

# TAFT

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# WINTER PARENTS' DAY

Remarks by William R. MacMullen, Headmaster

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## "On a Civic Identity"

The talk I want to give today is an answer to a question. The question goes like this: "What the heck were you thinking sending 91 boys and 116 girls and 30 faculty on six buses to Washington on January 19 for the presidential inauguration?"

I guess this talk is my answer.

The simple answer goes like this: it was an important trip for Taft because I was convinced it might serve to help construct and strengthen the civic identity in our students, and today, given the challenges we face as a nation, that's really important.

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By now you may have seen photographs from the trip and heard much about it. But what was my thinking before we left? In the end I had four reasons for offering the trip, and they probably reflect my beliefs about this school's mission. This I believed:

First, that your children were asking for a level of engagement in the political process that was inspiring—and we needed to honor that passion.

Second, this moment offered a unique opportunity for Taft students to learn profound lessons about history, citizenship and democracy.

Third, that not to seize the opportunity with all the boldness and courage we could muster would lead, in the days following, to considerable regret.

And finally, that for national and global reasons, the connection between civic identity and education needed to be made today more emphatically than ever.

We had lengthy faculty meetings to discuss the idea of the trip, and always our focus was on potential *learning*. Politics never entered into it. I had lots of parents and students from all over the political spectrum ask about the possibility of going, all citing the same theme: this was a historic moment. This excerpt is typical one, from a bright Upper Mid girl who wrote me:

We understand that academics are a main priority, but in the scheme of one's lifetime, listening to the first black president's inaugural address is of far greater importance than three classes.... Seeing as Taft prides itself on being an intellectually aware and involved community, this experience offers an exceptional learning opportunity. Plus, the problem of being tired for class can't be seen as something faculty never witness; frankly, overworked and sleep-deprived students are the norm at Taft. Yes, [not going to D.C.] would be the easy solution, but are we a community that represents this kind of view? No, of course not. Students should not be denied the opportunity to witness history. This is an important moment for all of us.... It is not about one's personal political views. *This is our generation's moment* [emphasis mine].

Now, how do you argue with that?

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If you asked your son or daughter about his or her identity, you might get a long answer, but I am not sure it would be a full one; for it probably would lack a critical component: that of a *civic* identity, a facet of the self that we take for granted, regardless of our nationality. The inauguration provided a singular chance to affirm and strengthen the fact of a civic identity.

No nation on earth has the same story of overlapping identities that ours does, and so nowhere is the importance of a national identity greater. Indiana University political historian John Patrick makes this case in his work *The Concept of Citizenship*: a population can have many identities, but “the single identity possessed by all citizens of the polity, regardless of differences, is civic identity... based on freely given commitment to certain civic principles and values of democracy.” In a nation of the most nubbled and colorful fabric of ethnic, religious, racial and social diversity, it is our shared identity that binds us. In a nation not bound by religion, race or ethnicity—in fact, one founded on the explicit rejection of such a model—he observes in a 2007 lecture, “It is by these common cords of constitutionalism...that our political and social order has been maintained.”

The implication is obvious: only with an identity rooted in a commitment to the nation’s constitutional claims would this national experiment succeed. And that fact, so deceptively simple, seems stunning when we think of the scores of nations that have tottered and then crumbled as slowly and inevitably as so many castles built on sand—because in the end they failed to create a civic identity.

Now, if we go one step further and argue that a stable United States is required if we are to have peaceful globe, you see where we end up: with the conclusion that a Taft student needs to gain a very profound understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic nation if we expect world peace. That is heady stuff.

It’s hard to argue that civic education should not be at the core of an education in a free nation, ours or any country; but we need to do a better job here. In an editorial in the Washington Post last year (10/27/08), Sandra Day O’Connor, the distinguished retired Supreme Court judge, cited the minimal time spent on civics in school, the failure of text books to capture the dynamic relationship between the government and the governed, and the lack of imagination and creativity in the classroom approach. “The evidence” she says, “is clear—and should be profoundly disturbing: we are failing to impart to today’s students the information and skills they need to be responsible citizens.” Our students need to understand our core constitutional principles and the responsibilities of a citizen. And so put simply, I wanted to make sure we were heeding O’Connor’s call, and this election afforded us a chance to do so.

What is remarkable, of course, is that our nation’s founders knew that an informed citizenry was the basis of the nation even when the nation barely existed. They emphatically and eloquently linked the destiny of the country with the need for a shared identity—and they said that *this identity would be taught in the schools*. This fact we take for granted, but it was a radical one: you can’t imagine, for instance, 18<sup>th</sup>-century monarchic France saying, “It is really important that every citizen, rich and poor, learn in school their civic obligations,” and we might argue that they would later fight a revolution over this question. Our founding fathers knew that this form of government was a really big experiment, and it wouldn’t work without a shared commitment to certain civic virtues.

Listen to them, all making the case for education and citizenship:

Thomas Jefferson, whose “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” (1779) called for such

learning that would allow citizens to have a familiarity of government and the ability to partake in it.

James Madison, in an editorial in *The National Gazette* (1792): “The people ought to be enlightened [read educated], to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government they should watch over it as well as obey it.”

Benjamin Rush, member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, 1798: “The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine the foundation for nurseries of wise and good men to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of government.”

What a clean, powerful sentence, an indication that our founding fathers woke each day with fear and hope: fear that this great experiment, over which so much blood had been shed and about which so much doubt persisted, might fail; hope that if its people could gain, through education, an unshakeable and enlightened civic identity as Americans who would obey and preserve the Constitution, then maybe, just maybe, the nation would endure. Today he might have said, “I hope schools create students who want to watch inaugurations.”

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As the 19<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the belief that our nation depended on an educated citizenry became so prevailing as to become trite. You find the claim in all corners of civic discourse, from politicians to educators, the consensus clear: that this new form of government required a reasoned and universally educated populace with a shared identity.

In the middle of the century, no one made this case more powerfully than Horace Mann who championed the “common school” movement. As secretary of the newly created State Board of Education, he argued that a common, free schooling was required, especially as millions of immigrants were entering the population. His fear was that our very diversity might create discord; schools, therefore, had to create civic unity. In one report to the state, he wrote with lovely eloquence:

A nation cannot long remain ignorant and free.... For freedom can be secure only as knowledge is widely distributed among the populace. Hence, universal education is the only foundation upon which the republican government can securely rest.

Mann saw that the very *existence of the nation* rested on civic lessons learned, at least in part, in school. He was right then, and he still is.

By the turn of the century, and with immigration one of the most important threads in our national narrative, the role schools played in educating citizens became even more pressing. Observers noted proudly that immigrants entered the country “absolutely ignorant of our language and political customs, and scarcely a generation passes before they are familiar with our spirit and institutions” (Bishop Ethelbert Talbot, *New York Times*, September 14, 1907). Private schools responded as well: consider the fact that Horace Taft taught “Civics” for most of his career here: a course intended to give an “elementary but very useful knowledge of the structure of government and the main principles of the constitution.”

Even the courts weighed in as well, acknowledging the role schools played in civic education. Listen to Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter on a case in which the court struck down a 1952 Oklahoman statute requiring state employees, including teachers, to sign a loyalty oath: “To regard teachers... as the priests of our democracy is therefore not to indulge in hyperbole. It is the task of teachers to foster these habits of open-mindedness and critical inquiry which alone can make for responsible citizens.... They cannot

carry on this noble task if the conditions for practice of a responsible and critical mind are denied to them.”

So this thread in our nation’s history—the connection between education, civic identity, and national existence—is a very important one.

Today we do not teach a “civics” class *per se*; but it is impossible to graduate, history department chair Colin Farrar observes, not having been exposed to the knowledge and skills necessary for the kind of critical thinking, honest discourse, and civic participation which form the basis of meaningful citizenship—and so witnessing the inauguration was an *extension*, not an interruption, of our curriculum. Horace Taft, who left school in 1909 to witness his brother’s inauguration, would have approved.

We integrate into our curriculum the core knowledge most consider to be essential to democratic citizenship. “Historical Civilizations” explore the origins of democratic concepts in a study of Greece and Rome. The two-year sequence of “Atlantic Communities” and “American History” courses help students understand our form of government: the Constitution, the three-part government, and the Bill of Rights. Courses like “Current Events” and “A.P. Government” further the study. And students return to these topics over and over. We also believe that participation in civic affairs promotes an active and engaging way to teach civics. One thinks here of the Model Congress, Model United Nations, the Political Awareness Club, on-line political forums, the Debate Club, the Mock Trial Club, the International Club, school-wide elections, service trips and volunteer activities in local schools and far-flung nations, internships with political campaigns, trips to witness speeches and debates, and so on. As Colin Farrar observes, “when you define citizenship as informed discourse and active participation in a civil society, the list of ways students can participate grows long. So we aspire to a broader vision.”

The trip to the inauguration and our broadcasting it in Bingham Auditorium, then, was a furthering of the thinking of our nation’s founders and early educational leaders, and it was our attempt to create one of the most important lessons—about civic responsibility—in a creative, bold, and sound way. There were American and foreign students, lower mids and seniors, students and faculty; and by night fall, I hoped they found a more nuanced sense of what it means to be a citizen, certainly here but also in any polity. In the end, I did not want to wake up on January 21<sup>st</sup> and be another timid school that had missed a chance to create a moment that would never be forgotten.

So why did we send six buses to the capital and broadcast the inauguration in Bingham?

Students witnessed a miracle we take for granted: the peaceful transfer of political power, the transaction taking place under established constitutionally guaranteed processes.

Students observed first-hand and lived out fully the experience of an engaged citizenry. They were marvelously, intensely, profoundly active—locked in a moment they will not forget.

Students were made aware of the remarkable richness of our national history: the line of presidential succession, the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, the saga of our struggle for civil rights, the clash of great political ideas on governance....

Students were intensely aware of the importance of *place*: of sacred real estate, a slope of acreage that has seen some of the most durable moments in our history.

Students touched the *monuments* that chronicle the nation: to Washington and Lincoln and to those who died in wars on foreign soil.

Students lived vividly the truth that democracy demands of its citizens *sacrifice*: they were

uncomfortable, cold, and exhausted for twenty-four hours.

Students were part of the *triumph of this nation*: the peaceful gathering of peoples of every race, ethnicity, religion, and region—all united with a single identity and a common destiny.

Students were made aware that they had a profound *civic identity, rooted in the vision of our founding fathers*, and shared by thousands of others who stood shoulder to shoulder.

My belief is simple: that the future of the globe is inextricably tied to the destiny of this nation. I do not believe that is a provincial statement. I believe that we are just one more nation gathered at the global commons, with an obligation to join in the quest for peace, advancement, and equity. But if we believe what our founders did—that our nation will only thrive with a shared civic identity based in an enlightened populace—then the work of every school becomes sublime: awesome, terrifying, exciting. And we better not shrink from our responsibility. I saw this inauguration as a chance to create the very citizens yesterday’s founders sought and tomorrow’s keepers will require.

Now more than ever, when our nation faces a time of uncertainty and fear, and when the challenges in the world seem so daunting, I argue for hope and confidence. I have neither time nor patience for doomsday prophecy, for no nation in history has rested on a shared identity as sound, as permanent, and as deep. This is the moment when our strength must show, and it will be evident tomorrow in your children. This is the moment schools must do their best work, and you will see it here.

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education undertook an extensive survey entitled “The Civic Development of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students in the U.S.” The study entailed over 4,000 students, exploring their understanding of the various dimensions of good citizenship. The results were telling: that too many of our students were not adequately equipped or fully enough informed. The report ended with a summary:

Not surprisingly, when looking at behavior and attitudes considered crucial for a healthy democratic political system, some results might suggest cause for concern. This group of students has relatively little knowledge of the American political process.... However, there is reason for optimism in the number and nature of the correlates of civic development.... The potential of schools is evident.

I have a prediction: that some day we will look back on the group of students who are at Taft right now and wonder why they vote in higher numbers, participate so actively in government and service, engage as boldly in global concerns, and lead to creative solutions to the most vexing problems we face. Someone is going to ask, “What was going on during their high school years?”

When I stand coffee in hand and watch your children stream out of the dining hall, lugging packs of books and chattering about the algebra quiz or the game they will play that afternoon, I’m thinking this: *here walks the future, and it looks pretty good*. In that busy hall are the students who carry the hopes not just of a headmaster and a faculty, not just of so many parents, but also of those who founded this nation on a wisp of a promise. In 1787 when the Constitution was drafted, they faced a future far more uncertain than even we face today, and theirs was a faith born of a compelling truth: if the young could be well educated, if they could unite over shared civic virtues, if they could become engaged and active citizens—why, then this glorious political experiment might succeed. Stare into those faces shivering in the cold on the Mall, walk these halls for a day, and you will see why I feel a similar faith and confidence. And you should as well.



For other remarks by the Headmaster, please visit [TaftSchool.org](http://TaftSchool.org)