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ARTICLE

Teaching For Democratic Values Under Political Duress

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Two days after 9/11, a bagpipe marching band playing a Sousa march paraded down an otherwise quiet section of State Parkway in Chicago, and, like the other passersby, I began to move to the music. As I became aware of the effects of the music on my body, I made a strong effort to break my step, and to not be seduced by the seductive rhythm of the band. Normally I have no difficulty walking or dancing out of step with the music. Many years ago when I was in the National Guard I would always be the one skipping along trying to line up my feet with everyone else's. But on that day in September, I had to make a very powerful effort to walk out of step and to not to keep pace with the beat of the band. It was easy to feel one with the music and what it represented.

My reluctance to fall in line was not a sign of lapsed patriotism or complacency about the events that had happened earlier. A few days before, I had sat glued to my television set, watching in horror as the Twin Towers collapsed and knowing that the courageous fire fighters that I had viewed climbing the stairs on their ill-fated rescue mission were, along with the others, caught in that horrible inferno.

Rather, my reluctance to follow the music came from a deeper concern about the choices that my country had before it. It could take the destruction as an act of war, as I feared it would, or it could have declared the act among the greatest international crimes in human history, brought the case to the world bodies, made a case for the world community to bring the criminals to justice, and argued that the international community punish any governing authority that refused to do so. While the second alternative would have been even more difficult than walking out of step with the music, it was, nevertheless, the right thing to do. Yes, it would have taken more wisdom and courage than our political leadership had, but had this wisdom and courage existed, it might have set a course that avoided the disaster that we are now engaged in Iraq. The decision of so many to march with the music, however, was not just a failure of political leadership. The leadership may have conducted the music, but we all followed the score because the implications of the sane alternative were so hard to contemplate.

We are not only a sovereign nation, we are also the most powerful nation the world has ever known—not only the only global superpower—the historical global superpower. Why would anyone want to surrender that power? To contemplate the alternative would mean to rethink the idea of sovereignty—to share power, to reduce our footprint, to ask for help in judgment as well as in action. Yet this is exactly what the new world calls for, and what wise people are learning from the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Historically the idea of sovereignty presupposed national independence aided by strong natural and cultural boundaries—mountains, oceans and rivers provided the physical boundaries; tribe, language, and religion, the cultural ones. But today, physical boundaries are incidental, cultural ones, porous. Today, the food we eat comes from Mexico; the cars we drive, from Japan; the air we breathe, from China; and the capital we raise, from all over the world. And tomorrow the climate that will engulf us will come from what we do today. We, as members of the nations of the world, are dependent on one another as in no other time in history, and dependency is what loss of sovereignty means. Our sovereignty has already been diminished—it remains only for our *idea* of sovereignty to realize this. To now march to the beat of sovereignty, as we have known it in the past, is to march out of step with sovereignty, as it must be known in the future. Marching to the tune of a bagpipe band calling for war

over diplomacy is to march out of step with the future. Yet it is not easy to hear that distant drummer. To skip to her tune is to engage in an unfamiliar and uncertain dance, and so it is hard for us to not follow the tune we know.

My own silent resistance, my skipping off the beat of the nearest drummer, took effort, but it did not come at a high price. But many do pay a price, and some of these are students. The newly minted high school graduate paid a price when he told me that he was so worthless that “he needed to be torn down and rebuilt from the bottom-up” and then joined the Marines and served in Iraq. The high school junior paid a price when, refusing to salute the flag and sing the National Anthem immediately after the events of September 11, her teacher lifted her out of her seat shouting the National Anthem in her ear. And she paid a price again when this born-in-the-U.S.A. youngster of Lebanese background was then told by the school disciplinary officer “to go back where she came from.”^[1] Many Moslem students, now objects of suspicion, also pay a price all over the country.

There are a lot of things that schools could do. They could open up the question of sovereignty, allowing students to trace the history of the idea from the Treaty of Westphalia on, encouraging them to explore the changes that have occurred in the concept of sovereignty in the past, allowing them to speculate on changes that might occur in the future. They could have students study the international treatise about human rights, just war, and the proper treatment of civilians and enemy combatants, including prisoners of war, all with the understanding that they may be called upon to serve. They could have them examine the international legal system and what constitutes war crimes on an international scale, and they could have students explore the possibilities for what a workable system of international law, one that was applied even-handedly, might entail for future military engagements. In some communities, they might even hold mock war criminal trials to determine what circumstances do and do not allow for military action.

For those who teach in schools where military recruiters address students, it is important that peace groups also be given a voice. And where students are likely to enlist in the military, it is important that they know the kind of behavior that they can be held accountable for, the conditions likely to provoke that behavior, and what they might do if they believe an order violates civilian or international law. Schools can also provide students with models of military courage—not only of soldiers who risked their lives to save their comrades or to accomplish a dangerous mission, but also soldiers who risked their lives to save innocents on the other side or to stop a war crime from taking place.

One example would be Hugh Thompson, who, spotting the massacre taking place over the village of My Lai in Vietnam, set his helicopter down between the remaining villagers and the American troops, ordering his men to shoot any American who continued to fire (Glover, 1999). Moreover, students need a realistic assessment of the mental and physical price exacted by war, especially in the context of the sanitized violence that they see on television and film. Their language arts classes need to explore the role that fear can play in galvanizing support for acts that may degrade democracy. And, most importantly, they need to understand the basic rights that belong to everyone in a democratic society and the fundamental duty of all of us to understand, interpret and defend those rights to the best of our ability. Here the PATRIOT Act could become not only a law to be followed, but also an important object for critical discourse and debate.

Much of what I am suggesting here should already be in place in the history and social studies curricula and in the special responsibilities that schools must take on when their students are endangered by uninformed choices. Every school should, for example, teach their students about just war theory and have them apply the theory to real cases, both past and present. This is a staple in many Catholic schools, but not in many public ones. And, perhaps most important, they must teach students to engage disagreement in a thoughtful and constructive way through dialogue, debate, and action.

Anxiety and excess fear are not good for democracy. They make us vulnerable to the erosion of liberties and stifling of dissent. Given the state of American education and the profound pressures that have been placed on it in recent years by political, commercial and military interests, and the anxiety and fear that have accompanied these pressures, one cannot be very optimistic about the response of the public schools or their ability to maintain the educational requirements needed to pass democracy on from one generation to the next. Indeed, given the privatization of schools often around commercial and narrowly vocational interests, and the very limited discourse about the role of the school in developing the habits and disposition required by democracy, it is not clear that many American leaders understand that schools even have a role in preserving liberal democracy. It is almost as if democracy is thought of as something that has been placed on automatic and allowed to run by itself; as if education and democracy were independent of each other.

It would be nice to be able to say that public education has offered some reasonable resistance to these assaults on democracy in the form of better information, more debate, greater openness to ideas, a stronger sense of history, and an idea of citizenship education as taking responsibility for the decisions of one's leaders. But there is little evidence that this has occurred. If anything, too many schools have closed their doors to ideas and debate. Schools are judged today not by how well they stimulate discourse and welcome openness, but by their contribution to a national economy. Granted, there are limits to what schools and teachers can or even are willing to legitimately do, especially given that we cannot just dismiss every threat as unreal or turn the clock back as if 9/11 or the Iraq war had not happened. Even if the wisest leadership came into office tomorrow, it would need to deal with the reality, including the fear that these events have created. So what is the intelligent educator to do? How can those teachers who understand just how critical their role is in preparing future citizens and in maintaining essential liberties respond to the present situation? And how can this be accomplished without imposing one set of ideas over another. In one respect, the answer should be clear and straightforward: Promote open-minded discussion and respectful debate.

Granted, the world is unsafe, and under some definitions, we will be in a state of "war" for a long time to come, but students need to be taught that the answer to risk is not a surrender of basic liberties. Nor are torture, rendition and kidnapping, all activities that have been carried out in their names in recent years by their own government, an answer. The right kind of education, and there is a right kind in these circumstances, is to engage the risk as a moment for deliberation and as a time to reflect upon just what might be precious about life in liberal democracies, and thus what it means to take the individual as the subject and the object of moral decision-making.

References

Glover, J. (1999). *Humanity: A moral history of the twentieth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 58-63.

Notes

[1] These are first-hand reports from the Marine and from a friend of the student who refused to salute the flag.