

**What We Owe Our Children**  
**The Hon. Lee H. Hamilton**  
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Let me offer some thoughts this morning on a fundamental question: What do we owe our children? My guess is that you have asked yourself this question many times. For many of us, it is the reason that we are involved in civic education.

There are, of course, many answers: a decent opportunity to become the best they can become; a strong economy; a secure country; a reasonable safety net; safe schools; an open society. Yet the right kind of education must be a top priority.

I agree with – and I suspect you would, too – the long time Senator from Rhode Island, Claiborne Pell, who said: “The strength of the United States is not the gold at Fort Knox or the weapons of mass destruction that we have, but the sum total of the education and the character of our people.”

Of course, over the years, people have disagreed about how important America’s schools are to the education and character of our people. Mark Twain once said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

I do not agree with Twain. What happens in our schools is vital. This afternoon, I would like to focus on four types of education that we owe our children:

- 1) preparedness education;
- 2) civic education;
- 3) character education;
- and 4) education to encourage them to enter into public service.

### **1. Preparedness**

Let me begin by talking about preparedness: You and I believe that we owe it to our children to be prepared for emergencies.

The last month has not been easy for our country. Hurricane Katrina has destroyed whole communities and rendered a major American city unlivable. For the last two days, Hurricane Rita has battered communities along the Gulf Coast.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many Americans asked hard questions: Why weren’t we more prepared for a tragedy that was so predictable? Why couldn’t local and state governments help evacuate more citizens? Why was the federal government so slow in providing assistance to stranded Americans?

These are questions that need to be answered. But I would like to focus on one particular question: How can we protect and prepare our young people to respond to the catastrophes that might come?

We never know what disasters might befall our people. A hurricane on the Gulf Coast. An earthquake in California. A blackout in the northeast. A deadly flu epidemic. Or a major terrorist attack on one of our cities.

But we do know that disasters inevitably do come. As we have all seen on our television sets, citizens are on the front-lines in the early hours of a disaster – they are our true “first responders.” Careful preparation by you and your peers is key. We must:

- educate ourselves about these challenges;
- take all necessary measures to prevent them from occurring and to protect our children;
- and prepare ourselves to respond to the dangers that do come.

You and I want our children to be conscious of their civic identity and their civic responsibility. That should include an awareness of how to respond in a crisis. Our children should know:

- What are the vulnerabilities – natural or manmade – in my community?
- Where should I go in the event of a large-scale disaster?
- How will my community respond in the event of a crisis?
- What can I do to help my family, church, school or community be more prepared?

Certainly one of the most uplifting things to come out of these tragedies is the way that individuals and communities have pitched in to help one another. That includes young people, who have helped raise money or volunteered to help in some manner. That kind of engagement we applaud and encourage.

Indeed, nothing challenges and highlights our civic identity more than a crisis. We owe it to our children to prepare them for the challenges that may come.

## **2. Civic Education**

You and I believe that we owe our children civic education.

Indeed, you and I work on civic education because we are concerned about it. David McCullough, the historian, recently said, “Our very freedom depends on education, and we are failing our children in not providing that education.”

McCullough was talking about our failure to educate American children adequately about this country's history. And I agree. Today, too many Americans lack a basic understanding of our representative democracy. With that lack of understanding comes a lack of appreciation and a lack of engagement.

When we fail to educate our children about our history and our representative democracy, we miss an opportunity to enrich our children's lives. We also miss an opportunity to enrich our country through their involvement.

Our responsibility is to teach our children the American story. We must instill in our young people a deep and abiding understanding and appreciation of our heritage.

-- We need to know, and teach, the robust American story: the full, truthful, unvarnished account of our successes, our failures, our ideals, our flaws, our progress, and our heroes.

-- We need to know, and teach, the techniques of healthy democracy: participation, consensus building, compromise, civility, and rational discourse.

-- We need to know, and teach, the responsibilities of citizenship: staying informed, volunteering, speaking out, asking questions, writing letters, signing petitions, joining organizations, building consensus, working in ways small and large to improve our neighborhoods and communities, and to enrich the quality of life for all citizens.

James Madison once said: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."

If we want this great country to become an ever-more perfect union, we must arm our young people with the knowledge of history, and the knowledge of how to be active citizens.

What happens if we fail to do this? People vote less. They pay less attention to their communities and their civic responsibility. They do not strengthen their churches, improve their schools and libraries, and enhance their hospitals. Participation falls, and people are isolated from one another.

But more than that, we deny our children an important opportunity, because civic education helps people reach their full potential:

-- Civic education can make a young person feel a part of something larger than themselves by connecting them to the endless line of splendor of American democracy;

-- Civic education can foster positive social interaction with friends and co-believers, within schools and communities;

-- Civic education can challenge a young person to take a stand, speak in public, ask a question, develop an idea, and learn about what they believe and to become the best they can be;

-- and civic education is the surest antidote to cynicism and apathy because it shows a young person that he or she can, indeed, make a difference.

### **3. Character Education**

But we owe our children even more: you and I believe that we owe our children character education as well as civic education.

To put it simply, we need to be deeply concerned, not just about the education of our children in general, but about the character of the young people who are emerging from American schools. I agree with the philosopher, Herbert Spencer, who said: "Education has for its object the formation of character."

The Founding Fathers were quite clear on which particular quality of character they thought most important: that quality was virtue. It is an old-fashioned word that is not much in vogue at the moment; yet, in the Founders view, the vitality of our democracy depended upon virtue. They did not step back from defining that word – "virtue – with specificity: integrity, industry and responsibility.

Listen to the words of Madison: "I go on this great republican principle: that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."

Madison and the other Founders believed that in a political sense the people must be informed, alert, intelligent, and uncorrupted. They also needed to possess virtue.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to bring with it tough challenges. Terrorism. Nuclear proliferation. Declining energy resources. A changing economy. Competition from China and India. Global warming. Immigration. New diseases. Difficult medical and ethical questions.

If our young people are going to be successful in confronting those challenges, we need to teach them how to get along together in an open and democratic society. We need to teach:

-- mutual respect, so that results of lasting consequence can be achieved;

-- tolerance, so that differences are valued instead of feared;

-- deliberation and consultation, so that open debate can lead us to consensus rather than conflict;

-- empathy, so that we can put ourselves in the place of others;

- civility, so that we can disagree and still find common ground;
- humility, so that we can always keep in mind that we might be wrong about something;
- and resolve, so that setbacks can be overcome, and challenges surmounted.

This is a task for more than schools alone – it is a task for the families and communities in which our children are raised. All of us must resolve to do better – not just in teaching students, but in setting examples as well.

We owe our children our best efforts to instill within them the traits of character that allow them to lift up this huge and diverse country. We owe it to our children to set an example that allows them to succeed together, rather splitting apart.

#### **4. Public Service**

Let me conclude by suggesting that we owe it to our children to encourage the path of public service – the path that you have taken.

My generation was stirred by President Kennedy’s famous challenge – “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

I do not feel – as some people do – that our younger generation’s answer to that question is “whatever.” Although some may have little interest in public service, many aspire to it. You and I should applaud and encourage that aspiration.

I have known many persons who held responsible jobs in public service, then left for good jobs in the private sector. Not one of them finds their present occupation as challenging or satisfying as public service. Without exception, they look back on their public service as the most as the most rewarding of their careers. Dean Acheson said, “To leave public life is to die a little.”

We should teach our young people that our days are for something more than making money or having a good time – although there’s nothing wrong with either of those. We have obligations that extend beyond ourselves. Today, the measure of those obligations is extraordinary, and the challenges exciting.

We should teach our young people that public service is a stimulating, proud and lively enterprise. As you and I can attest – public service is not just a way to live, it is a way to live fully. And it can fulfill your highest aspirations.

We should teach our young people that public service can take many forms: from elected public office to volunteer activity in the community; from a full-time career to a part-time endeavor.

And we should teach our young people that they need not have grand schemes of social change to make a difference. As Edmund Burke said: “Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing because he could do only a little.”

We should teach our young people that the question that Lincoln posed at Gettysburg – whether this country, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure – remains open. It is up to them to get off the sidelines and into the arena, so that this country can have a new birth of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

An ancient Greek philosopher once observed that: “Only the educated are free.” That is why we are here today:

- If our children are not educated about the disasters that might come, then our communities will not be as safe and strong as they might be.
- If our children are not educated about our country and its government, then they will not be able to effectively appreciate or participate in our representative democracy;
- If our children are not educated about the attributes of character necessary to succeed in a democratic society, then our democracy cannot flourish.
- And if our children are not educated toward public service, the greatness of this country cannot endure.

You and I know that we enrich our own lives as we educate our children. We do not possess all wisdom. From our young people, we learn about optimism, creativity, enthusiasm, and new ways of looking at old questions. Indeed, from our children, we learn of the horizons ahead, and the new forms that freedom may take.

What do we owe our children? We owe them the ability to be free. Indeed, our greatest achievement must be to transmit freedom to our children.

You accept the responsibility of providing this freedom to our children. Fortunately, there are many more Americans like you – but not enough.

Thomas Jefferson put it well when he said: “Democracy is never a final achievement. It is a call to an untiring effort.” You answer that call. And you can sound that call to new generations of Americans.