The danger posed to American democracy by internal threats keeps Richard Haass (2023) awake at night. For Haass, a foreign policy expert who has served both Republican and Democratic presidents, “our very concept of citizenship needs to be revised, or better yet, expanded, if American democracy is to survive” (p. xiv). This is the premise of his latest book, entitled *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens*. Haass argues that a democracy must protect and promote not only the rights of citizenship but also the obligations of citizenship. The failure of many Americans to fulfill these obligations jeopardizes the future of democracy in the United States.

As a society, Haass (2023) argues, people have become obsessed with personal rights: conflicts between rights, limits on rights, government intrusion on or failure to protect rights. Civic obligations, however, are too often ignored. He defines obligations as “what citizens owe one another and the country.” Unlike civic requirements, for which citizens are penalized for not obeying, obligations are “moral and political rather than legal commitments to be undertaken voluntarily” (p. 14). Indeed, these moral elements of democracy “seek to shape behavior, especially for how we deal with one another when inevitable differences arise” (p. 158).

While this book is an important one for all Americans to read, I believe it is especially useful for teachers engaged in citizenship education. After a brief exploration of his opinion of the dangers posed by an overly rights-based democracy, Haass devotes most of his book to describing 10 obligations of citizenship. Most teachers would find these obligations in their existing citizenship education curricula. For example, obligations such as “Be Informed,” “Get Involved,” and “Promote the Common Good” easily fall under most understandings of civic responsibilities. Haass uses current examples to demonstrate the threat posed to democracy by ignoring these obligations. While his book is political in nature, Haass makes his case using a variety of liberal and conservative voices such as Danielle Allen, George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter. For instance, in the opening paragraphs to his chapter on civility, he cites both John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush. In doing so, Haass condemns modern political behavioral and attitudinal problems in a bipartisan manner.

In Part 2 of his book, Haass (2023) dedicates a chapter to each of his 10 obligations, including “Remain Civil,” “Reject Violence,” and “Put Country First.” Each chapter presents an element for strengthening American democracy, and teachers will recognize ideas they could adapt into discussion points or exercises for their classrooms. For example, in his chapter on being informed, Haass distinguishes between facts, misstatements, opinions, predictions, and recommendations. His intent in doing so is to “provide the basis for productive debate and, in the end, wiser policy” (p. 50).

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The productive debate about issues is certainly what democratic citizens should engage in, and therefore it should be a goal for citizenship education classrooms. Haass makes the case for citizens getting their news from more than one source. For example, he lists both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* as reliable, if differently biased, newspapers. Implicit in casting an informed vote is understanding “the likely consequences of the policies [candidates] stand for and oppose so that you are in a position to determine what policy choices make the most sense” and consequently “holding officials accountable” (pp. 42–43). Seeking multiple sources of information also offers better understanding of viewpoints with which one disagrees.

The ninth obligation Haass (2023) identifies is to support the teaching of civics. In essence, his 10 obligations represent a civics agenda for all Americans. And it is our collective obligation “to pass down the essentials of what it means to be an American and citizen of the United States of America” (p. 134). For teachers, this means more than the traditional civic content of governmental structure and operations. It also means stressing “the behaviors that democracy requires” that are reflected in Haass’s other obligations, such as civility, compromise, and “the centrality of facts” (p. 142). In this regard, teachers need to reassess their own understandings of democracy and strive to provide students with what Reagan called “an informed patriotism” (p. 135). At a time when partisanship is too often deemed more important than what is best for the nation, students are constantly exposed to a false image of what American democracy means, one that is devoid of the moral foundations of equality and justice. Haass believes students need learning experiences that are “both useful and broadly acceptable.” He asserts “it is difficult to imagine a more urgent and critical need if American democracy is to survive” (p. 143).

Haass (2023) was writing for a general audience, but there are clear ways that teachers can enact his suggestions in classrooms. Chapters on compromise, civility, and respecting norms can spark ideas for how teachers manage their own classrooms in ways that promote democratic values for their students. For example, the current political climate in some states discourages or prohibits the discussion of controversial issues in class. Yet when students graduate and assume their roles as citizens, educators expect them to be able to confront and manage these same issues. Controversy and disagreement are inherent in a democracy. Addressing controversial issues in class creates the possibility “for differences to be reduced or even bridged” or at least enables “dialogue and relationships to continue on other issues where agreement might not be out of the question” (p. 76). This creates an atmosphere where compromise is seen as a vehicle to moving forward on solving problems and not as a sign of weakness. Haass demonstrates how compromise is the lubricant that makes the machinery of government work. Learning the value of civility and compromise in the classroom enables students to see its application in the real world, whether for national issues such as gun control, international issues like global warming, or local ones like zoning regulations. In essence, Haass is calling for creating democratic "spaces in which these ways of understanding and experiencing the world are fostered through educative opportunities” (Collins et al., 2019).

I do have a couple of minor issues with this book. For many readers, obligations and responsibilities might seem synonymous. Haass fails to clearly distinguish between the two terms. Perhaps the latter is something you should do, and the former is something you must do. Or, as grammahow.com (Lassen, 2023) has described it, “‘responsibility’ implies something you feel like you should do, whereas ‘obligation’ describes something you feel like you must do.” Haass makes only limited references to responsibilities. He attempts to differentiate between the two by stating “responsibilities . . . are all too easily shirked” while obligations are weightier. “The ability of American democracy to endure and deliver what it can and should to its citizens depends on their being put into practice” (Haass, 2023, p. 14). A reader might question if responsibility and obligation are, in fact, the same. Teachers especially might question this as they routinely distinguish between the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

A second nit I have to pick is in Haass’s (2023) discussion of the need for and importance of a free press. In his defense of it, he cites the Thomas Jefferson quote: “’Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter’” (p. 101). I would have liked Haass to include Jefferson’s (1787) caveat: “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers & be capable of reading them” (p. 880). Given the emphasis Haass places on proper democratic citizenship education, including being able to distinguish fact from fiction, the inclusion of this would have nicely supported his argument.

A final concern is Haass’s failure to make explicit the moral components of democracy. He hints at this when he urges a civic education that promotes a national identity instead of a regional or partisan one. This identity is based on principles identified in the Declaration of Independence. Ours is a society, therefore, grounded in equality, justice, and the protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Historian Gordon Wood (2011) wrote, “To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something.” That something is democracy: “the principles of liberty, equality, and free government” (p. 322). Haass could have explored how much of what passes for civic behavior today is undemocratic and therefore immoral.

Haass’s goal is not to write a partisan indictment of a particular party or individual but rather to protect democracy. He is genuinely concerned with the future of democracy in the United States and believes we are in the throes of a “civics deficit” with the potential consequences of this deficit being great (Haass, 2023, p. 137). Haass is far from the first to notice the scope of today’s crisis. Indeed, democratic educators have been advocating for a more participatory approach to citizenship education for many years (see, for example, Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Parker, 2001), and in the last decade, calls for greater civility are common (see, for example, Crocco et al., 2018; Qvarnstrom, 2020; Zimmerman, 2016). But he places these concerns in an alarming international and historical context: “The most urgent
and significant threat to American security and stability stems not from abroad but from within” (Haass, 2023, p. xi). For Haass, a frightening number of Americans are willingly ignoring historic values that have been the foundation of American democracy. Too many have grown convinced that “it can’t happen here.” As Haass explains it can. And unless we make a broad recommitment to democratic values, it will. Civility, compromise, equality, respect for the rule of law, and the supremacy of the Constitution seem to be endangered by hyper-partisanship and intolerance. Whether this condition is the result of complacency, ignorance, or willful actions, Haass believes the cure is for all Americans to meet their obligations as citizens. As he observes: “We get the government and country we deserve. Getting the one we need, however, is up to us” (Haass, 2023, p. 161).

This means everyone must learn and understand the broader meaning of democracy. Recent developments regarding banning books, restricting the formal curricula, and prohibiting the discussion of controversial issues in class further negatively impact teachers preparing their students for democratic citizenship. Such actions are, in fact, antidemocratic. Dewey noted, “Everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life” (Dewey, 1937/1987, p. 185). The American educational system should reinforce Haass’s obligations even if teachers need to reexamine their understandings of citizenship and democracy. Such a process is useful since everyone has political biases and opinions and events of the past decade have impacted us all. A reassessment of the moral foundations of democracy can help educators better prepare students. Haass has provided an excellent blueprint in the continuing struggle to build a more perfect union by arguing that obligations should “be at the core of a widely shared understanding of citizenship” (Haass, 2023, p. 155). Democratic educators have a responsibility to pass this understanding on to their students.

References


