

# The Center on Congress at Indiana University

---

## Master Teachers and Our Nation's Future

The Hon. Lee H. Hamilton  
Professional Development Leadership Training Seminar  
Fairmont Hotel  
Washington, D.C.  
July 19, 2010

I am here today for two reasons — nothing very fancy about it:

First, I do not think we are preparing young people for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Second, I believe that you as master teachers can do something about it. I have a lot of opportunities to speak to different groups, but I come here because of the importance of the work you do. I can't think of anybody who has more responsibility than you do for the future of our democracy. There are a great many of us who are in your debt because of the work you do.

My remarks are based on one premise:

You and I believe that the success of our democracy is determined by the participation of its citizens.

We agree with Lincoln. Lincoln asked whether this nation, devoted to the values of liberty, equality, justice and opportunity "so conceived and so dedicated...can long endure."

In these words, he told us a truth about our democracy — that its survival is never guaranteed, and that its success demands vigilance, and wisdom, and action from American citizens.

Thus, I focus my remarks today on two questions:

1. Why should we be concerned about producing good citizens?
2. What do we do about our concerns?

### 1. Why are we concerned?

Why are we concerned?

We are concerned because too many Americans lack a basic understanding of:

- The core institutions in our representative democracy;
- Our debt to our ancestors who established those institutions;
- And our responsibilities to teach our descendants about those institutions.

A multitude of surveys confirm our concerns. But we don't even need to look at surveys or statistics to know that political participation and civic engagement is down. There are some exceptions, but in general people are voting less, volunteering less, and complaining more.

There is a sense, particularly among many younger folks, that being an American citizen is no big deal; no obligation attaches to it, it's an endeavor not particularly worthy of their time and talent.

I know of young people in my home state of Indiana who, when asked about the meaning of Memorial Day, respond by saying that it is the day that swimming pools are opened, or the Indianapolis 500 auto race is run.

Too many Americans think that citizenship is hollow.

We are concerned because we know that an apathetic, passive, and cynical view about our democracy will invite leaders who abuse power.

There is an old observation: a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves.

You and I are concerned because if Americans increasingly disengage — if more and more Americans are less and less interested in civic responsibility — then the entire American democratic enterprise is at risk, and the country will not work.

## 2. What do we do about our concerns?

Where do we begin? We begin with ourselves, and we begin with a sense of gratitude.

Many have observed that the joy of being an American is the joy of freedom and opportunity. We have been bequeathed freedom, justice and opportunity from the extraordinary deeds of the Americans who preceded us.

We did not earn the inheritance.

This nation of unequalled wealth and power, of freedom and opportunity, was given to us. But America is not, and never will be, a finished project. It is always, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, aborning. But we need to move beyond gratitude.

You and I are handed a work in progress, one that can evolve for good or for ill.

American democracy makes a wager on each citizen. The deal is simple: with freedom comes obligation, with liberty comes duty. If you and I do not fulfill our side of that wager, democracy is doomed.

So we must learn and we must teach our young people the words we live by in the Constitution, in the Declaration of Independence, and in the other grand documents of American history.

You and I must get into our bones and convey to others the basic concepts of representative democracy: the consent of the governed, the institutions, the necessity of participation, and the avenues for action that are open to all of us.

And we must learn and teach about the institutions that bring life and permanence to those documents.

As Americans we owe a profound debt of gratitude for the actions of those who preceded us, and we have the obligation to transmit to those who follow after us an America that is even greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

**Meeting Civic Responsibilities** In a word, we must meet our civic responsibilities.

Now I understand, we have plenty of important things to worry about: our families and their welfare, our jobs, paying our bills. No doubt, these private interests are, in their own right, civic virtues. First Lady Barbara Bush said the important thing is not what happens in the White House, but what happens in *your* house.

We are good in this country at protecting and speaking out for our individual interests. But at least some of our attention should be on advancing the public interest, or as the founding fathers called it, the common good.

Look around you. Many things need to be done in your community and country. Perhaps you are upset by:

- the actions of some of my former colleagues on the Hill;
- the quality of health care;
- the bump in the road on your way to work;
- the availability and quality of local day care;
- the treatment of a person or a group in your town;
- or even our nation's foreign policy.

Please don't misunderstand me. Tending to your own business and your own family are activities of enormous importance to the welfare of this country. But civic engagement is your way of influencing for the better your neighborhood, community, state and nation.

And there are advantages to us and our communities if we engage.

Participation is the best antidote to cynicism. Our morale improves as we see, in some small but important measure, our lives become better, richer, and fuller, as we help make life better for our fellow citizens.

I know people who vote, walk out of the booth, and say and believe that their civic duty has been fully discharged, that voting is all they need to do. Voting is important but not enough. Do you know who does not disengage when the voting is done? Interest groups. They begin their work the day after an election — the day after the bill is enacted into law. They know that's when the work really begins, and so should the rest of us.

There are advantages to our communities — if we engage.

Civic engagement holds power accountable, and accountability is the key to good government. We engage because it improves the performance of the institutions — profit, non-profit, and governmental institutions — around us.

Civic engagement improves our lives, our community, our country.

**Strengthening Civic Skills** We need to strengthen the civic skills, knowledge, and virtue of our people. This means:

- being aware of the size and diversity of views in this great and diverse country of over 300 million people, and how hard it is to make it work;
- listening to our friends and neighbors, understanding their concerns;
- identifying problems that need to be addressed and looking for solutions;
- understanding the importance of the great dialogue of democracy, of discussion and compromise and seeking common ground;
- thinking critically, often in a noisy environment, and discerning the difference between mere slogans and substance;
- focusing on the common good, not just our own particular interests;
- reaching out to our elected representatives.

How much I am impressed with the obligations that representative democracy places on citizens. In developing and promoting civic skills we must be tenacious, because our problems are formidable — and we also have to be modest because of the magnitude of the challenge. Solutions come step by step, and not mile by mile.

No one ever said self-government is easy.

**Teaching How to Engage** If you ask them, most Americans want to be better people, living in better communities, in a better state, and in a better nation. Often, they want to become involved but don't know where to go, whom to talk to, what to do.

So the job of civic education is not complete if we teach only its importance; we must show them how to engage, how to participate, how to get off the sidelines and into the action.

Citizenship begins with commitment, not with expertise.

I like the attitude of the builder who said: "I cannot solve the world's problems, but I can help build this house."

A constituent of mine was a diabetic. He approached me one day many years ago because he had no idea what was in the food on sale at the grocery store, and his health depended upon it.

But he did a lot more than just talk to me. He spoke around the community to whomever would listen; visited and wrote letters by the scores to all kinds of supermarket chains, food processors, media outlets, and public officials. Thanks to him, and to many people of like mind and action, consumers now have meaningful labels on the food that they buy.

You and I may not have the opportunity to engage to resolve the really big problem: Fixing health care. Saving social security. Changing the tax code. Defending our nation against its enemies.

But all of us can engage effectively through small, incremental changes.

- A school is built or refurbished.
- Ramps for the handicapped are carved into street corners.
- A safety signal goes up at a dangerous railroad intersection.
- A worthy, young disadvantaged student enters medical school.
- A young woman steps into the world with more opportunity than her mother.
- A student lights up as he or she begins to experience the joys of learning.

These are not insignificant examples. They save and improve lives and communities. The actions of my constituent with his search for food labeling, and of countless American citizens like him made many American lives healthier.

Countless small actions that improve the quality of the lives of our people are the wellspring of democracy.

We engage by looking around us, identifying something that needs fixing, and doing something about it:

- We can stay more informed about issues in our own communities, as well as the issues of the state and nation.
- We can join the sometimes messy, rough and tumble dialogue of democracy by writing letters to local papers or elected officials, asking questions or advocating positions.
- We can give speeches or ask questions why things cannot be better across the street or across the world.
- We can organize petition drives or letter writing campaigns.
- We can join — or begin — an organization that reflects our views and enlarges our collective voice.
- We can run for elective office or work for candidates of our choice.
- We can vote in elections and hold each of our representatives accountable — from the president on down to the town council.
- We can join institutions of service — the Peace Corps, the armed services, Americorps, or local uniformed services.
- We can volunteer to work in our church or our synagogue, in the local hospital, or to help children cross the street at school — for all kinds of charitable causes and organizations.

If you know your community, you know:

- the needs of the people in the community (not just the people like you),
- who is in charge, who the movers and shakers are,
- who has the power to get a message out,
- who can assemble people together.

**Benefits of Engagement** Civic engagement, the hallmark of our democracy, is the greatest antidote for cynicism.

When we engage we feel empowered, we become more optimistic, we become less cynical, we have more trust in our fellow citizens, we feel better about ourselves, and we get good things done.

When we engage in our community we no longer feel distant from the centers of power in that community. We come to understand our own communities, and appreciate how we can influence change.

Perhaps most important, we gain an appreciation for the hard work of democracy, how to understand different points of view and forge a consensus behind a course of action towards a solution.

When we engage, we lessen the distance between ourselves and those who govern. And we gain understanding and appreciation for our country that can make it and the ongoing experiment of American democracy stronger.

## Conclusion

You and I know that democracy is the most worthy form of government, because it releases the energy of the people for worthy ends and brings out the best in us.

But even our participation is not enough.

Our nation demands not only our participation, but also two other things — competence, and passion.

I have known citizens who have brought great competence, but little passion, and I know others who have brought great passion but little competence. Neither is very effective. Both passion and competence are needed in our system in order to bring about change.

President Kennedy's words resonate through the years: "In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

I cherish the citizen who says: "I belong here; I have a role to play; I have a contribution to make."

Being an American citizen means that:

- We are blessed to be part of this nation.
- We worry about the lack of civic awareness and engagement.
- We want to do a better job teaching the responsibilities of citizenship to the young.
- We act to effect meaningful change and accountable government through countless avenues for civic action.
- And above all, it means we are responsible for tending to our own democracy, making it work for all people, and transmitting it to our children better than we inherited it.

I am grateful that you accept the responsibility of an American citizen, and go beyond that. Fortunately there are many more Americans like you — but not enough. Our charge is to spread this message anew to all Americans.

We hear a lot these days about leadership — leadership, of course, matters. But the key issue in the country today is not leadership, it is citizenship. We need to ask more of ourselves — and our fellow citizens.

Self-government is a monumental achievement — one of the greatest achievements in all the world's history — but it does not perpetuate itself automatically. There is no invisible hand that guides and preserves our institutions and our destiny.

So, I plead for the old civic and personal values to renew America:

- a sense of moral and mutual obligation and personal responsibility;
- a sense of personal sacrifice, a sense that we do not live by bread or wealth alone;
- a sense of observing the rules of life, as well as the rules of law;

- a sense of being an active agent — not a passive victim — for the common good;
- a sense that this nation is more than a clash of self interests, with each person and each enterprise trying to maximize its own position and share of the wealth, but rather, it is a nation that strives for the common good;
- a sense that we must not just discuss the civic virtues, but also live them by undertaking concrete projects to improve the lives of our fellow citizens;
- a sense that, as James Madison insisted, virtue is needed for self-government;
- and a sense that citizens working together in a common endeavor and for a common good is at the very heart of what this country is all about.

I do not worry whether we are in civic decline or civic renewal. It is too big a question for me to get my mind around. We can argue that one all the day long.

I do not worry about the role of an activist government versus the role of the civil, voluntary society. Both are needed.

I do not worry about whether the task should be done by local, state, or national government. It is an endless, not irrelevant, argument on federalism. Action by all is needed, and the focus should be on the results of our effort at all levels.

What I do worry about is whether our civic condition is strong enough to meet the challenges of this day.

And so, my good friends, as master teachers you know more than most, we must meet the challenge of civic renewal:

- as individuals,
- families,
- neighborhoods,
- schools,
- faith-based institutions,
- communities,
- and governing institutions.

It is, after all, our democracy — the work of many hands, including our own.

I do not have a sure-fire formula for civic success. I do have a sure-fire formula for civic failure: It's to back away, to disengage from our civic responsibilities.

If we become a nation of spectators, we will surely fail.

Copyright Center on Congress, 2000 - 2004. congress.indiana.edu