



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 2, 2023

Time Magazine: Teach History and Civics as the Founders Intended

“Teach citizenship the way the founders intended.”

As unbelievable as it may seem, that is the headline of a story in the latest issue of *Time* magazine.

The article’s authors — Sal Khan and Jeffrey Rosen — open their story with a bleak report:

New data released by the Department of Education — known as the Nation’s Report Card and widely regarded as the best assessment of how well we are educating our future citizens — paints a stark and worrying picture. Eighth-graders scored worse on the history section this year than in any other since the test was first administered on the subject in 1994, and civics scores dropped for the first time since it was first tested in 1998. Fewer than 1 in 4 students scored as proficient.



John Trumbull's Declaration of Independence

Uh oh. American kids don’t know history. It could be that American kids aren’t taught history, but let’s see Khan’s and Rosen’s solution to this unfamiliarity with our Founding:

We need to teach students not just history and civics, but also the virtues of democratic citizenship, beginning with the ability to consider arguments with which we disagree and to engage in dialogue and deliberation with people who hold views different from our own. In practice, this means giving students a rigorously nonpartisan education in American history and civics. We must expose them to the best arguments on all sides of the major constitutional debates past and present, and give them the tools to make up their own minds.

Honestly, most of that sounds fine. Most of it.

First, the union of the United States of America is a confederation of sovereign republics, not a consolidated democracy. If you don’t believe me, read anything ever written by any Founding Father about democracy. If you want a more well-defined reading assignment, read *The Federalist*, Nos. 10, 39, 45, and 46.



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Next, how do the authors propose that schools provide students “a rigorously nonpartisan education in American history and civics?” As long as that “education” is being received in a public school or any other category of institution that receives money and mandates from the federal government, it is impossible that it be nonpartisan.

Step into any public school in your area and ask to be shown the U.S. History or Government/Civics textbooks being used. If you manage to be allowed inside — teachers unions and many school boards across the country are adopting regulations preventing parents from interrupting the “instruction” of their children — you will be shocked by the sort of rubbish being taught to generation after generation of American kids.

You and I were taught things that aren’t true about American history, and those untruths continue being planted in the minds of our children. Unless we act now, those lies will be accepted as truths by our grandchildren, as well.

I’m reminded of the observation made by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (a book, incidentally, that our Founding Fathers could quote chapter and verse in Greek, but is never even mentioned in history classes today) regarding the difficulty of convincing someone that what they were first taught is untrue:

“Most men are so averse to taking pains to discover the truth, and are prone to just believe whatever they hear first.” (Book I, Section XX)

So, a nonpartisan education in American history is impossible until a child is either removed from the public school system or the government is removed from the process of education.

Now, I will give Khan and Rosen their due. When they speak of the importance of “expos[ing] [our children] to the best arguments on all sides of the major constitutional debates past and present, and give them the tools to make up their own minds,” I completely agree.

But what are those tools? Who decides which arguments are “the best arguments?” Where will these “best arguments” be found? The authors’ answer:

Our course will teach students America’s constitutional principles using primary sources spanning U.S. history, including Supreme Court decisions and the dissents.

Supreme Court decisions and the dissents are not primary sources on constitutional principles. Not at all. They are secondary sources, and often barely qualify at that.

As a teacher of American History, World History, Western Civilization, U.S. Government, and the U.S. Constitution for over 20 years, I can tell you that we would be doing our children a great disservice and great harm to teach them to look to the Supreme Court for their education on the principles upon which the Constitution was founded.

Where should they look? You know the answer, as well as I do, but let me take a different tack toward getting to those obvious answers.

In their description of how they came to create their proposed U.S. History course, Khan and Rosen speak of how “George Washington and James Madison dreamed of a national university.” Now, that is mostly true, so I’ll give them that. But guess what: James Madison, along with Thomas Jefferson,



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actually created a university — the University of Virginia — and they actually composed a list of the texts that students should know *before* applying for enrollment at the newly constructed institution. Here's what Jefferson and Madison wrote about these texts and their intended use in their instructions for *incoming* students, published in February 1825:

Whereas it is the duty of this board to the government under which we live, and especially to that of which this University is the immediate creation to pay especial attention to the principles of government which shall be inculcated therein, and to provide that none shall be inculcated which are incompatible with those on which the constitutions of this state and of the U.S. were genuinely based in the common opinion; and for this purpose it may be necessary to point out specifically where these principles are to be found legitimately developed;

Resolved that it is the opinion of this board that as to the general principles of liberty and the rights of man, in nature, and in society, the doctrines of Locke in his "Essay concerning the true original, extent, & end of civil government," and of Sydney in his "Discourses on government," may be considered as those generally approved by our fellow citizens of this, and of the US. and that on the distinctive principles of the government of our own state, and of that of the US. as understood and assented to when brought into union;

1. The book known by the title of the "Federalist",
2. The Resolutions of the General assembly of Virginia, in 1799 on the subject of the alien and sedition laws, and
3. The Declaration of Independence, ought to be considered as possessing the general approbation of our fellow-citizens. The 1st as an authority to which appeal is habitually made by all, and rarely declined or denied by any, as evidence of the general opinion of those who made and of those who accepted the constitution of the US. on questions as to its genuine meaning. the 2d as sanctioned by the people of the US. as manifested in the exercise of their rights of suffrage immediately subsequent to that publication; and the 3d as the fundamental act of union of these states. And that in the branch of the school of Law which is to treat on the subject of government, these shall be used as the text and documents of the school; and no principles shall be inculcated which do not harmonise with them.

So, rather than search around through "dreams" of the Founders or the opinions of Supreme Court justices on the genuine sources and intended interpretation of the principles upon which this union and the Constitution that created it were established, we could just follow the guidance on the matter published by two of the men who were "witnesses at the creation."

Finally, rather than proposing some fictional, illusory nonpartisan curriculum be created by contemporary "scholars," we should simply do as the headline to the article directs and teach history, civics, and public virtue in "the way the Founders intended."



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