A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM

Americans have watched with amazement lately as people all over the world have stood up to despots and demanded freedom. We were thrilled by the bravery of the students of Tiananmen Square. We were surprised by the constructive stance of new white leaders in South Africa and gratified to see the governments of Nicaragua and Chile voluntarily yield power in democratic elections. Most of all, we were astounded by the turnaround in Eastern Europe, where, one after another, totalitarian governments disintegrated before our eyes. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, we have witnessed “a new birth of freedom.”

Ironically, though, democracy isn’t working very well in the United States. Today’s elections are won by candidates who spend the most, hire the shrewdest “handlers,” and wage the ugliest campaigns. Americans no longer expect their leaders to tell the truth. And though quietly furious, citizens feel powerless to deal with the massive federal deficit, the misuse of funds intended for public housing, the deadly violation of environmental regulations at government-supervised atomic weapons plants, and the looting of government-insured savings and loan institutions by their dishonest owners.

Perhaps we are just better informed than our parents were. Maybe our cynicism has the same root cause as the Romanian revolution: modern communications media make it impossible for governments, even police states, to control what people see and hear. Maybe as citizens we are just less naive. Whatever the reason, fewer American adults now trust political leaders or have as much faith in democratic institutions as their parents did.

Little wonder, then, that teenagers are confused about their convictions. Donna Fowler (p. 10) reports that a recent survey of young people aged 17 to 24 found that most are more interested in financial success and having a good time than in helping their community be a better place. The survey also showed, though, that youth are willing to get involved, and that schools are an important influence—second only to parents—on student attitudes.

Many of the articles in this issue show what schools can do to encourage civic participation. Shelley Berman (p. 75) offers a convincing rationale and cites several examples. Richard Sagor (p. 81) describes two consortiums, one in Boston and the other in Portland, Oregon, where educators are collaborating on social responsibility projects. Mary Nebgen and Kate McPherson (p. 90) write of three school districts in western Washington working to establish youth service programs.

Community service is clearly valuable, but equally important is what students learn every day in their schoolrooms about their relationships with others. Eric Schaps and Daniel Solomon (p. 38) describe the Child Development Project of San Ramon, California, which is successfully creating caring communities in project classrooms. Tom Sobol, Commissioner of Education in New York State (p. 27), explains the background and status of New York’s controversial effort to devise a more multicultural curriculum. And Barbara Stanford (p. 97) tells how she learned, along with a group of teachers and their students, about international understanding by forging a relationship between educators in Arkansas and their counterparts in the rain forests of Guatemala.

Recent events in the Middle East have distracted the world’s attention from rain forests and Eastern Europe and cut short our celebration of victorious democracy. Just as we were beginning to foresee the possibility of a future in which nations could redirect their resources to improving the human condition, we found ourselves in a massive new military confrontation. In the short run, the situation is clearly ominous, although in time it could lead to more positive developments: greater international cooperation, renewed commitment to conservation, and perhaps even more freedom in the sheikdoms which are now the focus of so much attention. Certainly the conflict raises perennial questions about the rights and duties of citizenship, questions that cry out for discussion in classrooms.

As Ernest Boyer (p. 4) points out, the school reform movement has until recently ignored civic education. But if the United States is to sustain the democratic traditions that people in other nations now aspire to, American schools must help develop young people who care about others and who are prepared to act on their convictions.