

CIVIC ILLITERACY AND EDUCATION

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First of all, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to the Executive Board for the invitation to speak at this 25th anniversary of the association. I am deeply touched by the honor, even greater because I share this evening of celebration with our dear colleague Norm Bauer who has recently retired from SUNY Geneseo. Some of us in this room go back many years with NYSFEA, and I always look forward to the stimulating discussion and the renewal of collegiality each year. Those of you here for the first time: I welcome you and hope that you come back year after year. Twenty-five years ago, intellectuals were part of the struggle to end a criminal war in Vietnam, and end social, economic and educational injustice at home. Now, in the “postmodern” era, the movements of 1971 are ancient history and many intellectuals struggle over how to deconstruct a paragraph. Russell Jacoby has addressed this issue with his customary wit and historical insight in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

I would like to preface my remarks about civic illiteracy — which come from the introduction to my book: *Civic Illiteracy and Education: The Battle for the Hearts and Minds of American Youth* (forthcoming April 1997, Peter Lang) with a very brief review of what was happening in 1971 when this association began — throughout the nation and in Cortland where we had our first gathering. This review will give some historical context from which to examine the present. My thanks to Bill Griffen, who keeps a careful journal of issues and events, and John Ryder for his recollection of that time.

Some historical benchmarks from 1971 include: January: Phil Berrigan and others indicted in plot to kidnap Henry Kissinger; Cortland students and faculty send about 30 people to Harrisburg for the trial in April. January: Berrigan brothers on cover of Time Maga-

zine as “Rebel Priests” — compare their principled commitment to human rights and justice with those clergy who make up the Christian Coalition. April: Twenty-five years ago this weekend, the Grateful Dead play before some 5-6,000 at SUNY Cortland. The City Council passes a resolution barring them from ever playing within the city. May: May Day demonstration against Vietnam War in Washington with 7,200 arrests in one day and 13,400 for four days — the largest mass arrests in U.S. history. Late April-early May: SUNY Cortland “Conspiracy for Change” — week-long and all-day radical classes, workshops, and demonstrations. June: Bill Griffen and I are invited to the Cortland County Bar Association annual dinner to address that group on the Berrigan/Harrisburg trial and events surrounding the Vietnam War and protests; it was our last out-of-court appearance before lawyers. September: Members of the Onondaga Nation stop construction on Route 81, to block an effort to take reservation land. September: Attica prison protest and seige by state troopers lead to 41 deaths. October: SUNY Cortland students get Cortland Common Council to pass an anti-war resolution which makes national news.

1971-72: Education Department Pilot Program in a Binghamton elementary school, where students did their methods and student teaching; there has been nothing close to it since. I sat in awe as those students took on the Binghamton Superintendent of Schools, who was about to fire a young teacher in that very school. The Cortland students were so incensed that they demanded a meeting; he did not change his mind, but their courage and articulate challenge to his authority on behalf of a colleague have stuck with me after all these years. They and other students at Cortland were engaged in the struggle for civic literacy through their inquiries and activism; their courage, insights and involvement have not been matched since, and the comparison with today’s Cortland students — especially in Education — is striking.

Now, to some brief comments on Civic Illiteracy. Columnist Mike Royko of the *Chicago Tribune* has a crude but fairly accurate

statement that captures the analysis in my book about the profound level of civic illiteracy among youth — which has been crafted by a corporate, political and educational elite that fears “democratic dis-temper” among the citizenry.

Let’s be honest: When it comes to foreign involvement, Americans don’t know their butts from the nearest border . . . We Americans [are] the most geographically and politically uninformed, unenlightened and ignorant people who have ever claimed the title of World Leaders.... Now if you ask what teams are making the NFL playoffs, that’s different. Look at it this way: When was the last time Herzegovina was in the Super Bowl?

Introduction to [*Civic Illiteracy*] *Land of Promise; One Flag, One Land; Our Land, Our Time; America: The Glorious Republic; Spirit of Liberty: An American History; The Americans: A History of a People and a Nation; A Proud Nation; Heritage of Freedom; The Challenge of Freedom*. These history textbook titles reverberate with visions of democracy, freedom, and patriotism — what America is all about. They inspire one to think about the glorious traditions and lessons that should move youth.

There is a different view of our history, however, that rarely makes it into schools, textbooks and mass media. This “other side” must be presented if youth are to think about and challenge the distortions, omissions and lies that shape history lessons about the country and its wars. This book is about the contest for the hearts and minds of youth, about what is termed “civic literacy” — the ability to think critically and objectively about the nation’s fundamental premises and practices.

Influential educators faithfully support a dominant-elite view that has fostered an uncritical patriotism and militarism, undermining thoughtful and active citizenship in a democracy. In contrast, I argue that education, often through history textbooks which are the primary source of civic literacy instruction, offers youth a distorted

view of America, promoting civic illiteracy and turning civic responsibility into patriotic conformity. Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* has actually been fostered by those who influence educational policy. Dissenters, therefore, must challenge the empty patriotism, yellow ribbons, and militarism that shape the nation and our schools.

Today, there is a crisis of civic literacy and democracy; the representation of our history in schools will help to shape its outcome. This crisis has arisen because we do not educate students to criticize and challenge the nation's policies, especially those involving war. Despite the many claims that civic literacy is crucial to education and democracy, patriotic and militaristic propaganda has dominated history lessons in our schools. Such education leaves students unable to make reasoned judgments, preparing them to give unthinking support to American wars.

The crisis of civic literacy that I wish to address, however, is not the one discussed by educational reports, and by corporate, educational and political leaders. It exists because the dominant elite that runs this country requires youth and citizens who can be manipulated. This elite is comprised of corporate officials, influential educators, and political figures who govern the nation and shape its civic debate. These leaders see the foundations of our country and educational system as sound and our institutions and leaders as decent and humane, but they believe that mistakes are made because purposes are not questioned. The source of this crisis is not merely youthful ignorance of the basic facts of important historical events, though this deficiency certainly exists. Its roots lie in the elite's fear that civically-literate youth will become informed and involved citizens; civic instruction, therefore, is organized to prevent such a danger. Civic illiteracy, which helps to keep youth and other citizens stupefied, is perfectly reasonable once we understand the purpose and nature of "citizenship training" in the schools: to undermine the critical and liberating potential of education.

The images and beliefs inspired by the titles listed at the beginning of this introduction are those that influential political figures and educators want youth to embrace. The dominant elite fears what Harvard professor and former Pentagon official Samuel Huntington called “the democratic distemper” in the people, especially youth. If youth question and challenge issues and policies, this elite will face an “excess of democracy” of the kind that emerged in the 1960s when social movements challenged respected authorities and established policies.¹ Such movements threaten the power and stability of established institutions. The history lessons about patriotism, war, and these movements, therefore, are simply one educational tool in the struggle to vaccinate the hearts and minds of youth against this “distemper.”

Those who shape our perception of world events, including history textbook authors, present similar views on matters of state and war despite apparent differences on particular issues or policies. Their general position is expressed in high school and media history discussions and lessons. Rarely heard by youth, however, are radical views that challenge the fundamental beliefs about America and war that students and citizens learn and take for granted.

The radical or “other side” was expressed by the late Andrew Kopkind, writer and journalist for *The Nation*. Writing after the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, Kopkind argued that “America has been in a state of war — cold, hot and lukewarm — for as long as most citizens now living can remember”; that this state of war has “been used effectively to manufacture support for the nation’s rulers and to eliminate or contain dissent among the ruled.” This “warrior state is so ingrained in American institutions ... in short so *totalitarian* — that government is practically unthinkable without it.”² But this war mentality is a good cure for “democratic distemper,” because it “implies command rather than participation, obedience over agreement, hierarchy instead of equality, repression not liberty, uniformity not diversity, secrecy not candor, propaganda not information.”³ This war system permeates every institution in our society, including our schools. Opposed to the “kinder gentler” rhetoric that

we hear in commencement and political addresses, it glorifies patriotism and war and profoundly shapes the crisis in civic literacy.

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The Format of the Book: Chapter Outlines and Argument

Chapter 1: The Crisis in Civic Literacy and Foundational Principles

Chapter 1 will examine the “crisis in civic literacy” and fundamental principles, as presented by influential educational reports and theorists who have defined the debate. These will include the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Report (*High School: A Report of Secondary Education*, 1983), the Education for Democracy Project Report (*Democracy’s Untold Story*, 1987), the National Endowment for the Humanities’ *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation’s Public Schools* (1987), the *Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (1987), and the perspectives of Allan Bloom, William Bennett, and R. Freeman Butts. This review will serve as the basis for the challenge in later chapters to the nature of American society and civic literacy.

Chapter 2: America: The Dominant-Elite View

In order to critique the principles of civic literacy and education, we must examine the dominant-elite view about the United States, including its history and stated ideals, as expressed through its professed commitment to human rights and its role in the world. This view shapes the debate on civic literacy, country, and war, and those presenting it define the issues to which citizens and youth then respond. They include Robert Bellah, Bennett, Bloom, and Paul Gagnon.

Chapter 3: America: A Dissenting View

The dominant-elite view of national reports and leading educators will be contrasted with dissenters such as Noam Chomsky, W.E.B. DuBois, bell hooks, June Jordan, Michael Parenti, and Howard Zinn, voices rarely heard in contemporary political discussions in the media, and virtually excluded from our secondary history classrooms.

Their dissenting critique gives us a much more truthful understanding of American history and contemporary events. The chapter explores DuBois's and Manning Marable's insights on how racism ultimately shapes youth's knowledge about peoples and nations in the Third World, and what this has to do with American wars. Since 1945, for example, the United States has committed aggression against people of color in Cambodia, Cuba, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Grenada, Iraq, Korea, Laos, Lebanon, Nicaragua, Panama, Southern Africa, and Vietnam. Racist justifications found in history lessons and textbook accounts of American domestic and foreign policies and wars have legitimized this aggression.

The dissenting view continues with Ward Churchill's and Annette Jaimes's insights on U.S. aggression against Native Americans; reflections on patriotism from Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, and *The Nation*; and feminist reflections on nationalism, women, and war from Jean Elshtain, Linda Gordon, and Betty Reardon. A discussion of civic literacy and society must include an examination of the relationship of gender to patriotism and war. The indoctrination that results in the emulation of militarism is not just fostered by school history lessons, but is nurtured by cultural gender stereotypes that glorify U.S. military exploits.

Chapter 4: The Radical Tradition in Educational Criticism

To continue dissenting perspectives on the dominant-elite view of America found in chapter 3, it is necessary to review the critical/radical scholarship that has arisen in educational studies over the past three decades. This section will include a discussion of the insights of Michael Apple, Ann Bastian, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Martin Carnoy, Maxine Greene, and Kathleen Weiler.

Chapter 5: Civic Illiteracy and American History Textbooks: The U.S.-Vietnam War

The dissenting views in chapters 4 and 5 establish the context and foundation for the argument that educational texts, as part of the schools' larger political purposes, have fostered civic illiteracy by promoting an uncritical patriotism. To illustrate the general thesis

that civic illiteracy is fostered in schools, I will challenge the dominant-elite view with a concrete analysis of how the U.S.-Vietnam War is presented in American history textbooks. These texts remain a key source of civic learning for high school students, especially about past wars; they equate U.S. policy with honorable intentions and justice while acknowledging errors of judgment and horrible casualties.

History textbooks support the dominant-elite version of the basic premises and practices of the nation, including: the U.S. is a democracy run in the interests of the people; government and educational leaders desire civically-literate and informed youth; the U.S. pursues peace and justice and is always trying to do good; and that although aggression and violence have been a part of our history, they are accidental by-products of essentially humane policies. I will challenge this benign view by weaving a narrative view of 20 history texts published in the 1980s, describing the U.S.-Vietnam war in the language of the textbook authors. Distortions and inaccuracies will be examined by using dissenting sources that are rarely part of schools' curricula.

Chapter 6: The Persian Gulf War

To continue the discussion of education and war, chapter 6 discusses civic illiteracy in the context of a detailed history of the Gulf War. Part I reviews the war from the "yellow-ribbon"⁴ or dominant-elite perspective; Part II offers a dissenting critique of the war based on evidence rarely encountered in the mass media or schools.

Chapter 7: Civic Literacy during the Gulf War: Critical Pedagogy and an Alternative Vision

This chapter will examine civic literacy efforts undertaken in schools during the Persian Gulf War, drawing upon available research and information provided by teachers. I will report on the views of some teachers who fostered the critical dialogue envisioned by the leading educational reports and theorists as essential to civic knowledge. This critical dialogue happened because they practiced the es-

sential virtue of civic literacy in a democracy: engaging students and citizens in an informed dialogue on an important historical event. These educators embrace the highest ideals of the nation and their vocation; they are the heroes and heroines in the struggle for civic literacy.

We must have a radically different vision of civic literacy in order to challenge the powerful influence of the dominant elite, and the school history lesson version of U.S. wars. This new vision and approach are needed to counter the patriotic and militaristic indoctrination that our youth receive. Our social and educational institutions continue to pledge allegiance to civic literacy, compassion, and peace, while the nation's leaders remain militaristic and violent. We need to understand how these destructive policies have been supported by educational institutions, and how a genuine civic literacy can help to transform them.

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My interest in writing this book is not merely academic. Powerful personal and political experiences have moved me to address the subject and controversy that are the heart of this work: my involvement in the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s; my work with Vietnam veterans on the war and related issues; my brother's combat service in Vietnam, and the death of his best friend with whom he went through basic and advanced infantry training; my personal contacts with Noam Chomsky, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Benjamin Spock, and Howard Zinn, all of whom have spoken and written eloquently about issues of war and peace; co-authoring *Teaching the Vietnam War* (1979); teaching students at the State University of New York, College at Cortland for the past 27 years; and my efforts as an activist on issues of education, peace, and social justice for the past 31 years.

Regardless of the judgment on the questions under discussion in this book, becoming civically literate about patriotism and war is not merely a minor debating point in another educational report or

publication. What youth learn about the U.S.-Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War can literally mean devastation or peace, especially for the peoples of the Third World and, ultimately, for America and the globe. As the historian Howard Zinn argues, “we can reasonably conclude that how we think is not just mildly interesting, not just a subject for intellectual debate, but a matter of life and death.”⁵

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ENDNOTES

1. Samuel Huntington, “The United States,” in Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report On The Governability of Democracies To The Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 102. Huntington’s essay is a must for those who wish to understand the dominant-elite’s response to the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s.
2. Andrew Kopkind, “The Warrior State: Imposing the New Order at Home,” *The Nation*, April 8, 1991, p. 433.
3. Ibid, 447.
4. Millions of Americans wore the yellow ribbon as a symbol of support for the troops, and ultimately the war itself. The symbol represented the overwhelming view in the country, especially after U.S. combat action began. The yellow ribbon perspective totally overwhelmed any civically-literate dialogue on the premises, purposes, and strategies of the war. See chapter 7 of my forthcoming book.
5. Howard Zinn, *Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 1-2.