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Book Guide

Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens

A provocative guide to how we must reenvision citizenship if American democracy is to survive.

Summary

The United States faces dangerous threats from Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, terrorists, climate change, and future pandemics. The greatest peril to the country, however, comes not from abroad but from within, from none other than ourselves. The question is whether Americans are prepared to do what is necessary to save our democracy.

In *The Bill of Obligations*, Richard Haass argues that for American democracy to survive, or better yet thrive, the very idea of citizenship must be revised and expanded. The Bill of Rights is at the center of our Constitution, yet our most intractable conflicts often emerge from contrasting views as to what our rights ought to be. As former Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer pointed out, “Many of our cases, the most difficult ones, are not about right versus wrong. They are about right versus right.” The lesson is clear: rights alone cannot provide the basis for a functioning, much less flourishing, democracy.

But there is a cure: to place obligations on an equal footing with rights. The ten obligations that Haass introduces here are essential for healing our divisions and safeguarding the country’s future. These obligations reenvision what it means to be an American citizen. They represent commitments that we make to fellow citizens and to the country to uphold democracy and counter the growing apathy, anger, selfishness, division, disinformation, and violence that threaten us all.

The Bill of Obligations is divided into two main sections. The first includes chapters devoted to rights and their limits and to the causes and consequences of democratic deterioration. They provide a primer of the structure and history of American democracy and how rights came to occupy so central a place within it.

The second part of the book introduces the ten obligations for good citizenship that if adopted by U.S. citizens would go a long way toward ameliorating the issues. These obligations are:

1. Be informed
2. Get involved
3. Stay open to compromise
4. Remain civil
5. Reject violence
6. Value norms
7. Promote the common good
8. Respect government service
9. Support the teaching of civics
10. Put country first

Discussion and Essay Questions

Foundation and Value of Democracy

1. What are the core principles and structural elements that underpin a functioning democracy? How do these translate into the specific context of the United States, shaped by its historical development and enshrined in documents like the Constitution?
2. Trace the evolution of American democracy, highlighting its defining characteristics. Consider influences such as historical events, philosophical underpinnings, and social movements. Explain how these have contributed to its current strengths and weaknesses.
3. Is the preservation of American democracy, despite its imperfections and past mistakes, still worthwhile? If so, why? Construct an argument, considering the challenges and opportunities of maintaining and reforming the system.
4. To sustain a healthy democracy, what is required of its citizens? What roles, responsibilities, and obligations lie with citizens? In particular, why should obligations be placed at the core of citizenship? Discuss the inherent tensions between individual liberties and collective responsibilities in a democratic society. Propose solutions to foster responsible and engaged citizenship in the contemporary American context.

American Democracy in Trouble

1. Identify the key factors contributing to the perceived weakening of American democracy. Examine issues like political polarization, rising inequality, disinformation, and threats to electoral integrity. Consider how these factors interact and contribute to a broader narrative of "democratic backsliding."
2. Is the biggest threat to the United States the state of its democracy? Consider both the internal weaknesses and external pressures that may threaten American democracy. Evaluate factors like rising political polarization, erosion of trust in institutions, and the spread of misinformation. Explore how these challenges could undermine the foundations of democratic governance and stability.
3. Propose solutions to address the flaws in American democracy. Prioritize your recommendations, considering their feasibility, potential effectiveness, and alignment with democratic principles. Discuss the role of citizens, institutions, and policies in revitalizing American democracy.

Rights versus Obligations

1. Trace the historical evolution of rights in American democracy. Consider influences like Enlightenment philosophies, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. Explain how the concept of rights became enshrined in American law and identity.
2. While rights empower individuals, what are the potential vulnerabilities of a democracy solely built on them? Analyze potential challenges like conflicting rights, majoritarianism vs. minority rights, and the tension between individual freedom and collective good. Use historical and contemporary examples to illustrate your points.
3. What is the role of obligations in sustaining a healthy democracy? Differentiate obligations from laws and legal commitments, focusing on their unique contribution to social cohesion and responsible citizenship. Explore historical examples where obligations have played a crucial role in upholding democratic principles.
4. Reflect on the future of American democracy. Can it thrive by finding a balance between the individualistic spirit of rights and the collective spirit of obligations? Propose solutions to address the vulnerabilities of a rights-based democracy by integrating the concept of obligation to promote a sense of shared responsibility alongside individual rights.

The Ten Obligations

1. Be informed
 - Why is an informed citizenry crucial for a healthy democracy? How can citizens cultivate and share information responsibly to achieve this ideal? Explore the role of critical thinking, diverse perspectives, and understanding the complexities of our democracy in shaping informed citizenship.
2. Get involved
 - Why is it important to find ways to increase citizen involvement in politics? Discuss various causes of declining engagement/ apathy including: economic factors, political polarization, distrust in institutions, and changes in

civic culture. What can be done to encourage citizens to become more involved in the political process?

3. Stay open to compromise
 - What are the advantages of agreements that are reached through compromise? When is it right to choose compromise and when is it better to stand firm? Explore factors like core values, potential harm, long-term consequences, and opportunities for future collaboration.
4. Remain civil
 - What is civility and why is it essential for a healthy democracy? How can we hold ourselves and others accountable for upholding civil behavior?
5. Reject violence
 - What are the alternatives to using violence to achieve political objectives? What is the difference between free speech and inciting violence? Is the definition too narrow, too loose, or appropriate?
6. Value norms
 - How do norms and laws differ in the United States? How do norms contribute to the health of a democracy? To what extent have important norms eroded in the United States? What factors have contributed to this erosion?
7. Promote the common good
 - How does the concept of a social contract, including potential conflicts between individual rights and the common good, inform the obligation to care for others in a society? How should the government balance promoting the common good over individual rights? Is it ever appropriate to curtail individual rights in order to promote the common good?
8. Respect government service
 - Should public service be mandatory? What are the potential benefits of incentivizing public service? How can we cultivate and leverage respect for individuals in government service? How does public service contribute to a stronger democracy?
9. Support the teaching of civics
 - How can we implement civics education to ensure an informed and engaged citizenry that appreciates the complexities of American history and citizenship?
10. Put country first
 - What does the phrase “loyal opposition” mean? How can one be both loyal and in opposition? Why is prioritizing national interests over individual or partisan agendas an essential obligation in a functioning democracy? Identify specific instances in United States history where prominent political figures prioritize national interest over personal or partisan gains.

Further Projects

Although the book is primarily about citizenship at the national level, much of Haass’s argument can apply to citizenship on campus and at local and state levels as well.

Campus

- **Design a campus Bill of Obligations:** Justify your choices and explain why they are important to healthy campus life.
- **Civic Obligation Campaign:** Students work with their student government to identify, outline, and promote a list of campus obligations and promote the idea of campus citizenship. This could be a broad promotional campaign or a more targeted effort (focusing on a particular obligation, or a particular event such as freshman orientation).

Local Community (Town / City)

- **Engage with Local Government:** Students identify one local issue that is important to their community (e.g. public transit, housing, property development, climate change adaptation and mitigation, budget allocation), research it, and attend a meeting of local government (e.g. mayor, zoning, finance, school board, etc.) to share their thoughts.

State

- **Propose Legislation:** Students create a list of important issues for their state, identify potential solutions, and draft a proposed piece of legislation. This mock legislation could be discussed within the classroom, or could be used in the next project.
- **Letter to State Representatives:** Students contact their local state representatives about an important state issue that resonates with them. (Keep in mind that a major local issue might require help from the state). Students may reference these directions for [writing a letter to a member of Congress](#) - tailoring them to their local state representative.

National

- **Letter to a Member of Congress:** Students identify an issue of national importance, research it, and share their thoughts by writing [a letter to a member of Congress](#).
- **Propose a Constitutional Amendment:** Students research ways to strengthen democracy and propose Constitutional amendments in support of that goal. Students should consider concepts from the Bill of Obligations (for example: enhancing civic knowledge or increasing participation). Students can then discuss, debate, and defend the merits of their proposed amendment.

At Any Level

- **Letter to the Editor:** Students write a letter to the editor of a newspaper in response to a recently published article about an issue related to one of the arguments Haass makes.
- **Op-Ed:** Students write an op-ed about an important issue highlighting the importance of citizenship and civic obligations.

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