

Let's Talk Politics

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THE AMERICAN SCHOOL has a duty to perform in the sphere of politics. For it has as its function the preparation of children and youth for the responsibilities of American life, and one of those responsibilities—perhaps the most important, certainly the most universal—is that of engaging in politics.

Whatever else he may be, the American citizen is *ipso facto* a participant in politics. Sometimes he even gains his living at politics and is what we call a professional politician. The odds are against that, of course. He is much more likely to be one of that larger number who dabble in public affairs and perhaps get part of their income from governmental service—councilmen, township officers, school directors, and the like. But the chances are that when he participates in politics he does so not for the furtherance of ambition or personal

interest but merely as a manifestation of his American citizenship. This is the extent of the political activity of the bulk of the constituency.

Americans vote and they influence others in their voting. They are periodically solicited for their suffrages. They are visited with pressures and counterpressures, with political wisdom and political humbug. They review the acts of the officials whom they have placed in office and by continuing or removing them give direction to public affairs. Sometimes, too, they use the ballot to pronounce the majority judgment upon legislative issues. And, since the political activity of the great body of American citizens is of profound influence upon American Government, it follows that their political judgments should be as enlightened as it is possible to make them and that the acquisition of competence in fulfilling the political obligations that are bound up in American citizenship should be a common denominator in the education of all.

A great many American schools have hitherto done little to supply a political education to their pupils. There are, it is true, numerous individual schools in which programs of learning in this area have been thoughtfully and painstakingly worked out.¹ But such schools

As all America—and much of the world—knows, 1944 is election year in the United States. In the minds of a great many people, "elections" and "politics" are always modified by the word "dirty." In a democracy, where the perpetuating of our system of free government is dependent upon the whole-hearted support of all of us, such a connotation is, indeed, serious. Lee M. Thurston, Professor of Education at the University of Pittsburgh, discusses in this article why an understanding of the political structure of our Government needs to be taught in the schools as a basic skill.

¹ For illustrations see *Learning the Ways of Democracy* (Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators, Washington, D. C., 1940).

are the exceptions and not the rule. In the main our schools have tended, and still tend, to focus attention upon the formal aspects of government and to neglect the actual processes by which men achieve and use political power.

Now it is highly desirable that a pupil should acquire a firm understanding of formal governmental structure and the statutory processes by which government operates. All this lies within the sphere of politics. But it is equally important that he should come to realize that behind this mechanism there is a vital force that operates it. Unless he gains an understanding of the operation of the directive and manipulative forces in American public affairs—the subjective mechanism behind the formal mechanism—he will be less than fully educated for his responsibilities as a citizen. And this, unhappily, is a chapter of politics that too often is omitted from his education.

When we try to account for this significant gap in school experience, we find that the fault does not lie altogether with the teachers and school administrators. It may be accounted for partly by the prevailing prejudice against politics. We think of politics as something sinister, as a superfluous growth that has fastened itself upon our governmental organisms. It has not appealed to the American people as a fit and proper subject for the classroom.

Politics Is Neither Good Nor Bad

It is a curious paradox that this supercilious attitude toward politics should have taken deeper root in the America of Jefferson than, let us say, in the Europe of Bismarck. Our great Americans—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson,

Lincoln—strove constantly to broaden the franchise and to enlarge the political responsibilities of citizenship, while the continental Europeans who in recent times have produced the greatest momentary impact on world affairs—Napoleon, Metternich, Bismarck, Mussolini, Hitler—have dedicated themselves to the extinction of political liberty and to the ruin of popular government.

Actually, politics is not a bad thing and it is not a good thing. The two-valued orientation of good and bad simply has no meaning in the case. Politics is a sphere of human activity. It is the theory and science of government and the art of managing public affairs. This is the sense in which the term was used by Aristotle, and it is still as good a definition as any.

Politics yields to no other occupation in point of importance. Said F. S. Oliver: "With all the temptations, dangers and degradations that beset it, politics is still, I think, the noblest career that any man can choose." Walter Lippmann once observed: "The art of governing happens to be one of the most difficult arts which men practice. . . . When I am told that this art is a low concern, I set down the man who tells me that as just a trifle dumb." And Aristotle himself believed that politics is "the highest of the practical sciences." These interpretations of the nature of politics do not square with current usage; either the word "politics" has become heavily loaded with a meaning it was not meant to convey when it was coined, or else politics in America is unbelievably more corrupt than in other parts of the world.

It is to be hoped that as a people we

may come around to taking a more tolerant and rational outlook upon this broad question of the nature of politics and its place in our educational program, and in this matter the schools may as well throw their influence on the right side as on the wrong side.

Even so limited a topic as the attitude we take toward that much-maligned individual, the politician, suggests itself as a first-class turning point for a class exercise in perception and multivalued thinking. Consider, for example, the proposition: All politicians are wicked. Now we have observed, say, that Politician A is an exemplar of integrity, and Politician B is venal; Politician C is a man of strong convictions, and Politician D is easily influenced by his friends; Politician E always has his affairs in a mess, and Politician F is a model administrator. These are their outstanding characteristics, but they have others. In public life all of them befriend the downtrodden and try to keep their constituents happy, and in private life they are kind to children.

When we look at politicians in this way and break them down into their individual characteristics, the stereotype dissolves, and wickedness, if it exists here and there, attaches itself not to politicians as a class but to the individual politicians themselves. And this is certainly a kind of approach to political and social questions of which America stands in need. Without going into the troubled question of the transfer of training, it may be observed that from such a starting point we may proceed—as we do in the subject of geometry or in Fawcett's celebrated course in the Nature of Proof—to use an area of interest with limited frontiers for the

development of competencies that have general application.

We Have Confused Politics and Party Politics

However important or unimportant politics as a subject for classroom study may have appeared to American teachers, they have shied away from it as a matter too dangerous and too difficult to handle. Many Americans hold the paternalistic belief that high school students lack the maturity to deal constructively with political problems, especially where personalities are involved and local situations are at issue. Then, too, our schools are conceptually non-partisan, which is to say that they are not Republican schools and they are not Democratic schools, and yet because we have tended to confuse politics and party politics—obviously they are not the same thing—it has sometimes seemed wiser to avoid the subject of politics altogether and thus avoid the risk of invoking the displeasure of some party or faction that might find occasion for taking offense.

The prospect of employing youthful intelligences for the exploring and unmasking of any or all controversial political matters is in many quarters viewed with alarm. Political subjects are inherently interesting, and yet they must be handled in the classroom with special techniques and special skill, lest their study do more injury than good to the students and also to the school, which strives to maintain its character as an impartial institution. There is nothing in the vocational education of a tradesman or of a professional worker that approaches in delicacy his education in politics.

Still another factor that has in recent years retarded the inclusion of politics in the curriculum has been our academic insistence on learnings that could be demonstrated by means of short-answer tests. Short-answer tests to measure political competencies are not yet as well made as are the more conventional tests in the social science fields, and perhaps they never can be. They are also more difficult to obtain. It is certainly not unreasonable to ask that when politics is taught the objectives should be clearly formulated and the outcomes capable of being ascertained. As more satisfactory instruments of measuring student progress in political competency have become available to teachers, perhaps this difficulty may disappear.

Schools Can Help Cultivate Awareness of Political Responsibilities

Now for all of these reasons, many an American school has not seen fit or has not been able to fulfill its task in the political education of American children and youth. What it should have been doing, if such a thing had been possible, was to create a sanguine and affirmative attitude toward politics as the business of everybody. This, as Howard Mumford Jones has recently (September 18) pointed out in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, is a concept of civic virtue, the concept that the individual should be proud to serve the State if the State is worthy, and is a higher concept than "civics," or "social

studies," or "American history." And the school should have cultivated a sharp and critical awareness of the political responsibilities arising out of American citizenship, the collateral competencies in thought and action.

It is reported from the Russian battlefield that when German prisoners have been asked what they are fighting for a common answer is: "That is for the officers to know. It is my duty simply to follow orders." Such an answer would hardly come from an American soldier. He might offer a good reason or a poor one, a serious answer or a flippant answer, but as an American citizen he would feel incapable of disavowing a knowledge of why his Government was using him to fight.

The most unsophisticated American has an easy assurance in political matters. This is the fruit of the seed planted by Thomas Jefferson, who insisted that his countrymen were quite competent to govern themselves, and, if they were educated in their political responsibilities, their Government would be the best Government possible to achieve. This doctrine has had no little influence on the growth and spread of free public education in America. Once the doctrine of a single party, this belief has gained strength with the passing of time, and as the school performs with increasing competence its task in educating for political responsibility, it will become more and more an article of faith of the entire American people.



Men must be taught as if you taught them not,
And things unknown proposed as things forgot.—Pope, *Essay on
Criticism*.

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