

American Citizenship: From Traditional Values to “Progressive” Ones

L. John Van Til

Several years ago Vision & Values staff members and several Fellows began to examine the nature and meaning of *citizenship* in America. After some time, no obviously comprehensive study of the subject appeared. Indeed, an accurate and meaningful definition was elusive. We resolved to look into the matter further, since our thinking was that the traditional idea of citizenship seemed to have fallen on hard times. In due course, we resolved to plan a conference on American citizenship, settling on April 11-12, 2013, as the date. We sent out a call for papers as we have done for the past seven conferences. By mid-November the papers began to arrive.

Reading them produced a big surprise. While some were useful though a bit narrowly focused, a number, when taken together, painted a remarkably full account of the origins and development of *citizenship* from its roots down to the present time. This account shows that the development of the idea basically had three stages. One encompassed the pre-American Revolutionary period—including ancient roots and an English background. A second stage covered the development of the concept from the time the Declaration of Independence was being hammered out, on through the national era to the mid-1950s. A final stage began earnestly in the 1950s and continues to the present hour.

But, beyond the conference papers showing distinct stages, the conference papers also demonstrated that a basic shift in the meaning of *citizenship* began to occur by the 1950s. This shift was away from what the Founding Fathers, and great national leaders in the 19th- and 20th centuries, developed as the essence of American citizenship. This change needs to be elaborated on in a bit more detail here to make the point clear.

The Founding Fathers, while arguing with the British for two decades after the 1750s about the nature of the Empire, rejected numerous ideas about “subjectship”—life-long allegiance to the King—in the English tradition. They also reached deep into the English past to embrace some ideas about citizenship that had been discussed by John Milton, the poet, and his friends during the Commonwealth experience of the mid-17th century. When it came time to end their relationship with England, the colonials also had decades of experience in legislating for themselves. As the Declaration of Independence was being written, the Founders were rather suddenly confronted with the question of what their status was if they were no longer English “subjects.” Based on their knowledge of the ancients—a point explained in one of the conference papers—and on ideas they read in the works of Milton, which they had on their shelves, they called themselves *citizens*. Much of what this meant was stated in the Preamble to the Declaration. Foremost among these were “self-evident Truths.” Three in particular: “that all men are created equal,” that “they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and “that to secure these Rights, Governments were instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” This was the heart of citizenship rights of Americans in the new nation.

The Founders also dealt with the questions of sovereignty—state and national, allegiance, and state’s rights in relation to the national government, both in its Confederation and Federal forms. Most of what has just been outlined deals with the “rights” of citizens, but the Founders also had a view of the duties of citizenship.

Here again, as in several previous Vision & Values conferences, papers emphasized that the Founders naturally embraced the role of traditional Christian values in American society,

most of the Founders themselves being raised with these values as part of their education. Embedded in this value system was a deep sense of duty as a basic element of citizenship.

One especially significant conference paper, “The Texts that Made America,” traced how three basic texts were used in educating America’s young from the first days of settlement on into the 20th century. They were the *New England Primer*, Noah Webster’s *Blueback Speller*, and *McGuffey’s Reader*. These books were basically texts in citizenship. Tens of millions of Americans were brought up with these books as their guide. While the books taught the basics of reading and writing, they did so with a great emphasis on moral duties, often quoting from the Bible, traditional Protestant catechisms, and simple human wisdom.

Everyone did not go to college. Indeed, few went to college until well after WWII when colleges (often called “universities”) became diploma mills for technical training in place of traditional liberal arts education. But, American colleges from the beginning also taught the basics of citizenship in a required course, usually taught by the college president. Another conference paper is a case study of how citizenship was taught in the national period in American colleges. It focuses on Yale’s President Noah Porter and the way he taught citizenship. He called his book *The Elements of Moral Science: Theoretical and Practical*. The book was published in 1887 in the heat of the struggle between scientifically minded educators and traditional Christian ones. Many scholars, like Porter, adopted a scientific stance while dealing with subjects that traditionally were part of the liberal arts or humanities. This perspective gave an order to their work that was useful. In sum, Porter used this course to teach how one should live—ethically—both in the public and private aspects of life. In a few words, Porter’s book was a text on citizenship.

A very significant point to make here is that just as in the “readers” noted above, for grammar school level students, college texts in moral philosophy (or science) were rooted in Christian ethics. Porter’s book was used in many colleges. Dozens like it were authored by other college presidents, such as Amherst’s President Seeley, and his philosophy professor protégé Charles Garman. Garman student Calvin Coolidge was effusive in his praise of the Seeley-Garman method of teaching students how to live—how to be citizens with character.

To sum up to this point: Conference papers show that Americans, even before that name was commonplace, were educated in citizenship at home, in grammar school, and in colleges. Moreover, the backbone of this education was rooted in Christian ethics.

Our studies also revealed a very sad chapter in the history of American citizenship. It is this. The Founders never settled the question of citizenship for blacks, but the Civil War did. Three constitutional amendments and numerous Congressional statutes codified citizenship for all Americans, specifically including black Americans. Part of Southern society was not willing to accept this fact and did all they could to eviscerate (disembowel) the meaning and intent of the statutes and amendments. The result was a “re-enslavement,” as one writer called it, of millions of black Americans from about 1890 down to the WWII era. It took the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s to revive the citizenship rights of American blacks.

There is one more chapter to this story, a very significant one to be sure. Beginning in the early years of the 20th century, and maturing by WWII, a competing view of citizenship emerged. Its roots were not in a Christian ethic. It is most accurate to call this view *Progressive*, since it was hatched in the fertile minds of John Dewey, Herbert Crowley, Walter Lippmann, and others. These founding fathers of Progressivism embraced a secular view of the world. Two conference papers examine how the Progressive view, often with a deep appreciation of the

secular socialist tradition, have captured American public education, government agencies and governmental policies and regulations. Obamaism is its best expression. Duty and self-control have been exchanged for the dictates of a new governing elite in this new social order. Citizens are called upon to support and obey state-run programs. Virtues of the Old Order—like fiscal prudence—are ridiculed and condemned. Advocates of such views in the new Progressive order are often vilified and viewed as virtually treasonous.

There can be no doubt about the fact that until recent times education for good citizenship was ethically based—Christian ethics obviously. That changed as the Progressive movement began to take over the American school system, rather fully after WWII. One huge result of this shift in philosophy has been the removal of Christian influence from the school systems of the nation. With it went the Ten Commandments and anything else that reminded students of the nation’s two-hundred-plus years of commitment to a belief in the existence of a Creator-God, who required his “image-bearing” creatures to follow his commandments. To emphasize, all of the old home schooling—most Americans were “home-schooled” until well into the 19th century—grammar schooling, and collegiate education were aimed at education for citizenship based on a Christian view of the world. The Progressive movement, especially its most virulent form, Obamaism, has/is vigorously undermining that tradition.

One observer of this change suggested that this Progressive Obamian move to consolidate power in the Executive Branch is an echo of the “subjectship” that the Founders rejected in the Declaration. Is it possible that American citizenship under these circumstances will morph into a new form of subjectship?

Now, the central question of this piece: Can advocates and supporters of America's traditional view of citizenship devise a new way to explain, express, package, and market it? Can it seriously challenge an Obamian view of American society?

I believe this can be done. But, it will take some soul-searching and imagination to reach this goal. The time to begin is now!