First Amendment? And how was it intended to all be used anyway?*

Our focus was Washington, D.C. school children. After attempting to rally students from all sectors, it was the District’s charter schools and later a few private schools, that were most interested in a program of hands-on, experiential learning of American history through the lens of their backyard, the nation’s capital.

**Late historian David McCullough has argued convincingly that “You cannot love what you do not know.”**

The late historian David McCullough has argued convincingly that “You cannot love what you do not know.” The truth of this statement was on display—for students and many teachers—when we hosted the 200 middle school students from varying schools each month at some of the nation’s most prominent historical sites.

“I’ve lived here all my life and I never knew ‘who’ was in this park,” said one teacher as she and her students followed the White House Historical Association guide through Lafayette Park. One student literally skipped along with her class, offering a loud thank you for giving her the opportunity to learn about the Marquis de Lafayette and the other heroes of the American Revolution featured prominently across from the White House.

When the session on the life of the “Father of our Country” came alive, replete with historical interpreters representing George Washington, his friends and even the enslaved people who were instrumental to the nation’s early success, students remarked they’d never heard Washington called that, nor much about his heroism and character at all. In the visits to the three branches of government, more than one sixth grader noted that they had not understood more than it was “the government” and were glad to know people were holding each other accountable.

When we toured the Pentagon, we focused on how the Armed Forces protect the contract between the government and the people, and the meaning of Flag Day and Memorial Day in celebrating and honoring our nation and its symbols. The students’ excitement was palpable as they interacted with the “top brass” and

learned to fold a flag. The experience that day led some students to express interest in the military as a career on their bus rides home.

As the number of teachers signing their students up for these events grew, and their grades on homework reportedly improved, we knew we had the equivalent of a mini-focus group. It demonstrated the “why” behind the many disappointing national assessments. It’s not that most teachers do not care or care to know. But for most teachers, accessing objective, credible and engaging sources of history is more difficult than ever. And many are not required—or incentivized—to do so. Once they do, they are powerful allies for great civics education, as students are actually captivated by the exploration of history.

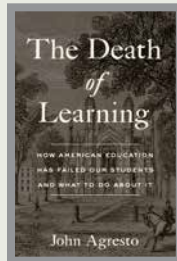
**Inspiring students to want to learn more about their country, and in so doing, come to know—and love—America, should be the most prominent goal of education.**

To be sure, civic resources abound—Constituting America and the Bill of Rights Foundation among them. Their work is being consumed by an increasing and steady stream of educators and schools. But do they know their material well-enough to convey it to students and engender that love of America? As some of us remember, there was that teacher who opened our minds and eyes to the power of history, being imbued with what felt like brilliance in having it all click. Inspiring students to want to learn more about their country, and in so doing, come to know—and love—America, should be the most prominent goal of education, no matter where or how it is delivered.

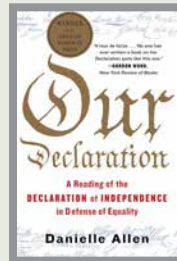
**Jeanne Allen** is founder and CEO of the Center for Education Reform.



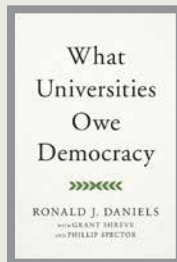
# Good Reads



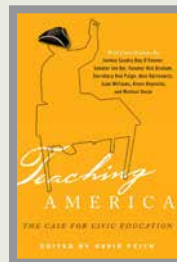
**The Death of Learning**  
How American Education Has Failed Our Students and What to Do about It  
John Agresto



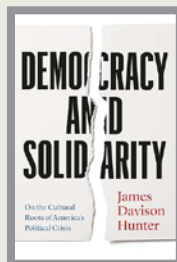
**Our Declaration**  
A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality  
Danielle S. Allen



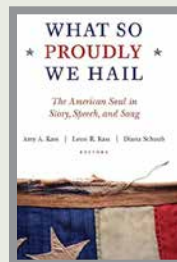
**What Universities Owe Democracy**  
Ronald J. Daniels with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector



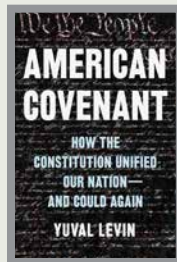
**Teaching America**  
The Case for Civic Education  
David J. Feith



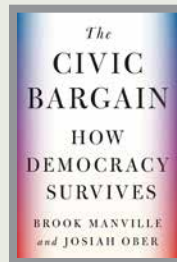
**Democracy and Solidarity**  
On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis  
James Davison Hunter



**What So Proudly We Hail**  
The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song  
Edited by Amy A. Kass, Leon R. Kass, and Diana Schaub



**American Covenant**  
How the Constitution Unified Our Nation—and Could Again  
Yuval Levin



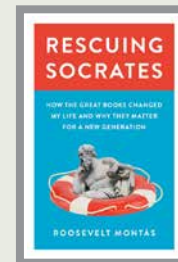
**The Civic Bargain**  
How Democracy Survives  
Brook Manville and Josiah Ober



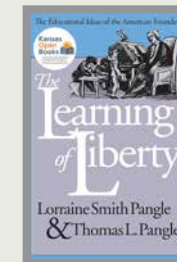
**Land of Hope**  
An Invitation to the Great American Story  
Wilfred M. McClay



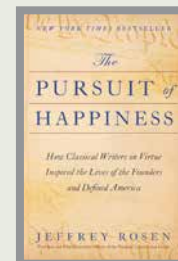
**Renewing America's Civic Compact**  
Edited by Carol McNamara and Trevor Shelley



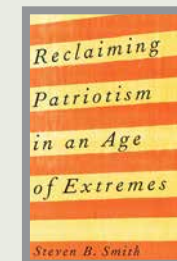
**Rescuing Socrates**  
How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation  
Roosevelt Montás



**The Learning of Liberty**  
The Educational Ideas of the American Founders  
Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle

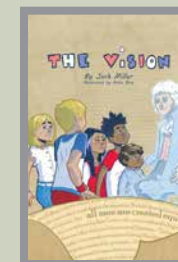


**The Pursuit of Happiness**  
How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America  
Jeffrey Rosen



**Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes**  
Steven B. Smith

## Books for Children



**The Vision**  
All Men Are Created Equal  
Jack Miller, illustrated by Arkie Ring



**My Day with Abe Lincoln**  
Jonathan W. White, illustrated by Madeline Renaux



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**LEFT** “Fall Plowing” by Grant Wood, 1931, depicts the recently developed walking plow and steel plowshare commonly used by Midwestern farmers at that time, innovations which played an important role in developing the prairie into farmland. Courtesy Deere & Company



## Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this special edition digest of the National Summit on Civic Education. Our goal was to create a product that reflects the inspiring conversations from the National Summit on Civic Education, which illuminate much of our work at the Jack Miller Center throughout the year. Our deepest gratitude goes to our talented writers, whose creativity and insights brought our theme, “Can Civic Education Can Save Our Institutions?” to life.

We are also grateful to our sponsors and donors, whose generous patronage makes this work possible. A special thanks to the Jack Miller Center’s Board of Directors, the National Civics Council, and the Academic Advisory Council for their invaluable support and guidance. We are grateful for the commitment of Karen Sheets Design and our editorial team, whose creativity, skill, and hard work have taken this from idea to reality.

Thank you all for being part of this project!

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**LEFT** Margaret Hamilton, NASA’s lead software engineer for the Apollo program, stands next to binders of her handwritten code. Her work helped put American astronauts safely on the moon in 1969. Courtesy Draper Laboratory, MIT Libraries



# About the Jack Miller Center

The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit committed to solving the national crisis of uninformed citizenship by teaching America's founding principles and history. Our project began in 2004 when Chicago philanthropist Jack Miller convened 50 top professors of political science and history from across the country to discuss the dire state of higher education and what needed to be done to fix it. Since that meeting, we have grown into a national coalition of scholars, K–12 teachers, philanthropists, and civic leaders who are passionate about advancing civic education in America.

There are four key pillars of our work:

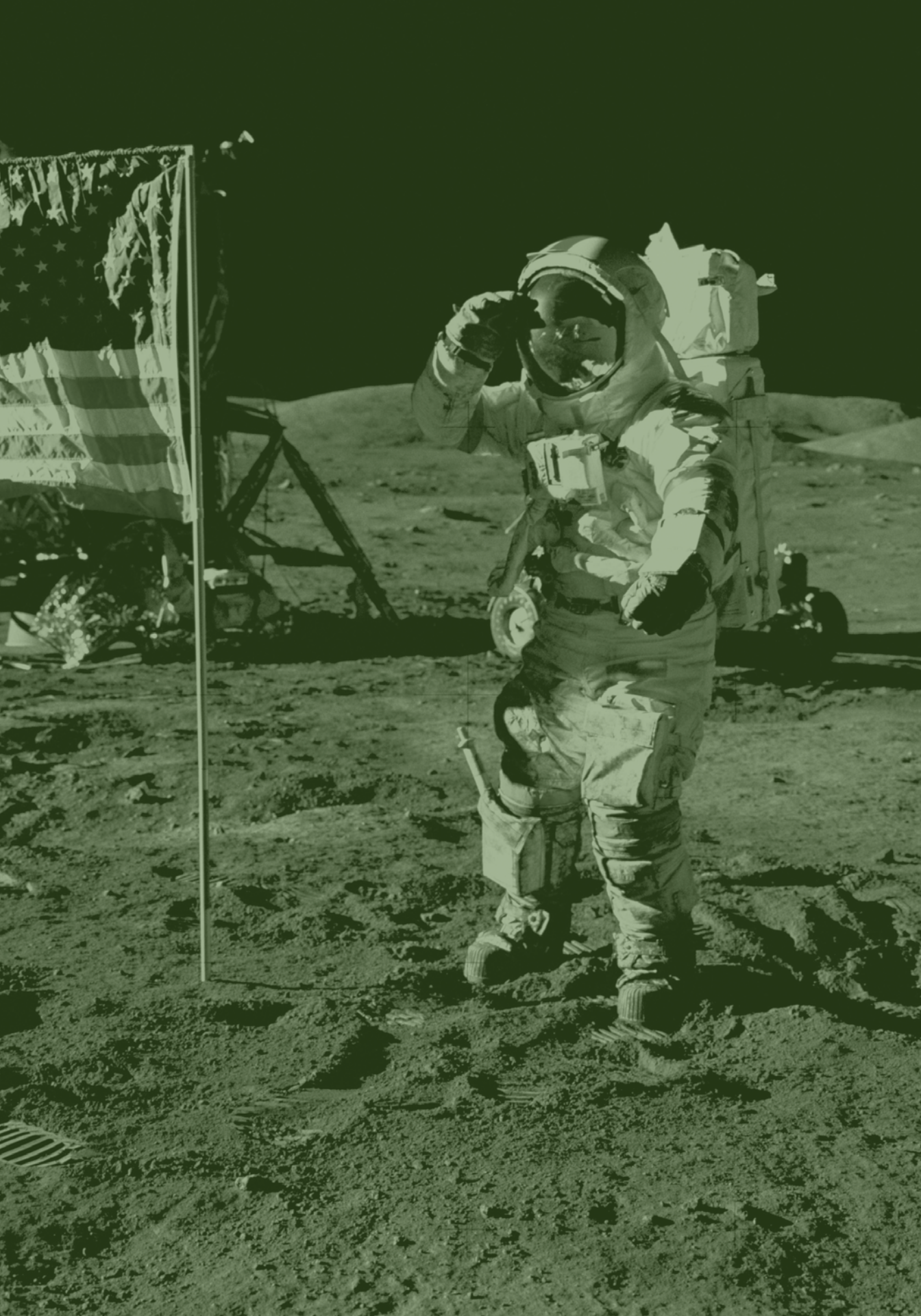
- **Transforming higher education through the American Political Tradition Project**—a strategic venture to build a talent pipeline of scholars and academic entrepreneurs to teach America's founding principles and history.
- **Bolstering K–12 civic education through the Founding Civics Initiative**—a national project to improve teacher education surrounding American primary sources and history.
- **Growing a nationwide coalition of civic education leaders and funders through the National Summit on Civic Education**—an annual two-day conference to identify and advance solutions for effective civic education.
- **Strengthening knowledge and support for American civics** through articles, webinars, and innovative learning tools that allow anyone to explore our history and central texts.

Learn more at [jackmillercenter.org](http://jackmillercenter.org).

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**LEFT** “The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, West Branch, Iowa” by Grant Wood, 1931

Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Des Moines Art Center, with funds from the John R. Van Derlip Fund, Mrs. Howard H. Frank, and the Edmundson Art Foundation, Inc.



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**LEFT** Apollo 17 Commander Eugene A. Cernan salutes the U.S. flag on the lunar surface

Courtesy NASA Archive / Alamy Stock

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