

Concluding Remarks on the Montpelier Conference on  
The Future of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
September 26, 2008  
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I've been glad to be here, glad to be in the land not only of Madison but Jefferson. As a child of history-embracing parents, I had visited central Virginia many times, to see the beauties of Monticello, to drink in the story of the War between the states, to visit the state that has nurtured so many presidents. In my youth Virginia was not the self-assured success story of early American days. Nearly a century after the Civil War, though the rolling hills were green and poetic, this land still seemed to feel the weight of history's judgment. Richmond then seemed dirty, charmless, and down-at-heel, not the relatively tidy and prosperous city we saw on Tuesday, and certainly not a city that could afford the meticulous and expensive restorations of the caliber we saw this week. They are using German paint, for goodness sake!

When I was young, Montpelier was not open to the public. Indeed, although I knew that President Monroe lived at Highland, or Ash Lawn, as it was called in the 1950s, I don't remember hearing the name of Madison's home until about two decades ago. George Washington and Mount Vernon dominated Northern Virginia, but the pre-eminent Founder and president from central Virginia was Jefferson and not Madison. Just as in life, when Jefferson physically towered over the diminutive Madison, so did Jefferson dominate in the national mind fifty years ago. Jefferson was tall and handsome and learned and brilliant and inventive. Madison was president when the British burned the White House and the US Capitol. Jefferson was the genius of the Declaration of Independence and the Louisiana Purchase—in many ways, the genius of America. President Kennedy, when addressing a group of Nobel Prize winners at a dinner in their honor at The White House, said "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House — with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone." I don't remember any famous quotes from President Kennedy—or rather, from his extraordinary speech writers—about James Madison, though he supposedly celebrated Madison's having been a founder of the Democratic Party.

But those were different days, partially obscured by ignorance or limited insight into the human condition. We the public didn't know about President Kennedy's extracurricular activities with ladies famous and infamous. We didn't know about Jefferson's activities of a related nature—with a slave, no less. At that time,

Monticello's knowledgeable guides spoke of Jefferson's "servants," not stating the nature of their servitude. Indeed, noted Jefferson scholars such as Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson had invested so much in constructing Jefferson's lofty pedestal that they could not begin to think to knock him off it. Jefferson, to them, had become more than a man, he was an ideal—even THE American ideal. But we realize now that he WAS a man—undeniably a genius, but still a man.

Madison, on the other hand, has continued to grow to the stature of a towering Virginia tulip tree. One could almost say of Madison, like the architect Christopher Wren, "if you seek his monument, look around you." But you would not be looking at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, as one would for Wren. Rather you could look around yourself anywhere in the United States. He was here at the constitutional beginning—that is his monument—and he is here still. Or at least he is still here when our nation lives up to its highest ideals, when it is true to the world that Madison helped to create.

But Madison was also a man, flawed as many men of his time were flawed. As we've discussed, he wasn't blind to that one great flaw, but he willfully overlooked it, as did many founders. Slavery-hating Samuel Johnson correctly asked "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" It is unthinkable that such thoughtful men maintained the evil institution that allowed them time to reflect and engage in their important building projects—from their homes to grand public buildings to the nation itself. Thankfully, James Madison's Montpelier, to its credit, completely acknowledges this historical truth, and embodies the kind of constructive institution that, by applying Madison's ideals, repudiates the destructive institution of Madison's time and place. And, happily Monticello now treads the same honest path.

The honest path is the only one for civic educators, for builders of civic character. Our task is to see clearly what is both true and faithful to our highest values, to promote constitutional principles and values, to preserve our moral ideals and our social suppleness. Yet that truthful compass competes with a desire to envision ourselves inhabitants of a "community that wants to be admired," or, as Joachim Detjen said of America, a "self-understanding as a heroic nation. "

This reference reminded me of a conversation with a colleague who is working on a book for the Center for which he interviewed Maya Angelou, the African-American poet. Four years ago she wrote:

"In the most private part of the heart of every American lives a burning desire to

belong to a great country. To represent a noble-minded country where the mighty do not always crush the weak and the dream of democracy is not in the sole possession of the strong.... It is fitting that every American, everywhere, ask herself and himself these questions: What do I think of my country? What is it in my country which elevates my shoulders and stirs my blood when I hear the words “the United States of America”? Do I praise my country enough? Do I laud my fellow citizens enough? Then there’s, what is there in my country which makes me hang my head and avert my eyes when I hear the words ‘the yet-to-be-United States of America’? What am I doing about it? Am I like one who sits high and looks low and pretends I see nothing? Am I relating my disappointment to my leaders and my fellow Americans? As Americans, we should not be afraid to own both the questions and the answers.... We are so powerful that we need to ask ourselves: what do we do in a democracy about making a democracy stout and strong and robust? Frederick Douglass said, ‘the thought of being a creature just of the present and the past was troubling. I long for a future, too.’”

We all long for a future, a just future, a promising future. In meetings like this we can envision such a future, not just in our solitary libraries, but together. These occasions are, for me, feasts of good fellowship, of reflection, of renewal of purpose. I have feasted not only on discussion but deliberation. I have feasted on enduring constitutional principles.

I have also feasted on ideas. Blatantly abandoning the essay form I present some of these ideas in no rank order:

Number one: That we have approached but not reached a point of discussing spirituality in our work—what motivates us, what higher state we can achieve as educators, as citizens.

Number two: That Will Harris’s comment that “Americans don’t know how to conduct an election” is not altogether accurate: we know how, but it’s in some people’s interest not to implement a system that is transparent and that has built-in fail safe mechanisms. But we shouldn’t complain—after all, isn’t it more fun to have a system that keeps everyone in suspense? America’s elections are like America’s blockbuster movies: they don’t need to make sense. These days, the more impossible the plot, the better. Who cares about what Hollywood writers call “script problems”? Those are only for elitists to worry about. The mega-bucks movie story doesn’t need to be true to the world it creates—true to it’s own rules—any more. So why should elections?

Number three: That Bob Schadler's question of how we might consider an adjustment to the ballot to ensure that the vote is at least minimally informed reminded me of my own unworkable suggestion from last year's conference, to consider administering citizenship "placement tests" to every student, native born and new arrival alike. The tests would focus on the important principles based in the founding documents of the US, but would cover other relevant topics as well as try to assess understanding of civic skills and civic dispositions. Then we would have diagnostic tools that would allow us to address the deficiencies of all concerned. To date no one has rushed to take me up on my idea and fund the project. I note that the film rights are also still available.

Number four: That we should make audio recordings of our presentations for possible podcast to a larger audience and offer them up to social networking sites on the web, thereby multiplying both the value of the investment and the potential political headaches for our respective organizations.

Number five: That we are actually NOT what we pay to see or to hear...or, rather, at least I hope not, as a shame-faced parent who allowed his teenaged son to buy the computer game "Grand Theft Auto."

Number six: That Germans prefer conferences in bright rooms with windows overlooking verdant surroundings to dark dungeon-like basements in high rise hotels.

Number 7: That the percentage of African American students at the wonderful Maggie Walker school was even lower than I had feared, even though I have no doubt that the selection process scrupulously abides by stated academic criteria.

Number eight: That civic educators need to protect each other from wallowing overlong in pessimism.

Number nine: That these conferences have had a beneficial effect, in that we have apparently persuaded Michael Wehner to agree with us that civic education should start in Kindergarten.

Number ten: That good people cannot allow the forces that aren't afraid of violence to intimidate the non-violent, especially when tabulating election results.

Number eleven: That, although I agree with Kevin Ryan that "selfless devotees of the common good are rare," I don't find them to be "dangerous." For instance,

Margaret Branson has rarely picked a pocket or stolen a vote. I also note that one of the goals of the CIVITAS curriculum framework was to inculcate a high degree of civic virtue, though I think we stopped short of asking anyone to become a selfless devotee.

Number twelve: That, unlike Kevin Ryan, I have “gotten under the sink with the plumber,” though I don’t recommend it unless absolutely necessary.

Number thirteen: That I will be amazed if 80% of the Idaho electorate actually turns out for the election in November, though I understand that many Idahoans are selfless and devoted, like Dan Prinzing. Well, devoted, anyway.

Number fourteen: That video game development has potential for civic education in theory, but that the experience our Center has had for the past year in working in a partnership with game designers and public television producers seems to be resulting in a very elaborate computer version of a card game.

Number fifteen: That Will’s suggestion of a real German-American collaboration on a civic education project is intriguing, and that I await the funding from the Bundeszentrale and the Center for the Constitution at Montpelier to put it into production.

Number sixteen: That according to what I told Professor John Haidt I am a centrist, but according to the infallible world’s smallest political quiz, I am an agent of chaos. My wife would agree with the quiz.

Number 17: That we continue to articulate new definitions of the concept of “ten minutes.”

Number 18: That although Dan from Idaho is correct in considering two semesters of government in the senior year of high school to be too little and too late, it sure beats the heck out of California’s requirement of only ONE semester of government in the senior year of high school.

Number 19: That ALL inventors are modifiers, and that Jefferson really was a great inventor, no matter what Andreas Petrik says.

Number 20: That I’ve been pleasantly surprised that our various paper topics have overlapped fairly gracefully, and that they have moved me closer to an

understanding of “how do we do this civic education enterprise better, now and in the future?”

Number 21: That although civic education is not equivalent to social studies, I could easily define civic education as the core of the social studies—or, rather, civic education should be the core of the social studies. It is the rationale for the existence not only of the social studies but also of the common or public school itself. What subject could be more inspirational? Indeed, what subject could be more heroic? Not when it’s taught as “how a bill becomes a law,” but when it’s taught as how brave people established in the public mind with their life’s blood the need for action to make America live up to how it describes itself on paper.

Number 22: That it has been a while since I’ve lived in anything resembling a fraternity house. Just to be clear, I have never been a member of a fraternity. Actually, in House 10, I’ve been more like the token male in a sorority’s affirmative action program, given as I’ve shared the house with four women.

Number 23: That House number 8 really is a fraternity house.

Number 24: That we visited the state Capitol Building with its seven niches filled with the busts of seven presidents, and reflected that the eighth niche is undoubtedly awaiting Will Harris’s entrance into political life.

Number 25: That I had thought of working on a conference statement that we might all endorse, if not ordain and establish, but that I hadn’t gotten far enough along by 2:00 a.m. to pursue it further, but that we might do so in future such meetings. One stumbling block was that I began to write “We the Participants” and found that I couldn’t improve on certain existing documents.

Number 26: That I apologize for not citing my normal quota of poetry.

In conclusion, as Günter Behrmann wanted to end his presentation on a positive note, so do I want to end the conference in a similarly positive manner. I appreciate knowing that Diana Owen is more hopeful about youth political participation than she was before. I appreciate knowing that the Hispanic press in the US is, as Mark Lopez told us, more analytical and conveys more useful information than the English-language press, though that is not a particularly elevated standard. I appreciate knowing that the silly movie *National Treasure* had a positive effect on student learning about the Declaration of Independence, though Lord knows what it taught them. But most of all, I appreciate the work of my

friends and partners in the US, in Germany, and in many other countries of the world, who help inspire me and my colleagues every day to live up to our highest ideals in walking in the constitutional footsteps of Madison and the other Founders.

I have feasted in all the ways outlined above, and I have simply feasted...and my compliments to the chef at Montpelier. My only over-indulgence was on food that far exceeded our typical American conference standards, and might have even equaled German standards. It is fitting that we conclude our time together with one last shared meal. But, before we do so, I want to thank our German friends for their forbearance in working with us in English, and our American friends for the many unrecognized contributions they make every day. The conference is officially ended; go in peace.