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Civic virtue has many benefits

On Sept. 29, my friend Tim reported for duty at Fort Jackson, S.C., the largest and most active Initial Entry Training Center in the U.S. Army. Fort Jackson trains almost 50 percent of the men and women who enter the service each year. Most likely, Tim will be sent to Iraq.

Since 1973, our nation has been protected by a volunteer army. To maintain our freedoms, our interests and our way of life, the men and women of the armed forces anticipate, plan and prepare for adversity, which can be rightly viewed as the ultimate civic duty.

An individual's willingness to assume the responsibility of community service in the armed forces is the key to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all of us. In fact, the establishment and protection of these inalienable rights are the result of individuals fulfilling their civic duties every day.

The Founding Fathers established in the American republic the notion that the individual who serves her community is the source of virtue. They believed that this reservoir of virtue, embodied in the citizenry through their involvement in the many functions of a community, would guide people to build a good society. Americans have taken well to this concept and express their civic virtue in many ways, including an adventurous



VIEWPOINT

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entrepreneurship. The property, prosperity and work attitudes needed to succeed in the economic world are viewed by many as one way to succeed in the American system and another reflection of civic virtue.

But civic virtue can be defined by more than just personal economic success. The founding generation recognized that only through education of the populace and restraint on individual desires could a lasting and good society be organized and sustained. The architects of our Constitution firmly believed that individual rights could only be secured through education.

In fact, the founders were extremely uneasy about the feebleness of the nation's educational system at that time and debated extensively how to improve the manner of instruction. Thomas Jefferson's arguments that education for citizenship was the first responsibility of the republic and particularly of the states led to a massive restructuring of the public education system in his native state of Virginia. In addition to educational reform, they developed a system of checks and balances to place one person's ambition against another's.

The premise upon which our republic is built is the belief that virtue, law and education work together as a total system. Individuals will be virtuous if they are educated so they might construct good laws within a setting of civility, discipline and love of community with a conception of the public good. The school, along with the family and community, would develop the good citizen,

who does civic work, which defines the good community, which provides for education.

The Bill of Rights itself was seen as a curriculum the citizen could study, reflect upon and through continuing education (or as we know it today, "life-long learning"), go beyond self-serving private action and protection to public or civic action, which is the only true protection for private liberty. In the opinion of our Founding Fathers, it was only through a knowledgeable citizenry that is active in the civic institutions of its community that our nation would be able to preserve and protect the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Today, Tim's noble civic work is in the U.S. Army. On Nov. 2, nearly 120 million Americans exercised their right to vote, one important aspect of their individual civic duty. To ensure that our community remains a vibrant one, we must support an educational system that prepares us to be good citizens first and good workers second. In addition to promoting education, we must continue to exercise our civic responsibilities regularly in the voting booth, in the jury box, and at our schools, churches or other civic and charitable organizations that make our city, state and nation the most vibrant and enchanting place in the world, a place for which Tim is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. •

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