

Opinion: Civic education is lacking

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"The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people," said Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis of the dangers of a disengaged citizenry. However, the American people have occasionally failed to heed Justice Brandeis' warning, with injustices at home and abroad the result.

I had direct, personal experience with one of those failures: the internment of over 100,000 Japanese-American citizens and legal resident aliens of Japanese ancestry during World War II. My family was forced from our home in San Jose to an internment camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

Treated like criminals

Barracks at Heart Mountain became homes for over 10,000 people. Each family was confined to a small, narrow room. We had committed no crimes, nor were we suspected of criminal conduct. Nevertheless, guards with machine guns trained their sights on those below who were imprisoned behind barbed wire fences.

Most detainees lost everything — homes, businesses, all other worldly possessions. But all of us lost the freedom and power of opportunity that brought our parents to America in the first place. We were forced at gunpoint to give up the basic dignity that our nation's founders promised when they declared that "all men are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."

I often reflect on that experience, and how it might have been prevented. Aren't American citizens entitled to expect more from our government? What went wrong?

In our democracy, responsibility resides with citizens and government alike. No one is, or should be, let off the hook when the system fails. In 1942, a disengaged and preoccupied public failed to speak out — just as today too few are speaking out on the erosion of civil liberties, on the pathology of poverty or on threats to our environment.

Civic-minded citizens are not simply born; they must be taught and nurtured. America's public schools have a special obligation in that regard, for more than any other institution they are charged with creating an informed and an engaged citizenry.

Despite its essential role in our society, civic education has been allowed to decline steadily over the past generation. As a result, too many of our fellow citizens do not know how our political system works, nor do they possess the skills and the motivation necessary to hold government accountable or to prevent injustice.

On the most recent national civics assessment in 2006, two-thirds of students scored below proficient, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. Even worse, civic ignorance is spread unevenly across the American population: minority students are twice as likely as their white counterparts to lack civic knowledge and skills, and low-income students score significantly lower than more affluent students on tests of such knowledge.

Joint effort

Moreover, civic education may be the only way that thousands of new immigrants can come to understand how best to affect change in their new country. For them and for us, civic engagement is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Restoring the civic mission of schools will require a joint effort by school districts, states, and the federal government. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (www.civicmissionofschools.org) has identified a number of strategies, including improved civics assessments, more service learning and professional development, which will help address the problem. But all of us has a role in turning things around.

Today marks the 221st anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. That covenant begins with the words "We the People," and two centuries later our democracy remains dependent on an informed and engaged citizenry. Only through civic education that prepares the next generation for active citizenship can we ensure the protection of our liberties and our ideals.

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