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Civic Engagement and American Democracy

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Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the United States during the 1830's and his observations say much about democracy in general, democracy in the United States of the 1830's and democracy today. His greatest fear for the United States was of apathy on the part of its citizens. He saw individualism and material wealth as potent contributors to the United States but also as potential distracters. He felt that the greatest threat existed because democracy might work so well that citizens would become apathetic. At this point the omnipotence of the majority would cause the democratic freedoms to slip away almost unnoticed. His prescribed counterbalance was neither theoretical nor literary. He did not have much confidence in the ability of Americans to learn as a society from books. Instead he found experience to be the best American teacher. He was an early advocate of civic engagement for the good of society as a whole, for the democratic political process and for the individual as a learner.

Is de Tocqueville's observation still true today? Is experience the best American teacher and is it valued in today's world?

The combination of two recent incidents in my life leads me to believe that the answer is yes. Recently my son gave me a series of compact discs that are recordings of great American speeches. Driving down the highway listening to former President Kennedy's inaugural address, I was once again inspired by Kennedy's language and his message. *"We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom - symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning - signifying renewal, as well as change."*

"The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life."

"In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course...Now the trumpet summons us again... to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself."

"And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you: Ask what you can do for your country."

"With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

I was a sophomore in high school when he made that speech but I think it resonates even with today's youth. That is, if my second incident is any indication. The second incident was an outgrowth of Kennedy's dream on how we go forth. A few weeks after I listened to these speeches, my son's girlfriend left for her two years of service in the Peace Corps - a creation of the Kennedy presidency. I think she viewed the coming experience both as

an education for herself and as an opportunity to serve others. Over forty years later Kennedy's words live in commitments of young persons throughout our country who participate in this kind of civic engagement.

Kennedy used the words 'we' or 'us' dozens of times in his speech. His was not a message of what he would do as President, but rather a message of civic engagement. It was a message to American citizens to go forth and participate. His message resonated throughout both his and Johnson's administration with the creation of the Peace Corps and VISTA. If my experience is any indication, he motivated young people throughout the country to become engaged. In my case I became a student at the University of Texas and began a program through student government that worked with professors to incorporate community activities into their curriculum - an early version of service learning. Many of my friends joined either the Peace Corps or VISTA. In my college world the victories in civil rights overcame the cynicism about the Vietnam conflict and filled young people with a sense of optimism and obligation.

Although President Kennedy's eloquence may represent the pinnacle of inspiring civic engagement through an inaugural address, President Bush reiterated the same sentiment in his address.

"The important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone."

"What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to...be citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens building communities of service and a nation of character."

It is not unusual for Presidents to lead by challenging the public with a call to engagement. After all, a measure of presidential leadership is the ability to create shared aspirations in the public and mobilize the public to work toward the achievement of these same aspirations. In Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address he told his public that we now realize *"our interdependence on each other; that we can not merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must...sacrifice for the good of a common discipline."* Shortly after this address he began his famous "Fireside Chats" with the announcement that he would close the banks for a time and explained to the public that if, after re-opening, they ran to withdraw their funds, the system would fail. He asked the public to support the country by leaving its money in these very banks that were threatened. He challenged the public in his inaugural address with a massive civic engagement comparable to *"a great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems."*

Perhaps the greatest challenge in an inaugural address set on engaging the public on a course foreign to their instincts is found in Lincoln's second address. The armies of the North and South had succeeded in killing almost 10% of all men of service age in the United States. The total dead in the Civil War approached the total number of Americans killed in all the military engagements of the twentieth century. The victorious public in the

North had every right to expect punishment, retribution and payment for their dead. The South was considered traitorous by many. Washington DC was packed for Lincoln's speech. Medals had been struck announcing their author's beliefs about Lincoln's message: "A Foe to the Traitors" read one while another read "No Compromise with Armed Rebels." The day was stormy but as Lincoln took his place to address the public the sun broke through the clouds. Instead of promising punishment Lincoln read *"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."* Lincoln asked all Americans to finish the "work we are in." It was not the government's task but that of all citizens, North and South, "to bind up the nation's wounds."

It is the nature of democracy that the "hands" of its citizens must be engaged in civic work because it is in these hands that success or failure lies. Washington's first inaugural address set the precedent for the future calls to civic engagement: *"The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are...staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."*

Although the 1830's are long behind us and learning from school and books may be a more popular form of learning than it was at that time, experience remains the best teacher. If the inaugural addresses are any indication, civic engagement remains a necessary part of American democracy and social fabric. With that in mind, schools and colleges need to bring that engagement into the curriculum. They need to provide service learning opportunities for young adults that are tied to the curriculum, meaningful in all respects and to all parties and which are viewed as an integral part of living in the United States. A country cannot expect sacrifice, as Roosevelt asked for it, if the concept is foreign to its citizens. Service learning develops citizens who understand that often a "good conscience is our only sure reward" and that it is a good reward.

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Richard Erdmann is the president of Syfr Corporation, which provides conferences and seminars in education for K-12 school district administrators. He has been the founder and CEO of several educational technology companies and currently consults with several others. His companies have tended to use technology as a vehicle with which to push curriculum reform in K-12 education.

Civic engagement has a long history in the messages of the inaugural addresses of American Presidents. It is not only a basis for American democracy but also a force mobilized by many American Presidents for change. It may even be the primary way we learn about our own system of governance, the society in which we live and the necessary interdependence upon others that we have.

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