



‘OLD SCHOOL’ CIVICS FOR A NEW AGE

WHY FOUNDING PRINCIPLES SHOULD BE THE CORNERSTONE OF CIVICS EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM R. MATTOX, JR.

As Florida educators seek to improve their civics programs in anticipation of forthcoming FCAT tests, I hope that they’ll stop and think about Michaela Freiova of the Czech Republic, the teenagers who frequent the Planet Hollywood in Rome, and Dana Edwards of the Lawton Chiles High School in Tallahassee. If that seems like an odd statement, let me see if I can explain.

Pride and Shame

In the winter of 1996, I attended a three-day meeting in Prague hosted

by Michaela Freiova, a top official with the Civic Institute, a public policy think tank in the Czech Republic. After years of serving as an underground leader in her homeland’s resistance to the Soviet Union, Mrs. Freiova was busy in her new role helping the Czech government find its way in the early days of post-communist life.

Over the course of our meetings, Freiova quoted again and again from America’s founding documents, showing a remarkable grasp of the animating ideas behind our

nation's creation. As I listened to this middle-aged woman, speaking in broken English, wax at length about America's founding principles, I couldn't help but feel a strange mix of emotions.

On the one hand, I felt a remarkable sense of pride for being connected, like all Americans, to great men like Madison and Jefferson whom Freiova found so inspiring. On the other hand, I felt a profound sense of shame knowing that many native-born Americans could not even pretend to know as much about our nation's founding principles as this Eastern European woman did.

Now, I suppose one could argue that a quarter-century of Soviet domination would send anyone scrambling to learn more about the genius of America's founding fathers. But this argument fails to satisfy. For it should not require the jackboot of political oppression for Americans to (re)gain a deep appreciation for the freedoms bequeathed to us by those who founded our nation.

Indeed, as Freiova readily understood, the enduring principles in America's founding documents are very relevant to the civic life of any people in the world today who desire to be free (or to remain free).

Roman Holiday

Several years later, I was joined on a business trip to Italy by my wife and two of our kids. One night, we went to the Planet Hollywood in Rome so that our pre-teen son could satisfy his craving for some "American food."

While we were there, a group of precocious Italian teenagers seated nearby struck up a conversation with us. "You look like Julia Roberts," one of them said to my adolescent daughter.

"Do you know Michelle Pfeiffer?" another asked in his best attempt at English. When we answered, "Yes," the teens oohed and aahed and got very excited. We tried to explain that we don't know Pfeiffer personally; we merely know who she is. But the teens didn't understand our explanation; and for the rest of the night, they treated us like FOHRs—Friends Of Hollywood Royalty.

This only added to the unsettled feeling that I had about that night. Don't get me wrong. I found those Italian kids thoroughly charming. And I share much of their appreciation for America's film industry.

Nevertheless, whenever I think about those star-struck teens at that restaurant in Rome—or their similarly-aged peers here in America—I am haunted by a nagging fear that many young people today know more about Billy Madison than James Madison. More about Will Smith than Adam Smith. More about Ben Affleck than Ben Franklin.

A number of recent studies lend credence to this idea.

For example, a 2008 report issued by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) found that fewer Americans could name the three branches of government than could identify one or more of the judges on "American Idol."

A 2006 survey commissioned by

the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that more Americans could name all five family members in “The Simpsons” than could name all five First Amendment freedoms.

And a 2006 survey of Kansas teenagers commissioned by the Bill of Rights Institute found that far more teens know that Tom Cruise is the father of Katie Holmes’ baby girl than know that James Madison is the “Father of the Constitution.”

Now, the reason these survey numbers are so unsettling isn’t that the world of politics is inherently nobler than the world of arts and entertainment. Plato himself said that those who write the songs of a generation often have more influence, legitimately, than those who write the laws. And John Adams once wrote:

I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.

The reason, then, that these survey numbers are so unsettling is that all of the higher and grander pursuits of a civilization—whether in the arts, the sciences, or in commerce—depend, as Adams understood, on a stable and secure political foundation that protects and ensures artistic, intellectual, and

commercial freedom.

If any generation fails to acquire an appreciation for the principles of sound government, these ideals can be easily lost—perhaps especially during times of trouble. (Both Soviet-style communism and Nazi-style fascism took root during periods of great economic unrest when panic-stricken people turned to authoritarian government leaders for “help” in the midst of crisis.)

Thus, young Americans today need to become thoroughly saturated in the animating ideas of our nation’s founding, and they need to learn these “Old School” civics lessons in ways that are both time-honored and cutting-edge. Which brings me to Dana Edwards.

Old School Civics, New Age Technology

Earlier this year, a friend encouraged me to view a short documentary film that Dana Edwards, a junior at Tallahassee’s Lawton Chiles High School, had produced for the 2009 History Fair competition. Since Edwards had placed 12th nationally in last year’s History Fair competition—and had had her exhibit displayed for a day at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington—I figured her 2009 film would be a quality product. But I didn’t know the half of it.

Slickly produced and carefully edited, Edwards’ documentary looks at the profound influence First Lady Dolley Madison had on our nation’s early life. It draws upon numerous archival portraits and artifacts,

skillfully blending together American political history with American cultural history.

The film depicts Mrs. Madison truthfully, hailing her as early America's hostess with the mostest, while acknowledging that she never appeared to struggle with the morality of slavery in the way that her husband did.

Fittingly, the film gives special attention to the role Dolley Madison played in saving a number of important documents (along with Gilbert Stuart's famous painting of George Washington) just before the British set fire to the White House during the War of 1812.

Miss Edwards' project demonstrates that it is still possible to capture the imagination of teenagers when teaching them about the people and ideas that shaped this country. And her project illustrates that civics education can be done in a manner that neither sugarcoats the past, nor diminishes our appreciation for the remarkable insight and wisdom that the founding fathers displayed.

Indeed, it is important for young people today to recognize that many important episodes in recent American history—such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work for civil rights—pay tribute to America's founding ideals. For rather than treating America's founding documents as the outdated writings of “dead white men,” King rooted his cause in the founders' own words, appealing to his fellow citizens to live up to such thoroughly-American ideals as “all men are created equal.”

As King once noted, “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

A Madisonian Metaphor

As educators seek to revivify civics education in Florida's classrooms, I hope that they will draw inspiration—as Dana Edwards did—from the example of Dolley Madison seeking to save from destruction important documents and artifacts from our nation's early history.

For Mrs. Madison sought to save these papers and portraits not so that they could collect dust in a museum someday, but so that future generations of Americans could gain an appreciation for the founding principles that undergird the great nation that she and her husband helped found.

These principles have been the secret to the longest-running and most successful experiment in self-government the world has ever seen. And if this success is to continue, today's educators must seek to do as Dolley Madison did—and pass down to a new generation of Americans a deep appreciation for our nation's founding ideals. ∞

William R. Mattox, Jr. is an award-winning writer who serves on *USA Today's* Board of Contributors. He is helping to coordinate the James Madison Institute's civics education initiative.