

2001 NCSS Presidential Address

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THE HORRIFIC EVENTS of September 11th have made a profound impression on us not only as a nation, but also as individuals both professionally and personally. These events and their aftermath have touched the lives of millions, one at a time. Even those of us who were not in harm's way are discovering that we, too, have suffered a loss. While we mourn nationally, we also mourn personally. Members of NCSS and their colleagues and students were aboard the American Airlines flight that crashed into the Pentagon that morning. They were Bernard Brown, Sarah Clark, Asia Cottom, Rodney Dickens, James Debeuneure, Joe Ferguson, Ann Judge, Hilda Taylor. These were our soldiers, working on the frontlines of the effort to improve teaching and learning in this country.

Historically, Americans have found meaning in work, family, community, and shared faith. We have always drawn upon our collective resources to do what we could not do alone. United efforts have always brought people together, created enduring bonds, and exemplified the possibilities of our collective spirit. Tragic events have traditionally served to strengthen, not weaken, our idealism, unity, and commitment to democracy. They tend to awaken the American spirit, and when awakened, that spirit transforms worlds. In the wake of such loss, devastation, and confusion, we owe it to our students to rise to the challenge again.¹

In light of the events of September 11th and their aftermath, much is being said about our heroes, the many who did their jobs that day and continue to do their jobs: The firefighters, the police,



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WHILE I WAS SLEEPING IN MY BED...
THINGS WERE HAPPENING IN THIS WORLD THAT
DIRECTLY CONCERNED ME—NOBODY ASKED ME,
[NOBODY] CONSULTED ME—THEY JUST WENT OUT AND
DID THINGS—AND CHANGED MY LIFE [FOREVER].*

the construction workers, and all the others should be heralded for their heroic efforts. There is another group of people, however, who also did their jobs that day and continue to do their jobs, but they are absent from the media's attention: the classroom teachers. The classroom teachers had to suppress their own feelings in order to put the needs of their students first. The classroom teachers had to try to explain what was difficult to explain and to answer questions in age-appropriate ways while concealing their own fears. The classroom teachers had to protect the youngest of our students from details that they did not need to know, while comforting those who were frightened and reassuring those who were worried that they, too, would be harmed or harassed because of their religion or ethnic backgrounds. America's teachers worked and are still working to keep the lives of millions of students as normal as possible.

There is much demanded of our schools today. As the demands increase, especially in light of recent events, social studies is more important than ever before. Social studies educators are afforded the opportunity to promote either inequality or equality, inequity or equity, to reinforce antidemocratic values and increase the hostile divisions of our society or to work to reconstruct schools to become laboratories for democratic life.² We have an opportunity to teach the coming generations to preserve and extend the United States as an experiment in building a democratic

community. Let us as social studies educators rise to the demand and provide America's future with the best social studies education we can.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are not isolated from their neighborhoods and communities. Schools and teaching reflect society, and they participate in constructing the future society. New forms of knowledge and new approaches to teaching have emerged in response to changes in our economy, in our society, and in our schools.³ As social studies educators, we are supposed to teach students the content, the knowledge, the intellectual skills, and the civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. This is an enormous task—a task that is overwhelming but necessary if we intend to continue forming a more perfect union. As social studies educators, we are committed to the mission of developing an informed, reasoned, and active citizenry. As I look at America today, I can't help but think of man's search for social forms that honor liberty and justice and the worth and dignity of every person as a long, long journey—a journey that started a before any of us were born. Don't fret, I don't intend to go that far back in time or to give you a history lesson. I must touch, however, on some of our American history in order to bring my point home.

Let's take a few minutes to think about what all of this means.

* Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1959).

In the years from 1776 through 1791, most of the fundamental principles of our society were written, and can be found, in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and numerous other declarations and actions by the states. The great words and phrases reverberate in our minds: the pursuit of happiness, the consent of the governed, equality and justice for all, the blessings of liberty, promoting the general welfare, and providing for the common defense. The men who produced these phrases were well aware that they were setting high goals, or in today's jargon, high standards, for those who followed. Thomas Jefferson referred to it as "an experiment."⁴ In Federalist Paper No. 39, James Madison admitted that they, the founding fathers, were creating a "political experiment" that would depend "on the capacity of mankind for self-government."⁵ One might doubt that even the most intuitive spokesperson for the "American Experiment" could have envisioned the difficulties and challenges that lay ahead.⁶ After Jefferson's



BILL PETROS

declaration that "all men are created equal," it took 87 years and a civil war to free the slaves, and another 57 years before women were granted the right to vote by "We, the people."

The American Experiment, the forming of a more perfect union, is not just the work of a few eighteenth-century white males. Men and women of many races and cultural origins have helped shape this union—and I might add, are still helping shape it. Surveying the national scene prior to September 11th, one could see much that should have put all of us in a optimistic mood: a healthy economy, low unemployment, the achieving of the American dream, and so on. But we were not in an optimistic mood. A feeling of disconnection existed between the people and the government. According to many polls, we the people didn't have much trust in our government. Another

troubling aspect, especially in light of the events of September 11th and their aftermath, is the loss of any sense of the future and the uncertainty of it all, coupled with the fear of losing what has become known as the "American way of life." We the people have reason for negative thoughts and feelings of uncertainty. But the sad, harsh truth is that at this juncture we, the American people, are part of the problem. Cynicism, alienation, disaffection, and fear do not move problems toward solution.⁷

The people of the United States have created one of the most free and democratic societies in history, but at a great cost to Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and others who are considered part of the minority populations of this country. Though far from perfect, this country offers its citizens more freedom and self-governance and a higher standard of living than almost anywhere in the world. Today, however, we stand in danger of losing these cherished freedoms, both to domestic prejudice and intolerance and to chaotic and uncertain global competition.

A great civilization is a performance that exists in the minds of its people. It is a shared vision, shared norms, expectations, and values. In today's climate, many of us are hesitant to talk about values. But in every successful society, a framework of law has been created, along with the unwritten customs, norms of conduct, and values that



BILL PETROS

channel human behavior toward purposes that a particular society deems acceptable. We have a tendency in this country, an obsession it may be, to focus on our disagreements over values. But if we care about the American Experiment, we had better search out and celebrate the values we do share.⁸

When most of us were growing up, we took a bright future for granted. I know I did. In those times, the future was a warehouse of expectations and dreams—not just for us but for all mankind. Our minds were alive with possibilities and hope.

Societies that keep their values alive do so not by escaping the process of decay but by powerful processes of regeneration. That we have failed and fumbled in some of our attempts to achieve our ideals is obvious. But the great ideas still beckon—freedom, equality, justice, and the release of human possibilities. And we have an uncelebrated capacity to counter disintegration with new integrations. What is required is a great insight and understanding so we can draw strength from the past in order to search out the truths that it offers; to learn its lessons, however bitter; to face present challenges, however uncomfortable; and to honor our profound obligation to the future. It is not a liberal or conservative issue. It is not Democrat versus Republican. It is a question of whether we are going to settle into a permanent state of fear or show the vigor and purpose that becomes us. We do not want it said that after a couple of great centuries, we let the American Experiment disintegrate.⁹

When the American spirit awakens, it transforms worlds. But it does not awaken without a challenge. Citizens need to understand that this moment in history does, in fact, present a challenge that demands the best that is in all of us. We need a powerful thrust of energy to move this nation through these troubling times, and much of that energy will have to come from us, the educators of this country. How can we come to understand this? I direct your attention to a trait shared by a great many people in this country— something waiting to

be awakened, wanting to be awakened. Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts us out of ourselves. We want to be better people. We want to help make this a better country. No one needs to tell us that the nation is facing troubling times, or that humanity, as we know it, is being threatened. We know that. One thing that can be done is to awaken all of us to the possibilities that lie within each of us. Awaken us to what we can do for our country, the country of our children and our children's children. The American Experiment is still in the laboratory. And there could be no nobler task for our generation than to move that great effort along. We are capable of so much more than is now asked of us. The courage and spirit are there, sometimes poorly hidden beneath our surface simplicity and self-indulgence, left drowsy by the moral indifference of modern life, waiting to be called forth when the moment comes— evidenced by the wave of patriotism that has overtaken this country.¹⁰

According to Robert F. Kennedy, "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."¹¹ In closing, I'm saying that the moment has come, and I reiterate that today, social studies is more important than ever before. Let us as social studies educators rise to the demand and provide America's future with the best social studies education we can. As social studies educators, we need to reinforce the ideals of equality, equity, freedom, and justice against a backlash of antidemocratic sentiments and hostile divisions. As social studies educators, we need to teach our students not only how to understand and tolerate but also how to respect others who are different, how to cooperate with one another, and to work together for the common good. Teaching is where we touch the future. In schools, we have an opportunity to teach the coming generations to preserve and extend the United States as an experiment in building a democratic community. We have a choice about the kind of nation we will be, and choosing to hold onto liberty is

astoundingly better than struggling to attain it in the first place. Our democracy can last, but only if we accept and practice freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty. For the sake of future generations, I pray that we not only accept and practice these and other enduring principles, but that we also send out ripples of hope to our students, our children, and our children's children, so it can be passed on. And in so doing, our generation will have done its part in continuing the American Experiment, the forming of a more perfect union for future generations. The task is far from over, and victory for democracy is still far from certain. 📖

Notes

1. Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1996).
2. Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Memorial Edition*, ed. Lipscomb and Bergh (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903-04), 6:156; 14:51.
5. James Madison, *Federalist Paper No. 39* (January 16, 1788).
6. Etzioni.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Robert Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation" Address (Capetown, South Africa, June 6, 1966).

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