

Political Studies Program, Summer 2011
THE AMERICAN CHARACTER: VIRTUES FOR CITIZENS
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This section of the Hertog Program will return to the subject of the American Republic, this time to look at issues of American identity, American character, and American citizenship. All of the readings will be found in *What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*, edited by Amy A. Kass, Leon R. Kass, and Diana Schaub. The first two days (sessions one through four) will be devoted to the American character: we will explore what kind of human beings are likely to emerge in a regime founded on individual rights, equality, enterprise and commerce, and freedom of religion. The next three days (sessions five through nine) will focus on virtues requisite for a more robust citizenry: self-command, law-abidingness, courage, compassion, charity and reverence. Our tenth and final session will be devoted to a more general discussion of American identity and American citizenship today.

All readings listed are required. Those marked with an asterisk (*) will receive the major attention in discussion and should therefore be read more closely.

Monday, July 18, 2011, 9:00 am to Noon

Session 1: "Individual Rights"

Reading:

- *Declaration of Independence
- *Jack London, "To Build a Fire"
- Saul Bellow, "A Father-to-Be"

Discussion Questions:

1. What view of the relation between individual and community is implicit in the Declaration's teaching about inalienable rights?
2. What is a right? A right to liberty? A right to the pursuit of happiness?
3. What kind of human being is likely to emerge in a society informed by these ideas and principles?
4. Is the self-reliance of the protagonist in "To Build a Fire" an exercise of irresponsibility and folly? Or does he embody an admirable spirit of adventure and enterprise of the sort that tamed the wilderness, settled the West, and founded great institutions?
5. What sort of individual is Bellow's "father-to-be," and how does he compare with Jack London's protagonist?

Session 2: "Equality"

Reading:

- *Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address
- *Kurt Vonnegut Jr, "Harrison Bergeron"

- Bernard Malamud, “Idiots First”

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Lincoln understand the key terms of the American creed, in particular, the relation between liberty and equality?
2. Does the society portrayed by Vonnegut represent a fulfillment of the ideal of equality or rather its perversion?
3. Does social justice require removing invidious distinctions, envy, and feelings of inferiority, even if it means reducing all to the lowest common denominator?
4. Would “equality” attained by artificially raising up the low, producing a nation of Harrisons rather than Hazels—a prospect offered by biotechnological “enhancement”—be more attractive?
5. How and why do you care about equality today?

Tuesday, July 19, 2011, 9:00 am to Noon

Session 3: “Enterprise and Commerce”

Reading:

- Publius, *Federalist*, No. 10
- *Mark Twain, “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Publius’ solution to the problem of faction? What assumptions about human nature inform it?
2. What is (are) the source(s) of corruption in Hadleyburg?
3. Is there any connection between the large commercial republic and the sorts of people we find in Hadleyburg?
4. Does Twain’s exposé offer any insights into current American life or any positive teaching regarding civic virtue and attachment?

Session 4: “Freedom of Religion”

Reading:

- *Mayflower Compact
- George Washington, To the Hebrew Congregation
- *Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the Pilgrims’ “covenant” or “compact” differ from a “social contract” and government based on consent?

2. Does vigorous religious pluralism enhance or diminish national identity, civic attachment, and religiosity?
3. What can be said for and against Hawthorne's two dominant parties—the Puritans and the Merry Mounters?
4. Is there a middle way that might combine the virtues of each party without their correlative vices?
5. Where in the American creed do we find support for the blend of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment implicit in love, marriage, and family?

Wednesday, July 20, 2011, 9:00 am to Noon

Session 5: "Self-command"

Reading:

- *Benjamin Franklin, "Project for Moral Perfection"
- Henry James, "Pandora"

Discussion Questions:

1. What would a "Franklin," i.e., a person who embodies all of the virtues he enumerated, be like? A good human being? A good citizen?
2. What is the purpose or goal of Franklin's project of moral self-perfection?
3. Are Franklin's enumerated virtues necessary—and sufficient—for citizens of a modern, commercial republic?
4. How do Pandora's evident strengths and virtues compare with Franklin's?
5. To what extent does self-command for the self-made woman differ from the self-command of the self-made man?

Session 6: "Law-abidingness: Toward Public Order"

Reading:

- *Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions"
- *Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Lincoln mean by "reverence for the laws"? Is it always a necessary part of law-abidingness?
2. Is such reverence (or a "political religion") necessary—and sufficient—for the preservation of our political institutions today?
3. Is Lincoln right that lawbreaking is always uncivil and destructive of civil government? Or is King right that lawbreaking done rightly ("openly," "lovingly" and "with a willingness to accept the penalty") expresses the "highest respect for the law"?
4. What is the relation between Lincoln's political religion (reverence for the laws) and religion as most citizens know it (reverence for God or, as King says, "the moral law or the law of God")? If they are at odds, which should govern?

Thursday, July 21, 2011, 9:00 am to Noon

Session 7: “Courage and Self-Sacrifice: Toward Country and Its Ideals”

Reading:

- *Michael Shaara, “Chamberlain,” from *The Killer Angels*
- *George S. Patton Jr., Speech to the Third Army

Discussion Questions:

1. How and why do Chamberlain’s words—and deeds—succeed with the previously recalcitrant, battle-weary mutineers?
2. To what does Patton appeal in encouraging the men, and how well do you think he succeeds?
3. Imagining yourself among Chamberlain’s mutineers or among Patton’s men, what would have been your reaction?
4. How does a polity devoted to safeguarding the rights of individuals produce citizens who are prepared to give their lives on its behalf?

Session 8: “Compassion: Toward Neighbors”

Reading:

- *Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you assess the lawyer-citizen’s response to Bartleby?
2. What might he—what should he?—have done differently?
3. What do you make of the coda, in general, and of the lawyer-narrator’s final words, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”?
4. Are people like Bartleby best understood as human beings with problems to be solved (“DO something”) or as fellow sufferers who most need our companionship (“BE there”)?
5. Is the problem-solving mentality to defeat disease, poverty, and misfortune compatible with the mentality to respond lovingly to our existential joys and sorrows?

Friday, July 22, 2011, 9:00 am to Noon

Session 9: “Charity and Reverence: Toward the Public Goods”

Reading:

- Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address
- *Flannery O’Connor, “The Artificial Nigger”

Discussion Questions:

1. Lincoln's Second Inaugural is replete with Biblical allusions and explicitly religious appeals, not least in his concluding summons, "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right." What is the place of charity and reverence in American political life? Does Lincoln's example offer any guidance for dealing with political adversaries in the partisan battles of contemporary public life?
2. What, according to O'Connor's story, is the origin of racial prejudice?
3. What happens to Mr. Head and Nelson in their encounter with the broken statue, the "artificial nigger"?
4. What do they learn, and what in their prior experience made it possible for them to do so?
5. In light of O'Connor's story and Lincoln's religious appeal, do you think that the virtues and attitudes needed for civic life are fully in our own power to provide?

Session 10: "What So Proudly We Hail: Identity and Civic Attachment"

Reading:

- *Introduction (to the volume)
- *Edward Everett Hale, "The Man Without a Country"
- *Willa Cather, "The Namesake"

Discussion Questions:

1. Is there anything especially *American* in the identity and attachment that Philip Nolan craves? (Does Nolan's longing for "home" differ in any way from the longing for home of the freed slaves?)
2. Is the story of the American expatriate, Lyon Harwell, believable? Can the flag help forge one nation out of many—and highly diverse—citizens?
3. How can we help make thoughtful, patriotic, and engaged citizens today?