

Meet a revolutionary educator: Thomas Jefferson

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I'm surprised that with all the warfare under way about teacher tenure and performance evaluation, together with standardized testing and schools as dropout factories, there has been hardly any mention of the leading active educator among our founders, Thomas Jefferson.

Some know of him only as the creative founder of the University of Virginia, but when he was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, Jefferson introduced what he considered his most important educational effort, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" in 1778.

In the invaluable "The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson" (Cambridge University Press, 2009), there is a chapter by Darren Staloff that I strongly recommend to present-day school boards, principals, teachers, students and members of Congress of both parties.

The chapter is titled "The politics of pedagogy: Thomas Jefferson and the education of a democratic citizenry." In the primary grades, the goal of education was to ensure a citizenry that would be made "the safe, as they are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty."

Not only would the young learn who they are as newly formed and self-governing Americans, but they would be taught, Jefferson wrote, "to think for themselves" and accordingly, "to participate as equals in political democracy."

This emphasis on thinking for themselves reminded me of a strong corollary point made many years later by another American educational reformer, Erich Fromm, a psychologist and social theorist, in "Escape From Freedom":

"The right to express our thoughts, however, means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own."

Standardized tests go in the opposite direction.

Jefferson went on to speak of student scholarships in the preamble to this 1778 bill so that the indigent, throughout their education, would be "able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they be called to

that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance.”

As some of us have learned, Jefferson did not include blacks (whom he knew only as slaves, including his) in that company of citizens with such crucial rights and liberties.

With regard to women, it was only after Jefferson was no longer here that women began to be full-fledged citizens of these more fully United States.

But, beyond those base prejudices, shared by most of his fellow white male Americans at the time, Jefferson’s criteria for elementary education as the essence of American identity remain essential, and are missing in most of our public schools.

Also vital to present needs is the revelation in “The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson” of a long letter he wrote during his second term as president to John Norvell on the need to go much deeper into learning beyond “history in general (which) only informs us what bad government is.”

Jefferson’s way of studying history was to learn the specific history of nations’ disrespect for individuals’ rights and liberties by finding “the patterns of usurpation by which regimes had undermined the liberties of the people.”

We should, Jefferson told John Norvell, learn “the system of principles instead on which such an organization should be founded.”

Once there was an American system of government, with the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution, those principles took root here and were, for a time, studied in our own public schools’ civics classes. But Jefferson would be dismayed at the absence now of those classes in far too many of our public schools.

Moreover, the worst damage to our Constitution by Bush and Obama has been to the separation of powers. For example, in a survey by the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, “The nation’s report card”), “Only one in 10 (students) demonstrated acceptable knowledge of the checks and balances among the legislative, executive and judicial branches.” (“Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a ‘Crisis,’” The New York Times, May 4, 2011.) Most of these students don’t know why George Washington, our first president, had declined an offer from some enthusiasts to be king of the United States.

This is a grim contrast to who we are now. When Alexis de Tocqueville of France came here to observe this new adventure in democratic self-government, he found

that “in New England, every citizen ... is taught ... the doctrines and evidences of his religion (its history, not as advocacy), the history of his country, and the leading features of the Constitution (“Democracy in America,” two volumes, 1835-1840.)

And, de Tocqueville found, “In the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts, it is extremely rare to find a man imperfectly acquainted with all these things, and a person wholly ignorant of them is a sort of phenomenon.” (“The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World,” National Center for Constitutional Studies, 2006).

In 2012, far too many Americans, wholly ignorant of these things, are not aware of what they don’t know about what it takes to be an informed American.

De Tocqueville did report that in the West or the South back then, “the instruction of the people diminishes.” But, he also said, “there is not a single district in the United States sunk in complete ignorance” of the singular identity of America. Will our next president know or care about this?

Thomas Jefferson would be dismayed by the range of our ignorance now. But how many of us, if we knew about the prevalence of so much ignorance among us, would be moved to demand that our educators — whatever their conditions of tenure — learn enough to know how to teach new generations who we are?

How many teachers and principals or school board members could pass an individualized test in American constitutional history?

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