

# THE ASSAULT ON AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman

Prepared for delivery at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association

Seattle, WA

October 1, 2021

DRAFT VERSION - NOT FOR QUOTATION OR PUBLICATION

## Abstract

American Political Thought is a university course offering. It encompasses a wide range of topics including American ideals, governance, the nation's successes and failures and the writings of those who contributed to them. Increasingly, the American foundational principles that inform the study of American Political Thought are being called into question and criticized to the point that it can no longer be assumed that there will be a standard curriculum. The criticisms can be likened to assaults and are explored under that guise. Discussion includes remedies and the consequences for the future of America should the attacks on American Political Thought succeed.

## Introduction

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection; and he could see the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation. [2] Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind. [3] For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately precede the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.<sup>1</sup>

The opening lines of the great work on the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides is an apt beginning to explore the assault on American Political Thought. There is no sharp geographical divide, as there was between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians, but the battle is currently taking place throughout America. Increasingly, the divisions among the people are widening and becoming more vocal and pronounced and can be likened to an assault—if not a war—that is comparable to the hostilities between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.<sup>2</sup> Most similar is the historian’s observation that he is chronicling “the greatest movement yet known in history.” The magnitude that Thucydides understood and presented in his writing serves as a model to enable students and teachers of American Political Thought to understand the scope of what is happening in America, how to combat it, and the stakes and subsequent costs of the battle—the war—that is unfolding in America.

The aim of this essay is to identify assaults on American Political Thought, suggest remedies, and recognize the consequences for the future of America should the attacks on

---

1. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Touchstone 1996), I.1.

2. My intent is not to draw a strict parallel between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians and America and its critics.

American Political Thought succeed. The choice of the word “assault” is to underscore that what is transpiring is similar to a violent attack through various means. The inquiry begins by responding to the question—what is politics?—and by understanding how American Political Thought is part of the more comprehensive study of political philosophy.

### **On Politics, Political Philosophy, Political Thought, and American Political Thought**

There is a long tradition of writing on topics related to political prior to and including the classical Greeks. Homer, Plato, Thucydides, and Xenophon are among the best known, but Aristotle’s *Politics* is the first book—a treatise—to present a teaching exclusively on politics. It offers guidance in answering the preliminary question on politics and is most relevant to the present subject.

Aristotle begins with the household and the family because they are the most basic forms of human companionship and interaction. The family may be a self-sufficient unit in some respects, but it cannot be wholly self-sufficient. To this end, families form villages, and several villages eventually form a city (*polis* in Greek). Aristotle describes the city: it is fully self-sufficient, it exists for the sake of living well, and it belongs among the things that exist by nature. He further notes that man is by nature a political animal and is thus naturally drawn to form political communities. Another reason why the city is necessary to the residents living well is because “the virtue of justice belongs to the city.” Aristotle explains further:

For just as man is the best of the animals when completed, when separated from law and adjudication he is the worst of all. For injustice is harshest when it is furnished with arms; and man is born naturally possessing arms for [the use of] prudence and virtue which are nevertheless very susceptible to being used for their opposites. This is why, without virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage [of the animals], and the worst with regard to sex and food. [The virtue of] justice is a thing belonging to the city. For adjudication is an arrangement of the political partnership, and adjudication is judgment as to what is just.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1253a 30-40.

To provide a general response to the question—what is politics?—an identification of the subjects that Aristotle chose to include in his treatise is a good beginning: the city, the citizen (“one who shares in ruling and being ruled” and “whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision”), types of regimes (“an arrangement in cities connected with the offices, establishing the manner in which they have been distributed, what the authoritative element of the regime is, and what the end of the community is in each case”), what leads to the regime’s preservation or destruction, political institutions, the best regime, and education. These topics inform a simple definition of politics: the art of governing people in a public sphere.

While current American Political Thought curricula are more expansive, the content of the *Politics* remains part of the current-day political thought corpus.<sup>4</sup>

The *Politics* can be a stand-alone volume, but Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* includes an introduction to the subject-matter of the *Politics* in its concluding paragraphs. This reinforces the idea that there is a connection between ethics and politics. The *Politics* begins with the assertions that every community is constituted for the sake of some good and that the political community is for noble actions and not merely for the sake of living together.<sup>5</sup> The presence of the virtue of justice in the city as well as the emphasis placed on the formation of the character of the citizens through education indicate that the political life has a potential for fulfilling a higher purpose for the city’s inhabitants. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a fuller exposition of the moral and intellectual virtues and other related topics. These are directly related to personal conduct in both the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the city.

---

4. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275b, 1284a, 1289a 15.

5. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a 1-4, 1281a 2-4.

Another explanation of politics from the perspective of political philosophy further emphasizes the moral component of politics.

Political things are by their nature subject to approval and disapproval, to choice and rejection, to praise and blame. It is of their essence not to be neutral but to raise a claim to men's obedience, **allegiance, decision or judgement**. One does not understand them as what they are, as political things, if one does not take seriously their explicit or implicit claim to be judged in terms of goodness or badness, of justice or injustice, i.e., if one does not measure them by some standard of goodness or justice. . . Political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.<sup>6</sup>

In light of this definition of political philosophy, there are other distinctions to make.

Political philosophy is related to the broader study of philosophy, which is the love or pursuit of wisdom. It is a quest. Political thought is a deliberation or a reflection on political matters and topics more broadly understood. It "finds its adequate expression in laws and codes, in poems and stories, in tracts and public speeches *inter alia*."<sup>7</sup> Political thought and political philosophy are also related. "Political thought may not be more, and may not even intend to be more, than the expounding or the defense of a firmly held conviction or of an invigorating myth; but it is essential to political philosophy to be set in motion, and be kept in motion, by the disquieting awareness of the fundamental difference between conviction, or belief, and knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The subject matter of political philosophy encompasses the comprehensive or universal in contrast to American political thought that has America as a focus. American political thought is also informed by the study of universal principles. The universal and the particular aid in achieving a deeper understanding of unique American features.

---

6. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 12.

7. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 12.

8. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 12.

## American Political Thought: Defining and Understanding the American Political Community

Presence on the soil and presence as a nation characterize the two beginning points in the study of America. Alexis de Tocqueville's study of democracy in America highlights his approach from the ground up, so to speak. The Frenchman's visit to America in 1831-32 and his study of history provided the basis for him to describe the people and the habits that they formed from the practice of self-governance in the New England colonies. The desire to exercise the religious and economic freedom that the colonists found wanting in England and sought in America were among the reasons for them to form new communities. England was an ocean away, and while there were varying degrees of English presence in their governance, they implemented and participated in governing the political communities that they established on American soil.<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville was also careful to note the stark contrast from the practices in New England to what he witnessed in the south and its markedly different development because of the presence of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

An excerpt from the second chapter of his work entitled *Democracy in America*, "On the Point of Departure and its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans," describes presence on the soil, the first beginning point.

The circumstances that accompanied their birth and served to develop them influence the entire course of the rest of their lives. If it were possible for us to go back to the elements of societies and to examine the first monuments of their history, I do not doubt that we could discover in them the first cause of prejudices, habits, dominant passions, of all that finally composes what is called national character; . . .<sup>11</sup>

---

9. See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 36 for the three types of political and economic relationships between the British government, the King, and the colonists.

10. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 31.

11. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), L1.2.

The second beginning point in the study of America is when it became a new nation.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas Jefferson, one of the drafters of the Declaration, gave a more complete introduction in an 1825 letter to Henry Lee.

this was the object of the Declaration of Independance. not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject; [ . . . ] terms so plain and firm, as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independant stand we [ . . . ] compelled to take. neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the american mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. all it's authority rests then on the harmonising sentiments of the day, whether expressed, in conversns in letters, printed essays or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney Etc. the historical documents which you mention as in your possession, ought all to be found, and I am persuaded you will find, to be corroborative of the facts and principles advanced in that Declaration. be pleased to accept assurances of my great respect and esteem.<sup>13</sup>

These two views of America are not mutually exclusive. Jefferson and Tocqueville present a comprehensive foundation to begin the teaching of American Political Thought by drawing upon their direct experiences and the intellectual foundations that supported them.

In addition to the colonists' direct experiences of governance, the Declaration announced to the world the self-evident and universal truths that inform the nation's governing ideals. The new political community—the new nation—was thus formed. The ideals and principles of the Declaration, “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,” coupled with the structure of the 1787 Constitution as informed by the republican form of government, the separation of powers, the bicameral legislature, and federalism laid the foundation for a just

---

12. There is a mere passing reference in Tocqueville's work when he refers to the colonies declaring independence in the prelude to his discussion of the Federal Constitution: “The thirteen colonies that simultaneously shook off the yoke of England at the end of the last century . . .” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 105.

13. Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5212>.

political community. The citizens gave their consent to this government and remain the sovereign authority as held in the Declaration and the Constitution. It must be noted that not everyone present in America was a citizen, nor could they give consent. Yet, the colonial era was over, the 1787 Constitution replaced the inadequate Articles of Confederation, and the foundation for a new nation was laid that could eventually allow for, in the words that Lincoln spoke in the 1863 Gettysburg address, a new birth of freedom. What subsequently transpired is among the content in the study of American Political Thought.

The great documents—the Declaration of Independence, the U. S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and subsequent amendments—mark fundamental points in the foundation of the regime. A course of study in American Political Thought includes these and are supplemented with colonial era documents that are representative of the debates about governance, the Federalist/Antifederalist debates, and significant issues including slavery. Other writings, contributions from towering figures such as Washington and Lincoln, and great debates are too numerous to mention. The point must be underscored that the corpus of American Political Thought is based upon America, its ideals, its governance, its people, its successes, and its failures. Finally, Jefferson gave a nod to the foundations of political philosophy quoted above in his 1825 letter, which would supplement the study of American Political Thought.

### **The Task of American Political Thought**

One should educate with a view to each sort [of regime], for the character that is proper to each sort of regime both customarily safeguards the regime and establishes it at the beginning. . .<sup>14</sup> Aristotle

Well Doctor what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin replied, "A republic . . if you can keep it.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Franklin

---

14. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a 12-15.

15. Benjamin Franklin, Friends of Franklin, Constitutional Convention; Elizabeth Powell?, <http://friendsoffranklin.org/constitutional-convention-elizabeth-powell/>.

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.<sup>16</sup> Hamilton

Our liberty depends on our education, our laws, and habits . . . it is founded on morals and religion, whose authority reigns in the heart, and on the influence all these produce on public opinion before that opinion governs rulers.<sup>17</sup> Fisher Ames

These quotations inform the role that the study of American Political Thought plays in supporting the citizens to perpetuate and participate in America's democratic republic.

A basic knowledge of reading and writing was sufficient in a colonial America, but the 1776 Declaration proclaimed the independence of the nation and to echo Aristotle, the character of the regime changed in a fundamental manner. There are two senses of character to take away from Aristotle's quotation: first, character of the regime, understood in the sense of specific features such as those of a monarchy or a tyranny, and second, character of the people who live in a particular regime. Both raise questions about the content of education. Is it merely an enterprise of learning facts and dates or is there a deeper learning that speaks to building the character of the citizenry to "keep" the republic or know when they are losing the structure? Are the American people more likely to understand the principle of equality as it is intended in the Declaration and respect the natural rights of others if there is a moral foundation that is reinforced by education?<sup>18</sup> These questions have become more pressing as the United States is experiencing assaults on the very foundational principles of the union.

---

16. "The *Federalist Papers*," The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp), #1.

17. Fisher Ames, "An Oration on the Sublime Virtues of General George Washington," Oration at Boston's Old South Meeting House, before the Lieutenant Governor, the Council, and both branches of the Massachusetts Legislature, Boston, MA, February 8, 1800 (Boston: Young & Minns, 1800), 23.

18. Examples of deeper learning about the American Founding are found in the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. In the first Lincoln Douglas Debate, Lincoln addresses the question of equality in light of natural rights. "There is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as

Franklin could not have offered a more apt reply to Mrs. Powel's question at the close of the 1787 Constitutional Convention. He looked beyond the events of a founding and the drafting of a new Constitution and focused attention on the responsibility to maintain and preserve the accomplishments thus far. His words underscore the necessity of teaching American Political Thought so that when the people are called upon to exercise the reflection and choice that Hamilton presented as necessary to establishing good government and maintaining our republic, an informed and well-educated citizenry can act. America was peopled by those who were already present on the soil as well as immigrants who came and continue to come from many nations. Their education about the America that emerged from colonial origins and founded as a new nation in 1776 was and continues to be of paramount importance to all citizens.

The consequences are great if citizens are not taught the basic American political structure—or even worse taught to despise it—and not inspired to exhibit a character that supports achieving the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and maintains a republic of free people. Should these educational efforts not be made or be corrupted in a significant way, the citizenry will not support or sustain American principles of governance and the republic. Worse still, they may participate in undermining or overturning it.

### **The Assault on American Political Thought**

American Political Thought: A Core of Foundational Principles or a Hodgepodge of Grievances

*The rejection of the intellectual foundations of the study of politics*

---

the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*" In his speech on the Dred Scott *decision*, he makes a similar statement with respect to women. "Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone. In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others."

The introduction to American Political Thought above began with understanding its relation to the broader study of political philosophy. It now serves as a prelude to the first assault on American Political Thought.

Socrates was the teacher of Aristotle's teacher Plato and is known to us through the Platonic dialogues. He became a well-known figure because of the conversations—the dialogues—that he had with others in Athens on a wide range of subjects. It was these dialogues that brought the seventy-year-old man to an Athenian court to defend himself against charges that included corrupting the young.<sup>19</sup> His defense speech included his devotion to persuading his fellow citizens to care for virtue, which he argued was beneficial but that others saw as a threat to themselves and the political regime.

Are you not ashamed that you care for having as much money as possible, and reputation, and honor, but that you neither care for nor give thought to prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best possible? And if one of you disputes it and asserts that he does care, I will not immediately let him go, nor will I go away, but I will speak to him and examine and test him. And if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, but one says he does, I will reproach him, saying that he regards the things worth the most as the least important, and the paltrier things as more important.<sup>20</sup>

He likened himself to a gadfly who awakens, persuades, and reproaches the citizens to care for virtue.<sup>21</sup>

In sharp contrast to Socrates are two other well-known figures in the works of political philosophy: Nicolo Machiavelli and Karl Marx.

Machiavelli wrote in chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

It remains now to see what the modes of a prince ought to be, and how he should govern, with respect to his subjects and his friends. And because I know that many have written on this, I doubt that I shall be taken to be presumptuous in writing about it again,

---

19. Plato, *Apology*, in *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds*, trans. Thomas G. and Grace Starry West (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984), 24b.

20. Plato, *Apology*, 29d-30a.

21. Plato, *Apology*, 30e, 31b.

especially in my departing from the orders of others in the disputation of this matter. But since it is my intention to write a useful thing for him who understands, it seemed to me more profitable to go behind to the effectual truth of the thing, than to the imagination thereof. And many have imagined republics and principates that have never been seen or known to be in truth; because there is such a distance between how one lives and how one should live that he who lets go that which is done for that which ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation—for a man who wishes to profess the good in everything needs must fall among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary for a prince, if he wishes to maintain himself, to learn to be able to be not good, and to use it and not use it according to the necessity.<sup>22</sup>

Without invoking the names of Socrates or Plato, Machiavelli had them in his sights. The imagined republic is a reference to Socrates's "city in speech" in the *Republic*, the "ought" is an ideal toward which one can guide behavior, and "governance" by one who learns not to be good is a far cry from the philosopher king in whom political power and philosophy coalesce.<sup>23</sup> Machiavelli turned Socrates's teaching on its head, arguably re-founding political philosophy in a manner that rejected both the classical Greek and the Judaic and Christian traditions.

Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* begins "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism." The first chapter announces one of their fundamental tenets: struggles between classes of people and not individuals.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.<sup>24</sup>

Marx's references to class struggles as the history of all "hitherto existing society" and to groups based upon class or profession are pointed contrasts to prior political philosophers who spoke of individual human beings and their behavior. Marx's recasting sets up an adversarial

---

22. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (Dallas, University of Dallas Press 1980), 93.

23. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), 473d.

24. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: New American Library, 1998), 49, 50.

nature that leaves behind the quest for wisdom or fellowship within communities as well as persons or citizens who are responsible for their actions. Aristotle's chapters on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or Socrates's search for virtues—courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom<sup>25</sup>—as he states in the *Republic*, are not part of Marx's views or aims of society. The sharpest contrast is when Socrates seeks a definition of justice and reminds his listeners that among the goals of the city were to pursue an occupation “for which his nature best fitted him.”<sup>26</sup> After discovering the other three virtues of the city, justice is explained as performing one's own task and not meddling with that of others.<sup>27</sup> Marx would reject Socrates's view of performing one's task. He may seek to remedy an injustice that he sees with a disproportionate amount of power that one group has over another, but his quest is not one of justice but in large measure righting a wrong by subduing the group that is inflicting the perceived harm through economic superiority.

A traditional political philosophy course includes readings of Plato, Machiavelli, and Marx followed by a full-throated discussion of their ideas. There has been a decline in the prominence of the study of political philosophy in political science departments and a change within the discipline itself, a fragmentation of the discipline with an increased focus on racial and ethnic studies, and a greater emphasis on the quantitative study of politics at the expense of qualitative studies. These practices and trends have contributed to the first assault on American Political Thought, which can broadly be summed up as the rejection of the intellectual foundations of the study of politics.

---

25. Plato, *Republic*, 433b, 434a.

26. Plato, *Republic*, 433a.

27. Plato, *Republic*, 433b.

The foundations include philosophy from the Greeks and Romans and theological teachings from the Jewish and Christian traditions, but a narrower scope with respect to the discipline of American political science is being presented in this essay. The following describes the changes in the field of political science.

There has been an upheaval, “intellectual revolution” as described in American political scientists’ thoughts and ideas in the last four decades or so. The innovations they have introduced have greatly influenced the nature and subject matter of our study. The approach to the traditional theory of Political Science, as they call it, is criticized on parochialism and formalism. The study’s focus in the past explained tended to be primarily on institutions and their legal norms, rules, regulations, or political ideas and ideologies rather than on performance, interaction, and behavior.

The modern political analysis, guided by sociological, anthropological, and psychological methods and theories, rests upon four basic principles:

The search for a more comprehensive scope

The search for realism

The search for precision and

The search for intellectual order

The object is to free the discipline of Political Science from the value judgments or quasi-ethical or philosophical judgments.

These modern political scientists seek to develop a kind of empirically oriented and value-free Political Science and bring it on par with natural sciences. Values are thought to be subjective preferences about which science has nothing to do. Traditionally, the study of political values-of what, for example, ought to be the political structure and what political goals ought to be sought has been political philosophers’ field.<sup>28</sup>

The relation between political philosophy and political thought proposed at the outset was that political thought sets political philosophy in motion. The study of American Political Thought necessarily undergoes a change because of the radical transformation of political philosophy within the larger discipline of political science. More will be said about the

---

28. Political Science Review, “Nature and Scope of Political Science” November 5, 2018, <https://www.politicalscienceview.com/nature-and-scope-of-political-science/>. A broader discussion of changes in the study of political science is in the following essay: “An Epilogue” a chapter in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss* pp 99-129, ed. Hilail Gildin (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975). As an anecdote, at the 2019 APSA meeting there were 57 Divisions that offered 1,306 wide-ranging papers and an additional 136 Related Groups.

importance of American Political Thought to the education of students and its role in supporting American political institutions, but let's return to the examples of Plato, Machiavelli, and Marx.

These authors may appear on a reading list in a political science department, but how they are studied has been greatly affected by the different approach of the now “empirically oriented and value-free Political Science.” Aristotle’s related studies of ethics and politics or the seeking of virtue in the Platonic dialogues are not distinguished from Machiavelli’s amoral teaching or Marx’s shift from individuals to groups. Political practices solely informed by the teachings of Machiavelli and Marx reject the topics that are of greatest concern to Socrates and Aristotle. Examples include using happiness as a measure of an ethical life, leading a virtuous life, and distinguishing between regimes that aim for the common good as opposed to those that are degraded by the selfish intentions of the rulers.

The change in emphasis and manner of study of political philosophy necessarily has an impact on American Political Thought. This change is also being exacerbated by the events currently taking place in America that are shutting down debate and is generally referred to as “cancel culture.” This is the second assault on American Political Thought: the rejection of dialogue.

#### *The Rejection of Dialogue: The “cancel culture”*

Aristotle notes early in the *Politics* that man alone among the animals has speech. Man is further distinguished from animals for the following reasons: “speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust. For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust

and other things [of this sort]; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city.”<sup>29</sup>

Socrates carried on his inquiries through dialogues with others. The word dialogue is made up of two Greek words, *dia* meaning through and *logos* meaning inward thought or reason itself. An apt description of the Socratic dialogue was penned by Eva Brann in her recollections of St. John’s College Dean and Tutor Jacob Klein.

Socrates had, as I’ve said, a way, a pursuit, but not a method in the Cartesian sense of a set of jiggled procedure for following an inquiry. Mr. Klein used to say that each dialogue was its own world and in each conversation Socrates goes about his search in a different way, taking into account the character of his conversational partners and of the object in question. So Socrates has his ways which are not a method, and in that respect he is the very incarnation of liberal teaching and our [St. John’s College] super-model.<sup>30</sup>

These two quotations lay the groundwork for understanding the importance of speech and dialogue. It is not only the basis of unity and fellowship among human beings, but it also makes possible the prospect of living in a good political community. Conversation can resolve differences; articulate ideas, aspirations, and goals; and bring to light solutions to problems. With respect to the present discussion of American Political Thought, a reading of selected works in American Political Thought is a beginning but the deeper learning takes place in the conversations about them. The ideas are brought to life; some say they are illuminated.<sup>31</sup> To return to the examples of Socrates, Machiavelli, and Marx, their ideas effected a revolution of sorts, and they were perceived as threats to some,<sup>32</sup> but the themes that Socrates advances—

---

29. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a 9, 14-19.

30. Eva Brann, “Jacob Klein: European Scholar, American Teacher,” The Imaginative Conservative, December 2, 2019, [https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/12/jacob-klein-european-scholar-american-teacher-eva-brann-90.html?fbclid=IwAR15KU5Lu\\_8im47dYgfkqKhpGa4quJMZh10GxFEn9NJM8fKPG3JRhDkn6X4](https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/12/jacob-klein-european-scholar-american-teacher-eva-brann-90.html?fbclid=IwAR15KU5Lu_8im47dYgfkqKhpGa4quJMZh10GxFEn9NJM8fKPG3JRhDkn6X4). Klein was Dean of St. John’s College from 1949-1958.

31. Brann, “Jacob Klein.”

32. Socrates was voted guilty by his fellow Athenian citizens of the charges brought against him, but he remarks that he would have been acquitted “if only thirty of the votes had fallen differently” (Plato, *Apology*, 36a). Machiavelli was suspected plotting against the new government of Florence in 1513 and was tortured by the

happiness, virtue, the examined life—inform the American Founding in a manner vastly different from the other two. This is especially discerned through debate of their ideas.

Efforts to silence or diminish the speech of others has a long history. The classical Greeks practiced ostracism against those who were perceived to be too politically powerful. By a vote of citizens, they were usually banished for a period of ten years, but persons were occasionally allowed to return earlier.<sup>33</sup> The contrast in America is that the silencing or “canceling” of speech is not done by a majority of the people but by a very few. It is not targeting those who pose a threat to America or its government but in many instances those who defend American institutions. It is not just for “offenses” such as slurs or offensive comments made currently but that could have been made long in the past with no account taken for apology, remorse, or changed behavior. There is also a racial component that generally focuses on the condemnation of white people, regardless of their actions. Within a short period of time, it has become widespread and vicious and advanced with lightning speed through social media outlets.

With respect to this inquiry into the assaults on American Political Thought, there is a particular emphasis on denying anything positive about America or bullying those who strive to engage or understand and recognize all arguments related to the country’s past transgressions and its successes. The popular identifier is “cancel” culture, but culture of repudiation is another name that underscores the rejection of cultural inheritance, especially that of religious life.<sup>34</sup> This, too, is relevant to the broader discussion of American Political Thought. The First Amendment protections include the establishment and free exercise of religion clauses and are

---

*strappado*, which causes dislocation of the shoulders (*Machiavelli*, ed. Wootten, xi). Marx was at odds with the Prussian, French, Belgian, and German governments and was expelled from some countries.

33. “Coming together, therefore, from all parts into the city, they banished Aristides by the ostracism, giving their jealousy of his reputation the name of fear of tyranny.” Plutarch, “Life of Aristides,” vol. 1, *Lives*, trans. A. H. Clough (New York: A. L. Burt, n.d.), 218.

34. Roger Scruton, “Sacred Truths in a Profane World,” The Imaginative Conservative, February 2, 2020, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2020/02/sacred-truths-profaneworld-roger-scruton-2020-timeless.html>.

part of the core teaching of American Political Thought. The Virginia Declaration of Rights was influential in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Section 15 reads as follows: “That no free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.”<sup>35</sup> Neither justice nor moderation motivates those who “cancel” others. The threat to liberty is real because among the goals of those who cancel others is to have no recurrence to fundamental principles.

There is also a great loss to reason and rational argument, which impacts the development of higher learning. Participation in rational discussion and exercising reason is learned and cultivated through practice. Much of the impetus for cancelling or targeting the speech of others is that the perpetrators have no rational response to those with whom they disagree. Lincoln adds another valuable practice that links reason to perpetuating America’s political institutions in his Lyceum Address.

They [scenes of the revolution] were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. **Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.**--Let those materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws: and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON.<sup>36</sup> (Emphasis added)

America is reverting to an age that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King decried in 1963. “Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue

---

35. “Virginia Declaration of Rights,” National Archives, America’s Founding Documents, section 15, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights>.

36. Abraham Lincoln, “Lyceum Address” (January 1838), in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 14.

rather than dialogue.”<sup>37</sup> The circumstances differ from his times to current times, but the consequences are similar. The assault on speech, debate, and dialogue is resulting in the silencing of those with differing opinions, arguments, and legitimate criticisms; dismissal from employment; or exile from activities. This harms what takes place in classrooms and among the citizens generally. It fosters fear, mistrust, and divisiveness because of the bullying tactics used to banish citizens from public fora. It is a new form of ostracism at its ugliest.

These tactics to hinder speech threaten the use of an American Political Thought curriculum to teach, debate, learn from the past, and envision the future. The threat is being compounded by other events related to race: critical race theory and questions about the very curriculum of American Political Thought.

*Sowing Seeds of Confusion: Igniting a debate concerning the point of origin & and how Americans are judged*

Two movements serve as examples of sowing seeds of confusion: Critical Race Theory and the 1619 Project. Critical race theory dates to a legal studies movement at Harvard Law School in the 1970s. In a legal setting, instead of the actions of an individual being judged by the rule of law, the theory advocated a broader scope that included among other things, a disadvantaged background or racial injustices as considerations when determining innocence or guilt. The aim was to transform the principle of equality before the law by consideration of other factors that went beyond the action or behavior of the accused.<sup>38</sup>

---

37. Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from Birmingham City Jail, April 16, 1963, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

38. Marina N. Bolotnikova, “What is Critical Race Theory?” Harvard Magazine, March 22, 2016, <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2016/03/bu-law-professor-khiara-bridges-teaches-critical-race-theory-at-harvard-law>. Kenny Xu, “Critical Race Theory’s Poisonous Roots Trace Back To Harvard University,” *The Federalist*, June 9, 2021, <https://thefederalist.com/2021/06/09/critical-race-theorys-poisonous-roots-trace-back-to-harvard-university/>.

What has come to be known as “The 1619 Project” originated as a series of articles published in the New York Times Magazine in August 2019.<sup>39</sup> It was originally presented in the following manner: “The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.” The language “understanding 1619 as our true founding” was subsequently removed,<sup>40</sup> but the debate was ignited.

These movements and discussions about them have swept the nation with scholars, parents, teachers, state legislators and governors, and Presidents Trump and Biden weighing in with refutations, protests, curricula, legislation, and Executive Orders.<sup>41</sup> Among all who have weighed in, there are disagreements about the legitimacy of the theories and movements as well as who benefits and who loses. On the one hand, the rousing debate brings to the forefront grievances and concerns that are worthy of public debate, but on the other hand the divisiveness and disingenuousness of some make a resolution difficult if not impossible.

---

39. Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 project,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, [https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/the\\_idea\\_of\\_america\\_full\\_essay.pdf](https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/the_idea_of_america_full_essay.pdf).

40. Heritage Foundation, “New York Times Quietly Edits “1619 Project” After Conservative Pushback,” Heritage Impact, September 26, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/american-founders/impact/new-york-times-quietly-edits-1619-project-after-conservative-pushback>.

41. Executive Orders by Presidents Trump and Biden highlight the divide in America. President Trump issued Executive Order 13950 Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping to preserve the American beliefs in the equality of every individual, no matter their race or country of origin, and King’s dream that his children would one day “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In stark contrast, on his first day in office, President Biden signed an Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (13985) that included a revocation of President Trump’s EO 13950. President Biden stated his intent in the EO: “It is therefore the policy of my Administration that the Federal Government should pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.” The demand for “equity” instead of “equality” is rooted in the Marxist ideal of class or group struggle, not the self-evident truths of individual rights articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

With respect to the question of an American Political Thought curriculum, reading selections that aimed to explain critical race theory and its advantages and disadvantages would broaden the spectrum of discussion. This should be a positive contribution if honest assessment were possible and if government social programs to aid disadvantaged groups were held up to scrutiny and judged against an objective standard of effectiveness.

The incorporation of the 1619 Project as a stand-alone offering would likely be less beneficial. The intentions of those who advanced the project were to change the debate about America and not for the better. It was not intended as a contribution to the American Political Thought core but rather a revision and replacement of what had been taught heretofore. Many scholars criticized the misrepresentations in the Hannah-Jones article.<sup>42</sup> Others have suggested dating America's origins to different points.

The 1620 project is based upon a book that argues that the pilgrims' ideals, as evidenced by the Mayflower Compact, are a truer and more accurate beginning than 1619.<sup>43</sup> Another scholar argues that 1689 should be in the running because of the Enlightenment, Newton's "*Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*," and England's Glorious Revolution, all of which dated from this time and had an impact on America's Founding. The article ends with an American catch-all: "The '1689 Project' – featuring Locke, Newton, Adam Smith, Jefferson, Hamilton, Lincoln – has led to the advance of civilization for billions of people around the globe.

---

42. Allen C. Guelzo, "Preaching a Conspiracy Theory: The 1619 Project offers bitterness, fragility, and intellectual corruption—not history," *City Journal*, December 8, 2019, <https://www.city-journal.org/1619-project-conspiracy-theory>. Sean Wilentz. "A Matter of Facts," *The Atlantic*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152/>.

43. Peter Wood, "America Wasn't Founded on Slavery in 1619 — but on Pilgrims' Ideals Written in 1620," National Association of Scholars blog, November 17, 2020, <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/america-wasn-t-founded-on-slavery-in-1619-but-on-pilgrims-ideals-written-in-1620>.

We must protect this ‘light,’ or we will lose everything.”<sup>44</sup> In a direct response to the 1619 project, President Trump initiated the 1776 Commission in November 2020. The Commission issued its report on January 18, 2021. President Biden removed the report from the White House website on January 20, 2021, Inauguration Day.<sup>45</sup>

These offerings, sincere and otherwise, foster debate about America, its origins, its ideals, the wrongs committed by some (such as those who denied the humanity of slaves and deprived them of their natural rights), and those who challenged them (such as those who drafted the 1787 Northwest Ordinance to prevent slavery in the Northwest territories, those who ended slavery in their states, those who fought and died on a battle field during a civil war to reestablish a union that was divided over the slavery, and many more).

An American Political Thought curriculum should chronicle the foundational events in America, set the stage for debate, and contribute to the overall education of citizens and those who desire to learn more about the country. The suggestion that movements such as critical race theory and the 1619 project are sowing seeds of confusion is real when the intent is to obfuscate or indoctrinate instead of to educate. The intentions of those who advance these projects must be held up to scrutiny before they are allowed to upend the teaching of American Political Thought.

Proposed above were two beginning points in the study of America when drawing out the contrast between the colonial origins and declaring independence from the British colonial power. Tocqueville’s writing on America and the drafters of the Declaration lay a foundation that supports a comprehensive study of early America and is easily supplemented by a vast

---

44. K. S. Bruce, “Want to Save the World? Adopt the ‘1689 Project’,” Real Clear Politics, February 5, 2021, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/02/05/want\\_to\\_save\\_the\\_world\\_adopt\\_the\\_1689\\_project\\_145185.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/02/05/want_to_save_the_world_adopt_the_1689_project_145185.html).

45. See footnote 40 above.

selection of readings from a variety of sources.<sup>46</sup> Lending credence to this comprehensive approach was Martin Luther King, Jr., who initially echoes Tocqueville by referring to the colonial era.

Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation-and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.<sup>47</sup>

His subsequent remarks make clear that he looks to the events of 1776 and 1787 to guide the efforts to end discrimination in Birmingham and elsewhere.

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.<sup>48</sup>

Another voice, that of W.E.B. du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, writing earlier than King, contributes to the American conversation in a different manner.

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. The meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader, for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.<sup>49</sup>

Du Bois's collection of essays illuminates struggles, hopes, fears, and injustices that blacks have experienced. There are many voices and rich selections that can speak to those who wish to study

---

46. Further development of this essay will include an appendix of suggested American Political Thought readings.

47. King, "Letter."

48. King, "Letter."

49. W. E. B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

America. The contrast with the offerings of critical race theory and the 1619 project is that these offerings of King and du Bois are among the finest that keep at the forefront some of the most compelling issues in America whereas the others are divisive. The past informs the current and future conduct of Americans rather than using the past to condemn Americans in perpetuity.

#### The Assault on American Political Thought: Conclusion

The three examples of assaults on American Political Thought—the rejection of the intellectual foundations of the study of politics, the rejection of dialogue, and sowing seeds of confusion—threaten the study of the foundations and the principles of American Political Thought in distinct ways. Can the republic survive with the loss of the intellectual underpinnings from the Greeks and Romans and the Judaic and Christian traditions, the loss of seeking knowledge through inquiry, the loss of a moral foundation—whether it be arrived at through reason or revelation—and general confusion about the origins and what America represents? To repeat Franklin, a republic . . . if you can keep it. These studies and practices contribute to and make possible “keeping” the American democratic republic.

Should there be a makeover of the traditional American Political Thought curriculum, it would not include the 1776 Declaration or the U.S. Constitution, the writings of the founders that give meaning to the intentions of the new nation, the freed slave Frederick Douglass who initially argued that the Constitution was pro-slavery but then came to the realization that it was anti-slavery<sup>50</sup> among many others. It is doubtful that King’s writing would be included because of his quest to fulfill the ideals of the founding documents. Du Bois’s work would likely be rejected. For example, his essay “The Talented Tenth” supports a merit-based approach to

---

50. Frederick Douglass, “The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-slavery?” Speech, Scottish Anti-Slavery Society, Glasgow, Scotland, March 26, 1860. Blackpast, <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/1860-frederick-douglass-constitution-united-states-it-pro-slavery-or-anti-slavery/>.

education, an unacceptable alternative to the goals of equity or critical race theory. We the people, the words in the preamble of the Constitution, would be replaced by “We the group.” The groups would be informed by racial characteristics and economic class. The theme of happiness as among the highest goods would be replaced with material satisfaction by the acquisition of goods. There is already a move away from civics and replacing it with “action civics” or “project-based civics,” which trains students to protest on behalf of leftist political causes.<sup>51</sup> These musings lead to the realization that the makeover would be nothing more than a hodgepodge of grievances. One could imagine the course being called APT Reset or APT 2.0, but even that would be rejected because the three words—American, Political, and Thought—would no longer be relevant to the grievances that would be inform it.

Presented at the outset was the idea of setting political philosophy and political thought in motion. The assaults on American Political Thought have the potential of being so crippling that we imperil our ability to set in motion beneficial contributions to American politics that are derived from the study of American Political Thought. Politics is dynamic, not static, and should the motion that it engenders be stopped, the country would atrophy and degenerate.

### **The Assault on America**

An assault on American Political Thought is ultimately an assault on America, its cumulative history, and its future. Two different examples speak to this broader assault.

#### *The American Canon and American National Character*

A canon has several meanings including a fundamental principle or general rule, a standard, a comprehensive list of books within a field, and established constraints governing the

---

51. Stanley Kurtz, “Beware: New Civics Mandates Will be Woke,” National Review, The Corner Politics and Policy, December 28, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/beware-new-civics-mandates-will-be-woke/>.

background narrative. These partial definitions inform different elements of the requirements to establish a nation and build a national character. As the assaults chip away at the principles, standards, writings and ideas that teach, and the governing constraints, the likelihood of maintaining a country with shared ideals and an American national character becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible.

George Washington spoke of establishing a national character in the years just after declaring independence. “We have now a National character to establish. & it is of the utmost importance to stamp favourable impressions upon it—let justice then be one of its characteristics, & gratitude another.”<sup>52</sup>

He wrote in a Circular letter to the States,

it appears to me there is an option still left to the United States of America, that it is in their choice, and depends upon their conduct, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a Nation; This is the time of their political probation; this is the moment when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them; this is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever.<sup>53</sup>

The two components of a canon and a national character reaffirm what is at the core of a nation. The intellectual elements of a canon and the activity of the citizen that is consistent with a national character both contribute to a cohesive nation. Should the assaults previously described succeed, there will be no canon to teach students and citizens about their country, and the national character becomes nothing more than a shadow of its former self.

---

52. From George Washington to Theodorick Bland, 4 April 1783, in W. B. Allen, *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1988), 231.

53. George Washington “Circular to the States.” June 14, 1783, in W. B. Allen, *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1988), 241. A discussion of national character is in W. B. Allen, “Moral Frontiers: American National Character and the Future of Liberty,” (speech, November 2014).

*Loss of the link with the past is detrimental to the nation's future*

The American civil war is the closest event that is similar to what is occurring in America today. President Lincoln, in one of his most famous speeches, laid out the stakes in grave terms. He delivered his House Divided speech in Springfield, Illinois on June 16, 1858, to an audience of 1,000 attendees at the Republican State Convention.

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented.

In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed.

‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing or all the other.<sup>54</sup>

We are currently experiencing stark divisions in America. Lincoln's House Divided Speech is an entrée to considering the state of America and the divide that has emerged. To realize the parallels that exist between Lincoln's time and the present, remove the words slave and free in the phrase “I believe this government cannot endure, *permanently half slave and half free*” and rewrite it to read: “I believe this government cannot endure, *with some embracing the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and others rejecting them*” (italics added). This represents a far greater disunity in America because the very foundation is being called into question and being rejected by some. The America of today differs from Lincoln's America of the 1840's and 1850's, where those who defended slavery were building a new house in their efforts to spread slavery throughout the nation. America is now in a time when some

---

54. Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided Speech at Springfield, Illinois” (June 16, 1858), in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) 126.

have as a goal to tear down the America that began in 1776. Are their aspirations to build a new house akin to those in the southern states who attempted to do so in the time of Lincoln or are their aims even more radical? Despite the efforts of Lincoln and others, a civil war was fought that cost the nation dearly. The current civil war is not being fought on a traditional battlefield as it was during Lincoln's time such as Vicksburg or Gettysburg, but it is being waged in the hearts and minds of citizens, in K-12 schools and universities, in government, and in the media.

No one can predict what the future holds, but the loss of an education that contributes to a foundation to form good, strong political communities and that instills the necessary education for a self-governing people portends dire outcomes for American citizens and their beloved country.

### **Remedies**

The teaching of American Political Thought is traditionally done at the university level. Civics and American History are among course offerings at the high school level. Many universities and public and private primary and secondary schools are among the worst offenders for undermining traditional curricula that teaches students about America and its institutions. The university tenure system and the dominant presence of the Unions in the K-12 system make any prospects for change unlikely. It is the responsibility of scholars, citizens, parents, and those teachers who value a traditional American Political Thought teaching and recognize its place in sustaining the nation to act. Together they can contribute to the effort to re-establish and defend the canon.

Scholars are well-positioned to assist in this effort. Some work independently, some teach, and some have affiliations with local and national organizations. Among the most prominent of the organizations and schools are the National Association of Scholars, Hillsdale

College, Center for Renewing America, and the Woodson Center's 1776 Unites and the related Liberty And Justice For All initiative. Scholars are well-suited to participate in these efforts because of their prior study, research, and writing. Organizations like the ones mentioned and others have the means to organize conferences, draft curricula and educational programs, propose and review legislation, and publish, all with the aim to engage Americans of all ages in local, state, and national dialogues.

Many of these organizations have been around for years but a fervor enveloped the nation with the publication of the 1619 project. It was met with a barrage of criticism from historians, journalists, political scientists, and educators, as well as then President Trump. He initiated the 1776 project to counter the false and misguided narrative of the 1619 project. A lively debate stormed across America and continues.

Citizen involvement in elections offers an opportunity to learn about programs, textbook adoption, and legislation that directly impacts students, schools, and educational content. School board elections are especially important. Some are as small as five elected members who wield a tremendous amount of power in deciding K-12 policies. Whether a citizen runs for the school board or backs candidates who are willing to advance sound educational programs, both are of value. The same holds for state legislatures who draft content standards and curricula for public schools.

The classroom is the traditional place for education, but the kitchen table is the next best when the classroom is lacking or detrimental to learning. Parents are well-placed to listen to their children, ask them questions about what they are learning, and counter when necessary. Whether parents home-school their children or send them outside the home to be educated, supplementing their education is both beneficial and necessary. Parents have an opportunity to be a school

outside of a school. Some examples include reading with them, visiting libraries and museums, and attending city council meetings. Visits to the state or nation's capital and legislatures and homes of the Founders and Presidents provide direct experiences with governing and are good opportunities to teach and learn. Abraham Lincoln, in his Lyceum address, spoke more specifically to the rule of law but his mention of the role of parents and the broader idea of a political religion is applicable to this discussion of remedies:

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap--let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;--let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.<sup>55</sup>

Teachers, whether they are at schools or universities that support teaching the foundations of America in a sincere and truthful manner or accomplish this by stealth, can engage students in ways that can support them to become thoughtful citizens. Among the best types of education to support such an endeavor is a liberal education in its original form. In contrast to a manual education where one learns skills, a liberal education is intended to free the mind. Understood in the broadest meaning, it encompasses four things: 1) education to be human beings, 2) education to make the most of our human powers, 3) education for our responsibilities as members of a democratic society, and 4) education for freedom.<sup>56</sup> The common element of these four points are individual human beings who can thrive in a liberal society and in a democratic republic. This is in sharp contrast to a totalitarian regime in which the private and the

---

55. Abraham Lincoln, "Lyceum Address" (January 1838), in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 11.

56. These categories are discussed in the introduction to *The Great Ideas Program. The Great Ideas Program*, ed. Mortimer J Adler, 10 vols. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1959-63).

individual is diminished or denied, and uniformity prevails. The mind is closed in such a regime rather than opened and enriched.

Political philosophy introduced the study of American Political Thought at the beginning of this essay. The curriculum of a liberal education draws from the works of political philosophy and other disciplines and are broadly part of a Great Books curriculum. The aims of a liberal education are achieved by reading and discussing books that are recognized as “great” and that reach as far back as the classical Greeks—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—and continue through the centuries to present-day—Shakespeare, Montesquieu, Jane Austen, Tocqueville, and others. Such works free the mind. We hold opinions, but how do we test those opinions and transition from opinion to knowledge to truth? Oftentimes a liberal education takes place at a seminar table where students and teachers discuss readings, question, challenge, and engage the author as well as those participating in the discussion. Nothing prevents this from happening at the kitchen table as well among friends or parent and child.

The value of a liberal education is twofold. First, the content of the readings expands the students’ experiences through thought. Second, it forms habits that serve throughout one’s private, public, and professional lives. These habits include students being capable of exercising reflection, deliberating, contrasting theories, and listening to other points of view and assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Liberal education, both the content and the habits, begins in the private sphere of the student and is carried into the public sphere of the citizen as one reaches adulthood. Such an education is not only enriching, but it contributes to the means to perpetuate a free society where such studies are allowed. No such thing exists in a totalitarian regime—and sadly in many American institutions of so-called higher learning—because free minds are a

threat to the uniformity and indoctrination that must exist for such a regime to maintain its power over the people or its student-body.

### *Measure of success?*

Is there a measure of success to determine if the country and the people are regaining a country that strives to achieve the ideals of the 1776 Declaration, reclaim the practice of self-governance, and restore the principles of the US Constitution? Anton Sharansky, in his book *The Case for Democracy*, asked four questions to serve as a measure. His focus was human rights, but the questions also apply to current American circumstances

We knew that to determine whether or not human rights were being generally upheld in a particular country, we only had to ask a few simple questions:

Could people in that country speak their minds?  
Could they publish their opinions?  
Could they practice their faith?  
Could they learn the history and culture of their people?"<sup>57</sup>

Sharansky was a dissident in the USSR and jailed for nine years. Political pressure by President Reagan and the United States resulted in his being the first political prisoner ever released by Mikhael Gorbachev.<sup>58</sup> In light of the prior discussion of the assaults on American Political Thought, these questions should give one pause. American citizens must work toward answering all these questions affirmatively

## **Conclusion**

Pericles, at the end of Book One of Thucydides' work, speaks directly to war. "It must be thoroughly understood that war is a necessity, and that the more readily we accept it, the less will be the ardor of our opponents, and that out of the greatest dangers communities and individuals

---

57. Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: Public Affairs: 2006), 196-97.

58. Jewish Virtual Library, Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/natan-anatoly-sharansky>.

acquire the greatest glory.”<sup>59</sup> The Athenian’s prosecution of the war is a subject of debate, but Pericles’s words speak to those in the battle against the assault on the study of American Political Thought and on America. It also speaks to citizens who wish to defend or at the very least engage in a dialogue about how to understand the past and proceed toward the future, carry on the fundamental and necessary task of teaching these subjects, and reasserting and living according to the principles that guide the people of America.

Thucydides, experiencing the greatest movement unfolding in his lifetime, prompts readers to recognize the scale of events taking place in America. He included a description of writing history: “...if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.”<sup>60</sup> That his work is a possession for all time underscores the idea that his teaching has lessons that are applicable to the battle that Americans find themselves in today. The Epilogue of Thucydides’s reveals the end of the war. “Now supreme in Greece, Sparta thus reduced Athens to a state of isolation, weakness, and dependency . . .”<sup>61</sup> This reinforces the notion that America is at great risk if the war is not prosecuted well.

America, in its quest for independence 245 years ago, seized upon a revolutionary idea of equality, a recognition of natural right, and instituting a government to secure the natural rights of human beings. Pericles, too, speaks of the unique features in the Athenian government and references equality.

---

59. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I.144.

60. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I.22.

61. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Epilogue 1.

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition.<sup>62</sup>

There are many differences between the America and the Athenian city that Pericles defended, but his description highlights similarities as well. There are other words spoken by American statesmen during a time of war on American soil. Those of Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address are the most relevant to quote here. He speaks of being engaged in a great civil war, “testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure” and he praises those who have fought and sacrificed their lives for others.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain –

But more importantly, their sacrifice has been for the country and its future, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”<sup>63</sup>

The stakes of the battle in which America and its citizens are engaged rise to the level of what Lincoln vowed to preserve. Americans risk losing it all if they do not stand up to correct falsehoods and to proclaim that the foundation of America and the Constitution are worthy of a spirited defense in pursuit of the ideals proclaimed at the founding.

---

62. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.1

63. Abraham Lincoln, “Address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania” (November 1863), in *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 417.

## Bibliography

“Declaration of Independence.” National Archives: America’s Founding Documents.  
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>.

“Executive Orders.” Federal Register: Executive Orders.  
<https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders>.

*The Federalist Papers*. The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy.  
[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp).

*The Great Ideas Program*. Edited by Mortimer J Adler. 10 vols. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1959-63.

“U. S. Constitution.” National Archives. America’s Founding Documents.  
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution>.

“Virginia Declaration of Rights.” National Archives. America’s Founding Documents.  
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights>.

Ames, Fisher. “An Oration on the Sublime Virtues of General George Washington.” Oration at Boston’s Old South Meeting House, before the Lieutenant Governor, the Council, and both branches of the Massachusetts Legislature, Boston, MA, February 8, 1800. Boston: Young & Minns, 1800.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bolotnikova, Marina N. “What is Critical Race Theory?” Harvard Magazine. March 22, 2016.  
<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2016/03/bu-law-professor-khara-bridges-teaches-critical-race-theory-at-harvard-law>.

Brann, Eva. “Jacob Klein: European Scholar, American Teacher.” The Imaginative Conservative. December 2, 2019. [https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/12/jacob-klein-european-scholar-american-teacher-eva-brann-90.html?fbclid=IwAR15KU5Lu\\_8im47dYgfkqKhpGa4quJMZhI0GxFEn9NJM8fKPG3JRhDkn6X4](https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/12/jacob-klein-european-scholar-american-teacher-eva-brann-90.html?fbclid=IwAR15KU5Lu_8im47dYgfkqKhpGa4quJMZhI0GxFEn9NJM8fKPG3JRhDkn6X4).

Bruce, K. S. “Want to Save the World? Adopt the '1689 Project.” Real Clear Politics. February 5, 2021.  
[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/02/05/want\\_to\\_save\\_the\\_world\\_adopt\\_the\\_1689\\_project\\_145185.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/02/05/want_to_save_the_world_adopt_the_1689_project_145185.html).

Douglass, Frederick. “The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-slavery?” Speech. Scottish Anti-Slavery Society. Glasgow, Scotland. March 26, 1860. Blackpast.

<https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/1860-frederick-douglass-constitution-united-states-it-pro-slavery-or-anti-slavery/>.

Franklin, Benjamin. Friends of Franklin. “Constitutional Convention; Elizabeth Powell?” <http://friendsoffranklin.org/constitutional-convention-elizabeth-powell/>.

Guelzo, Allen C. “Preaching a Conspiracy Theory: The 1619 Project offers bitterness, fragility, and intellectual corruption—not history.” *City Journal*. December 8, 2019. <https://www.city-journal.org/1619-project-conspiracy-theory>.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “The 1619 project.” *New York Times Magazine*. August 18, 2019. [https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/the\\_idea\\_of\\_america\\_full\\_essay.pdf](https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/the_idea_of_america_full_essay.pdf).

Heritage Foundation. “New York Times Quietly Edits ‘1619 Project’ After Conservative Pushback.” Heritage Impact. September 26, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/american-founders/impact/new-york-times-quietly-edits-1619-project-after-conservative-pushback>.

Jefferson, Thomas. Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825. Founders Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5212>.

Jewish Virtual Library. Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/natan-anatoly-sharansky>.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” April 16, 1963. [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

Kurtz, Stanley. “Beware: New Civics Mandates Will be Woke.” National Review, The Corner Politics and Policy. December 28, 2020. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/beware-new-civics-mandates-will-be-woke/>.

Lincoln, Abraham. “Speech on the Dred Scott Decision” (June 26, 1857). In *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 108-119. Edited by Steven B. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Lincoln, Abraham. “Address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania” (November 19, 1863). In *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 417. Edited by Steven B. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Lincoln, Abraham. “House Divided Speech at Springfield, Illinois” (June 16, 1858). In *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 126-133. Edited by Steven B. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Lincoln, Abraham. “First Lincoln-Douglas Debate” (August 21, 1858). In *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 151-185. Edited by Steven B. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Lincoln, Abraham. "Lyceum Address" (January 1838). In *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 7-14. Edited by Steven B. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Machiavelli. *The Prince*. Translated by Leo Paul S. de Alvarez. Dallas: University of Dallas Press, 1980.

Machiavelli. *Selected Political Writings*. Edited and translated by David Wootten. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.

Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: New American Library, 1998.

Plato. *Apology*. In *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds*. Translated by Thomas G. and Grace Starry West. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974.

Plutarch. "Life of Aristides." In Vol. 1 of *Lives*, 211-243. Translated by A. H. Clough. New York: A. L. Burt, n.d. (There are three volumes in *Lives*, vol. 1.).

Political Science Review. "Nature and Scope of Political Science." November 5, 2018. <https://www.politicalscienceview.com/nature-and-scope-of-political-science/>.

Scruton, Roger. "Sacred Truths in a Profound World." The Imaginative Conservative. February 2, 2020. <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2020/02/sacred-truths-profaneworld-roger-scruton-2020-timeless.html>.

Sharansky, Natan. *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. New York: Public Affairs, 2006.

Strauss, Leo. *What is Political Philosophy?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. Translated by Richard Crawley. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Washington, George. Circular to the States. June 14, 1783. In W. B. Allen, *George Washington: A Collection*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1988.

Washington, George. Letter to Theodorick Bland, April 4, 1783. In W. B. Allen, *George Washington: A Collection*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1988.

Wilentz, Sean. "A Matter of Facts." *The Atlantic*. January 22, 2020.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152/>.

Wood, Peter. "America Wasn't Founded on Slavery in 1619 — but on Pilgrims' Ideals Written in 1620." National Association of Scholars blog. November 17, 2020.  
<https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/america-wasnt-founded-on-slavery-in-1619-but-on-pilgrims-ideals-written-in-1620>.

Xu, Kenny. "Critical Race Theory's Poisonous Roots Trace Back To Harvard University." *The Federalist*. June 9, 2021. <https://thefederalist.com/2021/06/09/critical-race-theorys-poisonous-roots-trace-back-to-harvard-university/>.