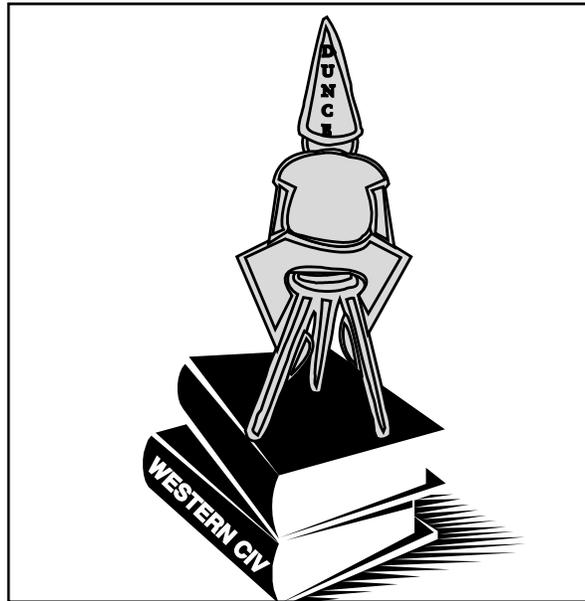


# CELEBRATING WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Recently, I used the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence (“When in the course of human events,” etc.) in a lecture class to make a point about grammar. Afterwards I asked the students, a cross-section of undergraduates at UW-Milwaukee, where this sample sentence came from. Over eighty students were present. None of them knew. Not one.



with my academic specialty, the ancient Greeks.

Why?

One factor is that American students are given great latitude in their studies. UWM is typical in this respect. History majors here may study western civilization or the American Revolution, but they are not required to do so. On balance, such freedom is a good thing. Most

I mention this by way of introducing the fact that Wisconsin Congressman Thomas E. Petri has recently introduced the Higher Education for Freedom Act (HR 2336). This bill would fund the establishment of new college courses and programs in traditional American history, the study of free institutions, and western civilization. The amount of money proposed is not insignificant — approximately \$140 million a year for five years. There was time when I would have opposed such an expenditure on fiscal grounds. No more. Experiences like the one mentioned above have convinced me that the \$140 million would be money well spent. Contemporary college students are shockingly ill-informed about their own history, not just the American founding, but the whole pageant — starting

students learn best when allowed to pursue their own interests. Permissive as their educations have usually been, American scholars end up performing well on the world stage. Yet there are dangers in letting the curriculum drift freely.

Since the 1960s, topics given prominence by the civil rights movement have enjoyed favored status on American campuses. Resources of all kinds have flowed into courses and programs meant to celebrate and secure the achievements of that movement under the banner of multiculturalism. This redistribution of wealth has done some good, correcting some long-standing omissions.

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Unfortunately, it has also diminished the study of the American republic and western civilization and cast those subjects in an excessively harsh light. There has been a tendency to judge all previous western history by the standards of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and to find it wanting.

As for the shunting aside, it was once common for students to take two semesters in the history of western civilization. The tendency in recent decades has been to dilute or eliminate such requirements. This was done most notoriously at Stanford and Chicago. North Carolina has recently followed suit. Yale turned down a major gift for the purpose of teaching western civ. These are bellwether schools. The herd's direction is not in doubt.

What is worse, I think, is a widespread conviction that the history of western civilization must be taught, when it is, from a jaundiced point of view. As a classicist, I am especially aware of how this prejudice has affected what students know about the ancient Greeks. In the first meeting of a recent class, hoping to find some common ground, I asked the students whether any of them were familiar from previous studies with any ancient Greek individuals. Only two answers were volunteered: Zeus and Julius Caesar. Yet all the students knew that the Greeks owned slaves and that the women couldn't vote. That is the source of the problem, I think. The first thing that my students have learned about the Greeks is that they should not think too highly of them. With that introduction, it is not surprising that they do not demand to know more.

In order to engage peoples' interest on almost any subject, one's presentation has to focus first on positive qualities. This is a fact that is acknowledged by all when they are dealing with other cultures. By chance, I'm currently developing a course of my own on Cherokee myths, a long-standing interest growing out of my study of Greek mythology. In teaching this new subject, I will of course emphasize the charm and insight of the Cherokees' stories and the resilience of Cherokee culture in difficult circumstances. It

would be absurd and offensive for me to dwell on the counterproductive effects of Cherokee medicine, the fact that some Cherokee owned slaves, the sometimes murderous feuds among their leaders. The multiculturalists are right. To teach something properly means celebrating its positive features. If we have chosen to teach a culture, it is because it provides things to admire, things that we want our students to appreciate.

Despite the obvious truth of this principle, a cynical approach has become mandatory when it comes to the Greeks, the American founding, and the other cynosures of western civ. The result is that students often learn just enough about them to despise them. What are needed are courses that celebrate western civ, that focus on its positive accomplishments and explain in some detail why they deserve to be called great.

For example, from my perspective, a huge watershed event in the history of western civilization was the Greeks' invention of the alphabet. Current western civ textbooks, however, mention this event only in passing. About 800 B.C., we are told, the Greeks adopted the Phoenicians' system of writing and added vowels. It is left unstated that the resulting system of writing was one of revolutionary simplicity and accuracy, one which has never been improved upon in any important way; that the alphabet we still use is the one the Greeks invented, with minor modifications; that earlier methods of writing were so complicated that only specially trained scribes mastered them — or they were simple but ambiguous; that the Greek alphabet made the precise, visual representation of language and thought easily accessible to everyone, even children, for the first time ever.

It is also not mentioned that after the invention of the alphabet Greek civilization soared, or that our whole way of life still rests on the advances the Greeks made in the next few hundred years. I will mention just one such advance that has particular relevance to current events: the creation of democracy. This was a direct offshoot of alphabetic literacy.

Upon becoming literate, the Greeks started experimenting with their legal codes. In 510, the Athenians adopted a new one, which is correctly hailed as the basis for the world's first democracy. As with the case of the alphabet, however, the unique character of Athenian democracy is not well explained in our western civ texts. It is generally said that this constitution encouraged widespread participation in the job of governing by male citizens. On the other hand, we are inevitably reminded, slaves, women, and resident aliens were excluded; hence the constitution was not really *that* democratic.

In fact, the unique feature of the Athenian constitution was something quite different and more important and profound than widespread participation in government. In order to govern themselves, people must be divided into groups. From time immemorial, in Greece and elsewhere, the original method of subdivision followed bloodlines: families and clans provided the basic units. People were classified according to the possession or lack of common ancestors, real or imagined. This method of social organization is known as tribalism. It seems to be a universal stage in the evolution of human society.

The Athenian constitutional reforms of 510 B.C. are critical events in human history because they consciously abandoned the principle of tribalism. Athenian territory was divided into geographical neighborhoods known as *demes*, whence the term *democracy*. Magistrates represented groups of people classified together because of the geographical locations of their homes, not because of common ancestors. The motto of the Athenians who supported these reforms was, "Do not classify by tribe." The statesman responsible was named Cleisthenes. In the years leading up to his reforms, Greek city states had been

bothered by civil wars, which were caused by rivalries between clans. Cleisthenes perceived the advantages of creating a counterweight to the blind loyalties and intransigent hatreds that occur when people divide themselves along blood lines. His new constitution succeeded in doing this. In the wake of his reforms, the state of Athens achieved a new level of solidarity and dynamism. It became the first recognizable western democracy.

The essential spirit of western democracy is easier to recognize than to define. It is an underlying, mental attitude, of which the transcendence of tribalism was just one manifestation. Call it an analytic, progressive frame of mind. The Greeks examined whatever they did

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logically, asking what its purpose was and how it could be done better. This frame of mind is a natural concomitant of alphabetic literacy, which provides its possessors with the basic technology of logical analysis — viz., write down what you think and examine it backwards and forwards. This attitude led to rapid evolution not only in governmental structures, but also in the whole range of

human thought, in the arts and sciences, and in technology.

The awesome powers of the analytic, progressive frame of mind were dramatized in democracy's first war. Twenty years after Cleisthenes' constitution, Athens was invaded by the then mighty Persian empire, a despotic regime centered in the region of modern Iran. The Persian army landed on the Athenian beach at Marathon. The Athenians fielded an army of 10,000 soldiers, who were outnumbered by the Persians by a factor of about two to one. It must have preyed on the outnumbered Athenians' minds that up to that point the Persians had never lost a battle. Athenian opinion was divided on whether they should attack. After debate in the generals' council,

the hawks barely prevailed. The Athenians charged on the run for nearly a mile, an unheard of tactic, in order to minimize the time in which they would be vulnerable to Persian arrows. Afterwards, when the battle had been joined and the dust cleared, the Persians were in headlong retreat. Six thousand four hundred of them were dead compared to a hundred and ninety-two Athenians.

What accounted for the Athenian victory? The contemporary western civ textbooks do not have much to say on this topic either. Part of the explanation derives from the democratic nature of the Athenian army. It consisted of soldiers obeying the orders of leaders who were not tribal patriarchs but fellow citizens whom the soldiers themselves had elected. The Persians were the emperor's slaves. The Greeks fought with more spirit. That is important, but there is more. The Greeks had also applied some of the mental energies ignited by the alphabet on the art of war and developed the then cutting-edge techniques of hoplite warfare. Unlike the Persians, the Greek soldiers wore bronze armor. They also practiced marching and fighting in formation. Greek generals had a good grasp of infantry tactics, sharpened by constant debate. They had made a science of warfare. In hindsight, the victory was inevitable. Western civilization had arrived.

The accomplishment of the Athenians at Marathon is worthy of celebration, but I am not saying that college courses should consist of uncritical triumphalism. There was a downside to all of the Greeks' accomplishments and their history was full of atrocities and debacles. The Greeks themselves were aware that setting aside tribalism led to a reduction in the strength of family ties. Aeschylus' tragic trilogy, the *Oresteia*, wrestles with anxiety caused by this realization. In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus also emphasizes that technological progress is a mixed blessing. Furthermore, the

historians Herodotus and Thucydides tell us all about the seamy underside of Greek politics, including an anti-heroic account of how the war with Persia actually started. Nothing is less Greek than the uncritical praise of Greeks.

I am not speaking of suppressing negative facts but of emphasizing positive ones. We study people who have done remarkably good things. In arriving at a full understanding of their accomplishments, we naturally learn about limitations, mistakes, failures, even the influence of vicious motives, but these are of secondary importance and should be treated as such.

The teaching of western civilization in this natural, upbeat way has become taboo on college campuses since the 1960s and needs to be restored. From a purely intellectual point of view, it needs to be restored to give students an undistorted view of history. It is simply wrong to imply that western civilization is uniquely sinister, that it is the one set of human accomplishments not worth celebrating. From a practical point of view, it is important that our citizens appreciate the benefits of living in a western democracy and recognize that these benefits are not natural or inevitable. They were earned by acts of intelligence and courage and could be lost through the reverse.

For these reasons, Congressman Petri's Defense of Freedom Education Act is an important, accurately named measure. The transformation of campus culture in the wake of the civil rights acts shows that colleges and universities are responsive to desires backed by a political consensus. The passage of Congressman Petri's act would signal the fact that our nation now desires a renaissance in the study of its own culture and history to balance the ongoing celebration of others. I hope and believe that its passage will lead to a transformation of the intellectual life of our campuses, and it is particularly gratifying that the initiative arose in my native state.