

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## EVERY CITIZEN—YOUNG AND OLD

**Mortimer Adler**

**I**n the middle of the 19th century, when a constitutional democracy in this country was still a hundred years away, Horace Mann wrote:

“The establishment of a republican government without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man.”

Every citizen, both young and old, should know about the ideas and ideals of the Constitution.

By *every citizen* I mean not only the persons who are of an age to exercise the franchise that enables them to participate actively in political life. I include also those individuals who will become our future citizens—the young,

who, when they come of age, will take on the responsibilities that the high office of citizenship puts on their shoulders.

Most Americans, I fear, do not know or appreciate the fact that citizenship is the primary political office under a constitutional government. In a republic, the citizens are the ruling class. They are the permanent and principal rulers. All other offices that are set up by the constitution are secondary.

The first and indispensable qualification for holding political office in any of the branches of government is to be a citizen. Officeholders, moreover, whether elected or selected, are citizens in office for a period of time, but all citizens are citizens for life. Officeholders, from the President down, are transient and instrumental rulers, unlike citizens in general who are permanent and principal rulers.

The distinction between the permanent status of citizenship and the transient or temporary character of government officials is obvious. But it may not be so obvious why I refer to citizens as the principal and call government officials instrumental rulers. To understand this point it is necessary to realize that the government of the United States is not in Washington, not in the White House, not in the Capitol, which houses the Congress, nor in any or all the public office buildings in the District of Columbia.

The government of the United States resides in us—we, the people. What resides in Washington is the administration of our government. We recognize this, at least verbally, when we say, after a Presidential election, that we have changed one administration for another. That change leaves the government of the United States unchanged, because its principal rulers are also its permanent rulers, whereas its instrumental rulers, its administrative officials—are transient and temporary.

Administrative officials, from the President down, are the instruments by which we, the people, govern ourselves. They serve us in our capacity as self-governing citizens of the Republic. Lincoln never tired of saying that he conceived his role to be that of a servant of the people who elected him. The word *servant* in this connection does not carry any invidious connotations of inferiority or menial status. Rather, it signifies the performance of an important function, one carrying great responsibility, a responsibility officials are called upon to discharge while they are serving a term in public office.

I am sorry to say that most Americans think of themselves as the subjects of government and regard the administrators in public office as their rulers, instead of thinking of themselves as the ruling class and public officials as their servants—the instrumentalities for carrying out their will.

It is of the utmost importance to persuade the citizens of the United States, both young and old, that they have misconceived their role in the political life of this country. If they can be persuaded to overcome this misconception, and come to view themselves in the right light, they will understand that their high responsibility as citizens carries with it the obligation to understand the ideas and ideals of our constitutional government.

In earlier times, when much smaller societies than ours were ruled by princes, books were written to instruct princes in the art of governance. The education of the prince, both moral and intellectual, was of supreme importance if one had any expectation of obtaining good government from their benevolently despotic rule.

Now, when the people have replaced the prince, when they are the self-governing rulers of the Republic, how can we expect good government from them, or from the administrative officials whom they directly or indirectly

choose to serve them, unless we think it supremely important that they, the citizens both young and old, be educated for the discharge of their responsibilities.

Preparation for the duties of citizenship is one of the objectives of any sound system of public schooling in our society. Our present system of compulsory basic schooling, kindergarten through the twelfth grade, does not serve any of these objectives well.

The reasons why this is so and what must be done to remedy these grave deficiencies have been set forth in a series of my books *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, *We Hold These Truths*, and *The Paideia Proposal* that have initiated much needed reforms in our school system. Here I will borrow from them only what is germane to the explanation of what must be accomplished educationally to make the future citizens of the United States better citizens than their elders.

I am going to state the educational objective in its minimal terms. The least to be expected of our future citizens (as well as all the rest of us) is that they will have to read the three documents that are our political testament—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—and that their reading of these three documents will have eventuated in their understanding the ideas and ideals of our Republic. While much more might be added, the primary concern here is the understanding of the ideas and ideals of the Constitution.

I have engaged in the Paideia project to reform basic schooling in the United States. In the course of doing so I have had the occasion to conduct many seminars with high school students in which the reading assigned for discussion was the Declaration of Independence. Taking part in the seminar resulted in their reading that document for the first time.

The discussions that followed revealed how little they understood the meaning of the Declaration's principal terms before the discussion began, and how much more remained to be done after the seminar was over to bring them to a level of understanding that, in my judgment, is the minimal requisite for intelligent citizenship in this country. The same can also be said with regard to the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address.

I am sure that the sampling of high school students I met in these seminars is representative of the general state of mind, and that a similar sampling of our college graduates would not change the picture.

Over the last fifty years, I have also conducted executive seminars under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, in which the participants are graduates of our best colleges and universities and have reached positions of eminence in our society—the top echelons in industry, commercial establishments, journalism, the so-called learned professions, and government. Their understanding of the basic ideas in the Declaration and in the Preamble to the Constitution is not discernibly better than what I found among high school students.


On one very special occasion, I conducted a discussion of the Declaration with leading members of President John F. Kennedy's Cabinet and his political entourage. To my surprise and chagrin, the result was the same.

The inevitable conclusion that I draw from all of these experiences is that there is work for us to do. I am fully aware that I cannot hope we will succeed in achieving what we seek to do—to help every citizen, both young and old, understand the ideas and ideals of the Constitution.

Considering the extent of actual and functional illiteracy in this country, even that may be too much to hope for at

the present time. Still, one must believe that reform of basic schooling will succeed in the years that lie ahead and that, at some future time, an understanding of the fundamental principles that underlie the political life of this Republic will be the possession of every citizen of the United States.

Our schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. Our political institutions cannot thrive, they may not even survive, if we do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens, from whom some statesmen of the type we had in the eighteenth century might eventually emerge. We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can save us from impending disaster.

Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater. 

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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