

Civics, Citizenship, and the Constitution

We're glad to put September with its conflicting messages about free speech behind us. But it did leave me with one very bright hope and encouragement. On Constitution Day I was fortunate to attend "Civics, Citizenship, and the Constitution," a symposium in Washington, DC hosted by More Perfect and iCivics, arguably the nations two best advocates for Civics Education.

More Perfect US about which I have written in the past is an "alliance of all 34 Presidential Centers, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Karsh Institute for Democracy at the University of Virginia, and more than 100 organizations that have freely chosen to unite around a big idea – the advancement of Democracy Goals." More Perfect's five Democracy Goals --- Civic Learning, National Service, Bridging Divides, Elections & Governance, and Trusted Information are "designed to drive collective action for democratic change,"

"iCivics is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing civic learning by providing educators and students with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to embrace and engage in our civic life together. [They] empower educators and lead the movement to make civic education a nationwide priority, so all young people have the confidence to shape the world around them and believe in our country's future."

Jonathan Alger, the President of American University the symposium facility, John Bridgeland, the Founder, Executive Chair and CEO of More Perfect, and Louise Dube, CEO of iCivics welcomed us. I was particularly pleased to see, listen to, and briefly chat with John Bridgeland whom I met in Washington years ago when I first started advocating national

service and civics education. “Bridge”, as he is commonly known, at that time was Co-Founder and Vice Chairman of the Service Year Alliance, an initiative to create a civilian national service counterpart to military service in the United States, thus our initial dialog. He served both the Obama and George W. Bush administrations, under the latter as the first Director of USA Freedom Corps.

The highlight of the opening remarks was an announcement by More Perfect of more than \$56 million in new funding by an alliance “led by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Stand Together, and the Bezos Family Foundation to expand civic learning and service opportunities across the United States....Projects include developing new technologies and media for educators and students as well as launching civic learning programs focused on the country’s 250th anniversary.”

There were a host of impressive speakers including Judy Woodruff, Former Anchor and Managing Editor PBS, Katie Jenner, Indiana Secretary of Education, Condoleezza Rice and Ken Burns both prerecorded, and General Stanley McChrystal, former Commander US Forces in Afghanistan and the head of Joint Special Operation Command when it captured Saddam Hussein and eliminated al Zargawi leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

After his talk on “Character and Citizenship,” I was pleased to finally meet, albeit briefly, General McChrystal with whom I had previously communicated regarding the above mentioned Service Year Alliance of which he is still Chairman. Service Year relies on philanthropic funding to support national service programs including AmeriCorps and to advocate for federal and state funding to expand available opportunities for young Americans.

There were a great many takeaways from the meeting and there was a lot to comprehend and remember. Here are some of the resources for follow up.

The National Archives Foundation has provided a list of 100 historic documents for teachers and classrooms broken down by time period, e.g. Revolution. Civil War, New Deal WW11, etc., to address in the period leading up to our 250th anniversary next year. Students and all others who wish to participate will vote and determine the 16 most significant off these documents, leading up to the one most significant final selection. Anyone interested can vote. Go to America's 100 Docs home page 100docs.vote, get involved and start the learning experience for the procedure. But note, the primary founding Documents, The Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, are exempt for consideration here, as we all are, or should be, already very familiar with them. This exercise is offered to instruct us in some of the documents with which we may not have familiarity.

Another important announcement covered The 2026 Civic Learning Week National Forum—themed “Liberty and Learning: Civic Education at 250”— high-profile spotlight on the importance of civic learning, engagement, and leadership to be held in Philadelphia March 9-13, 2026. iCivics and the Democratic Knowledge Project (DKP) as co-hosts are seeking presenters with civic learning expertise and experience to present sessions, posters, and/or mainstage spotlight talks in the following areas: Liberty and Learning in Practice: What pluralistic civic learning looks like in practice across sectors and communities; best/promising practices--- Liberty and Learning Impacts: Evidence of the effectiveness of civic learning---Liberty and Learning for the Next 250 Years and Beyond: Investing in/growing a broader movement and funding for civic learning.

General Stanley McChrystal spoke on “Character and Citizenship” and the related takeaway is an interesting challenge for us all. General McChrystal in partnership with More Perfect has committed to foster “Conversations on Character” “across the nation – among Americans in homes, houses of worship, schools, nonprofits, businesses, government and other places where people gather. The [intent] is to understand our values and beliefs and how they are reflected in our conduct and the decisions we make in life.” If you will visit the discussion group on www.joinmoreperfectus/character , you will find many inciteful ways to converse with others or with yourself on what constitutes character. Give it a try starting with self-examination. This is an interesting approach to addressing our current climate which More Perfect aptly describes as “a critical juncture with worrisome trends showing a lack of trust in each other and institutions, increased polarization and hate-fueled violence.” General McChrystal in stressing the importance of character noted that it has to be learned. We are not born with it. We cannot rely on the inherent wisdom of the American people. We should all continually focus on the character of our leaders and our own character and do what we can to foster good character in ourselves and others. And finally, of course, the subject of universal public service came up as a question from the audience, and General McChrystal was adamant in promoting one year of service, military or civilian, for all youngsters---giving them a sense of contributing and legitimacy.

Colleen Shogan, advisor to More Perfect and former US Archivist, spoke about More Perfect’s “In Pursuit” lessons starting on Presidents Day 2026 with historical essays to be distributed weekly and paired with podcasts, videos and other media to ensure that students and all citizens can learn from the past successes, failures, challenges and triumphs of some of the most revered leaders in American history. “Contributors include former presidents and first ladies, national leaders, cultural icons, and respected

journalists. And then, “In Pursuit” will “ask all Americans to engage with their reactions to the lessons, challenging everyone to identify lessons of their own.”

Michael Carney, President of the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation moderated an interesting discussion of the National Civics Bee between two very impressive youngsters Neil Handa, Winner of the 2025 National Civics Bee® Virginia State Finals and Katia San Juan, Winner of the 2025 National Civics Bee® Maryland State Finals. There’s much attention paid to declining test scores across the country these days, but you’d never know it listening to Niel and Katia.

The entire symposium was refreshing and inspirational especially at this time when free speech, the separation of powers, the right to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures, and other pillars of the Constitution are under such challenge. Over the full day of talks and “networking” breaks, I didn’t hear Trump’s name mentioned once. It was as if this group of highly respected dedicated leaders is totally confident that they will eventually convince enough Americans to focus on Civics, Citizenship, and The Constitution, that the America that our founders envisioned will prevail.

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