

The following essay, “The Warrior at the Mall”, by Phil Klay, appears in the New York Times of Sunday, April 15, 2018. Its concerns echo the concerns voiced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his final address to the nation, on January 17, 1961, after eight years in office. I believe that President Eisenhower would have fully endorsed the views expressed by Phil Klay in this essay. Indeed, what Mr. Klay decries is the manipulation and coercion of public opinion, to further the self-serving objectives of, and insulate the errors of, the military industrial complex.

Eisenhower's address and this essay ought be required reading in all civics classes. But civics is not taught much anymore. I wonder why? Eisenhower’s address is set out after the Klay essay.

HJB

Opinion

## The Warrior at the Mall



Image  
Credit Oliver Munday

By Phil Klay – [New York Times, April 15, 2018](#)

Mr. Klay is an author and a veteran of the United States Marine Corps.

April 14, 2018

“We’re at war while America is at the mall.”

I’m not sure when I first heard this in Iraq, but even back in 2007 it was already a well-worn phrase, the logical counterpart to George W. Bush’s arguing after the Sept. 11 attacks that we must not let the terrorists frighten us to the point “where people don’t shop.”

Marines had probably started saying it as early as 2002. “We’re at war while America is at the mall,” some lance corporal muttered to another as they shivered against the winds rushing down the valleys in the Hindu Kush. “We’re at war while America is at the mall,” some prematurely embittered lieutenant told his platoon sergeant as they drove up to Nasiriyah in a light armored vehicle.

Whatever the case, when I heard it, it sounded right. Just enough truth mixed with self-aggrandizement to appeal to a man in his early 20s. Back home was shopping malls and strip clubs. Over here was death and violence and hope and despair. Back home was fast food and high-fructose corn syrup. Over here, we had bodies flooding the rivers of Iraq until people claimed it changed the taste of the fish. Back home they had aisles filled wall to wall with toothpaste, shaving cream, deodorant and body spray. Over here, sweating under the desert sun, we smelled terrible. We were at war, they were at the mall.

The old phrase popped back into my head recently while I was shopping for baby onesies on Long Island — specifically, in the discount section on the second floor of the Buy Buy Baby. Yes, I was at the mall, and America was still at war.

There’s something bizarre about being a veteran of a war that doesn’t end, in a country that doesn’t pay attention. At this point, I’ve been out of the military far longer than I was in, and the weight I place on the value of military life versus civilian life has shifted radically. On the one hand, I haven’t lost my certainty that Americans *should* be paying more attention to our wars and that our lack of attention truly does cost lives.

“We’ve claimed war-weariness, or ‘America First,’ and turned a blind eye to the slaughter of 500,000 people and suffering of millions more,” the former Marine

Mackenzie Wolf pointed out in [a March essay on America's unconscionable lack of action in Syria](#) up to that point. On the other hand, I'm increasingly convinced that my youthful contempt for the civilians back home was not just misplaced, but obscene and, frankly, part of the problem.

After four United States soldiers assigned to the Army's Third Special Forces Group were [killed in an ambush in Niger](#), the American public had a lot of questions. Why were they in combat in Niger? What was their mission? How do you pronounce "Niger"? Answering these questions would have required a complex, sustained discussion about how America projects force around the world, about expanding the use of Special Operations forces to 149 countries, and about whether we are providing those troops with well-thought-out missions and the resources to achieve them in the service of a sound and worthwhile national security strategy.

And since our troops were in Niger in a continuation of an Obama administration policy that began in 2013, it also would have meant discussing the way that administration ramped up "supervise, train and assist" missions in Africa, how it often tried to blur the line between advisory and combat missions to avoid public scrutiny, and how the Trump administration appears to have followed in those footsteps. It would have required, at a bare minimum, not using the deaths as material for neat, partisan parables.

Naturally, we didn't have that conversation. Instead, a Democratic congresswoman who heard the president's phone call to the widow of one of the fallen soldiers informed the news media that Mr. Trump had ineptly [told the grieving woman](#) that her husband "knew what he signed up for."



Image

Soldiers on patrol at the Westfield World Trade Center Mall in New York City. Credit Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Quickly, Americans shifted from a discussion of policy to a symbolic battle over which side, Democratic or Republican, wasn't respecting soldiers enough. Had the president disrespected the troops with his comment? Had Democrats disrespected the troops by trying to use a condolence call for political leverage? Someone clearly had run afoul of an odd form of political correctness, "patriotic correctness."

Since, as recent history has shown us, violating the rules of patriotic correctness is a far worse sin in the eyes of the American public than sending soldiers to die uselessly, the political battle became intense, and the White House was forced to respond. And since in a symbolic debate of this kind nothing is better than an old soldier, the retired Marine general and current chief of staff, John Kelly, was trotted out in [an Oct. 19 news conference](#) to defend the president.

He began powerfully enough, describing what happens to the bodies of soldiers killed overseas, and bringing up his own still painful memories of the loss of his son, who died in Afghanistan in 2010. He spoke with pride of the men and women in uniform.

But then, in an all too common move, he transitioned to expressing contempt for the civilian world. He complained that nothing seemed to be sacred in America anymore, not women, not religion, not even “the dignity of life.” He told the audience that service members volunteer even though “there’s nothing in our country anymore that seems to suggest that selfless service to the nation is not only appropriate, but required.” He said veterans feel “a little bit sorry” for civilians who don’t know the joys of service.

To cap things off, he took questions only from reporters who knew families who had lost loved ones overseas. The rest of the journalists, and by extension the rest of the American public who don’t know any Gold Star families, were effectively told they had no place in the debate.

Such disdain for those who haven’t served and yet dare to have opinions about military matters is nothing new for Mr. Kelly. In a 2010 speech after the death of his son, Mr. Kelly improbably claimed that we were winning in Afghanistan, but that “you wouldn’t know it because successes go unreported” by members of the “‘know it all’ chattering class” who “always seem to know better, but have never themselves been in the arena.” And he argued that to oppose the war, which our current secretary of defense last year testified to Congress we were not winning, meant “slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to the nation.”

This is a common attitude among a significant faction of veterans. As one former member of the Special Forces put it in a social media post responding to the liberal outcry over the deaths in Niger, “We did what we did so that you can be free to naïvely judge us, complain about the manner in which we kept you safe” and “just all around live your worthless sponge lives.” His commentary, which was liked and shared thousands of times, is just a more embittered form of the sentiment I indulged in as a young lieutenant in Iraq.

It can be comforting to reverse the feelings of hopelessness and futility that come with fighting seemingly interminable, strategically dubious wars by enforcing a hierarchy of citizenship that puts the veteran and those close to him on top, and everyone else far, far below.

But John Kelly’s contempt for modern civilian life wasn’t a pep talk voiced in a Humvee traveling down an Iraqi highway, or at a veterans’ reunion in a local bar. He was speaking to the American people, with the authority of a retired general, on behalf of the president of the United States of America. And he was letting us know our place.

Those with questions about military policy are being put in their place more and more often these days. When reporters later asked the White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, about some of Mr. Kelly's claims, which had proved false, she said, "If you want to get into a debate with a four-star Marine general, I think that's highly inappropriate." It was an echo of the way Sean Spicer tried to short-circuit debate about the death of a Navy SEAL in Yemen by claiming that anyone who questioned the success of the raid "owes an apology" to the fallen SEAL.

Serious discussion of foreign policy and the military's role within it is often prohibited by this patriotic correctness. Yet, if I have authority to speak about our military policy it's because I'm a citizen responsible for participating in self-governance, not because I belonged to a warrior caste.

If what I say deserves to be taken seriously, it's because I've taken the time out of my worthless sponge life as a concerned American civilian to form a worthy opinion. Which means that although it is my patriotic duty to afford men like John Kelly respect for his service, and for the grief he has endured as the father of a son who died for our country, that is not where my responsibility as a citizen ends.

I must also assume that our military policy is of direct concern to me, personally. And if a military man tries to leverage the authority and respect he is afforded to voice contempt for a vast majority of Americans, if he tries to stifle their exercise of self-governance by telling them that to question the military strategy of our generals and our political leaders is a slight to our troops, it's my patriotic duty to tell him to go pound sand.

If we don't do this, we risk our country slipping further into the practice of a fraudulent form of American patriotism, where "soldiers" are sacred, the work of actual soldiering is ignored and the pageantry of military worship sucks energy away from the obligations of citizenship.

I understand why politicians and writers and institutions choose to employ the trope of veterans when it comes to arguing for their causes. Support for our military remains high at a time when respect for almost every other institution is perilously low, so pushing a military angle as a wedge makes a certain kind of sense. But our peacetime institutions are not justified by how they intermittently intersect with national security concerns — it's the other way around. Our military is justified only by the civic life and values it exists to defend. This is why George Washington, in his Farewell Orders to the Continental Army, told his troops to

“carry with them into civil society the most conciliating dispositions” and “prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as citizens than they have been persevering and victorious as soldiers.”

Besides, let’s not pretend that living a civilian life — and living it *well* — isn’t hard. A friend of mine, an officer in the Army Reserves, told me that one of his greatest leadership challenges came not overseas, but when a deployment to Afghanistan got canceled and his men were called to the difficult and often tedious work of being husbands, fathers, members of a community.

My wife and I are raising two sons — the older one is 2 years old, the little one 6 months. And as we follow our national politics with occasional disgust, amusement, horror and hope, we regularly talk about the sort of qualities we want to impress upon our boys so they can be good citizens, and how we can help cultivate in them a sense of service, of gratitude for the blessings they have, and a desire to give back. It’s a daunting responsibility. Right now, though, the day-to-day work of raising these kids doesn’t involve a lot of lofty rhetoric about service. It involves drool, diapers and doing the laundry. For me, it means being that most remarkable, and somehow most unremarkable of things — a dad.

Which is how I found myself that day, less a Marine veteran than a father, shopping with the other parents at Buy Buy Baby, recalling that old saying, “We’re at war while America is at the mall.” I wondered about the anonymous grunt poet who coined it. Whoever he was, there’s a good chance that even by the time I heard it, he’d already done his four years and gotten out.

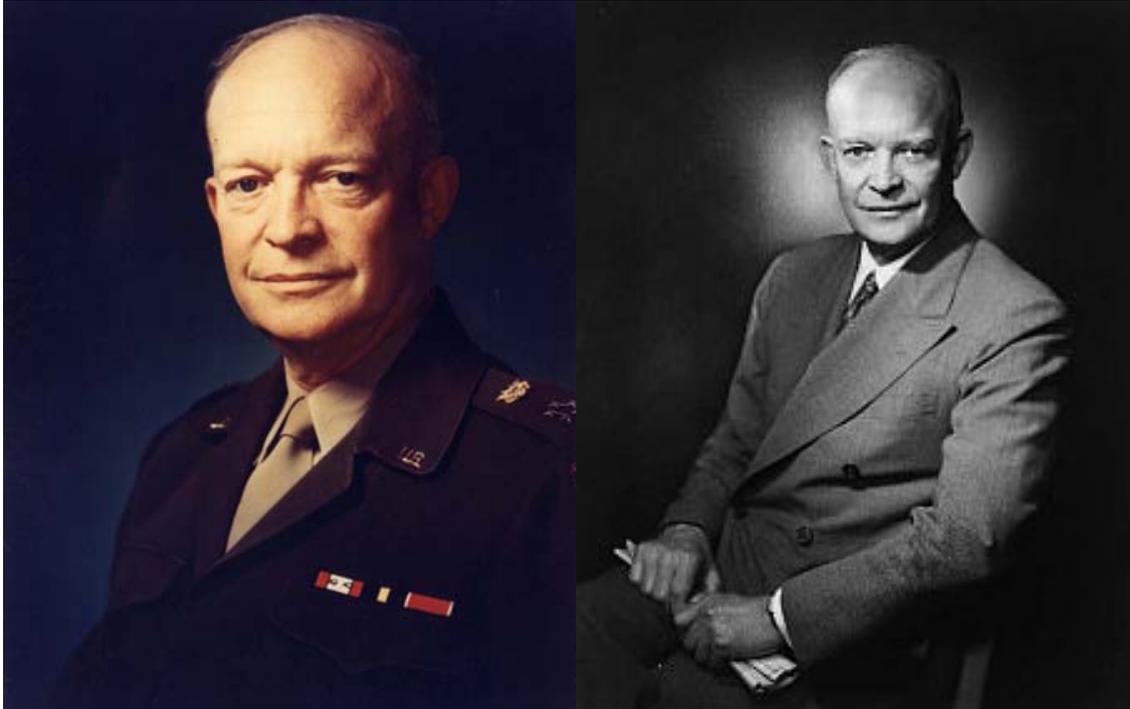
Maybe he’d left the Corps, settled into civilian life. Maybe he was in school. Perhaps he was working as a schoolteacher, or as a much-derided civil servant in some corner of our government. Perhaps he found that work more satisfying, more hopeful and of more obvious benefit to his country than the work he’d done in our mismanaged wars.

Or perhaps, if he was as lucky as I have been, he was in some other mall doing exactly what I was — trying to figure out the difference between 6M and 3-6M baby onesies. If so, I wish him well.

Phil Klay (@PhilKlay) is the author of the short story collection “Redeployment” and a veteran of the United States Marine Corps.

---

---



On Jan. 17, 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former Supreme Allied Commander of the allied forces in Europe, during World War 2, delivered his final address as President of the United States. It is worth reading, in its entirety.

My fellow Americans:

Three days from now, after half a century in the service of our country, I shall lay down the responsibilities of office as, in traditional and solemn ceremony, the authority of the Presidency is vested in my successor.

This evening I come to you with a message of leave-taking and farewell, and to share a few final thoughts with you, my countrymen.

Like every other citizen, I wish the new President, and all who will labor with him, Godspeed. I pray that the coming years will be blessed with peace and prosperity for all.

Our people expect their President and the Congress to find essential agreement on issues of great moment, the wise resolution of which will better shape the future of the Nation.

My own relations with the Congress, which began on a remote and tenuous basis when, long ago, a member of the Senate appointed me to West Point, have since ranged to the intimate during the war and immediate post-war period, and, finally, to the mutually interdependent during these past eight years.

In this final relationship, the Congress and the Administration have, on most vital issues, cooperated well, to serve the national good rather than mere partisanship, and so have assured that the business of the Nation should go forward. So, my official relationship with the Congress ends in a feeling, on my part, of gratitude that we have been able to do so much together.

## II.

We now stand ten years past the midpoint of a century that has witnessed four major wars among great nations. Three of these involved our own country. Despite these holocausts America is today the strongest, the most influential and most productive nation in the world. Understandably proud of this pre-eminence, we yet realize that America's leadership and prestige depend, not merely upon our unmatched material progress, riches and military strength, but on how we use our power in the interests of world peace and human betterment.

## III.

Throughout America's adventure in free government, our basic purposes have been to keep the peace; to foster progress in human achievement, and to enhance liberty, dignity and integrity among people and among nations. To strive for less would be unworthy of a free and religious people. Any failure traceable to arrogance, or our lack of comprehension or readiness to sacrifice would inflict upon us grievous hurt both at home and abroad.

Progress toward these noble goals is persistently threatened by the conflict now engulfing the world. It commands our whole attention, absorbs our very beings. We face a hostile ideology -- global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method. Unhappily the danger it poses promises to be of indefinite duration. To meet it successfully, there is called for, not so much the emotional and transitory sacrifices of crisis, but rather those which enable us to carry forward steadily, surely, and without complaint the burdens of a prolonged and complex struggle -- with liberty the stake. Only thus shall we remain, despite every provocation, on our chartered course toward permanent peace and human betterment.

Crises there will continue to be. In meeting them, whether foreign or domestic, great or small, there is a recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties. A huge increase in newer elements of our defense; development of unrealistic programs to cure every ill in agriculture; a dramatic expansion in basic and applied research -- these and many other possibilities, each possibly promising in itself, may be suggested as the only way to the road we wish to travel.

But each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs -- balance between the private and the public economy, balance between cost and hoped for advantage -- balance between the clearly necessary and the comfortably desirable; balance between our essential requirements as a nation and the duties imposed by the nation upon the individual; balance between actions of the moment and the national welfare of the future. Good judgment seeks balance and progress; lack of it eventually finds imbalance and frustration.

The record of many decades stands as proof that our people and their government have, in the main, understood these truths and have responded to them well, in the face of stress and threat. But threats, new in kind or degree, constantly arise. I mention two only.

#### IV.

A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.

Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Akin to, and largely responsible for the sweeping changes in our industrial-military posture, has been the technological revolution during recent decades.

In this revolution, research has become central; it also becomes more formalized, complex, and costly. A steadily increasing share is conducted for, by, or at the direction of, the Federal government.

Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers.

The prospect of domination of the nation's scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present

and is gravely to be regarded. Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.

It is the task of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system -- ever aiming toward the supreme goals of our free society.

V.

Another factor in maintaining balance involves the element of time. As we peer into society's future, we -- you and I, and our government -- must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.

VI.

Down the long lane of the history yet to be written America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.

Such a confederation must be one of equals. The weakest must come to the conference table with the same confidence as do we, protected as we are by our moral, economic, and military strength. That table, though scarred by many past frustrations, cannot be abandoned for the certain agony of the battlefield.

Disarmament, with mutual honor and confidence, is a continuing imperative. Together we must learn how to compose differences, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose. Because this need is so sharp and apparent I confess that I lay down my official responsibilities in this field with a definite sense of disappointment. As one who has witnessed the horror and the lingering sadness of war -- as one who knows that another war could utterly destroy this civilization which has been so slowly and painfully built over thousands of years -- I wish I could say tonight that a lasting peace is in sight.

Happily, I can say that war has been avoided. Steady progress toward our ultimate goal has been made. But, so much remains to be done. As a private citizen, I shall never cease to do what little I can to help the world advance along that road.

VII.

So -- in this my last good night to you as your President -- I thank you for the many opportunities you have given me for public service in war and peace. I trust that in that service you find some things worthy; as for the rest of it, I know you will find ways to improve performance in the future.

You and I -- my fellow citizens -- need to be strong in our faith that all nations, under God, will reach the goal of peace with justice. May we be ever unswerving in devotion to principle, confident but humble with power, diligent in pursuit of the Nation's great goals.

To all the peoples of the world, I once more give expression to America's prayerful and continuing aspiration:

Source:

Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, p. 1035- 1040

---

THESE DAYS, American **schools** are focused on two big “C's,” college and career readiness. Many believe we're neglecting a third “C:” citizenship. Today, only eight states require that **civics** be **taught** at all.

People also ask

Is civics a required class?

What is civics in school?

What states require civics class?

What is the definition of civic education?

[Forgotten Purpose: Civics Education in Public Schools - NEA Today](http://neatoday.org/2017/03/16/civics-education-public-schools/)  
[neatoday.org/2017/03/16/civics-education-public-schools/](http://neatoday.org/2017/03/16/civics-education-public-schools/)

Mar 16, 2017 - Knock down barriers for *civics* educators. One out of four teachers surveyed by the Center for Information & Research on *Civic Learning and Engagement* thought parents *would* object if *they taught* about politics in a government or *civics class*, and only 38 percent thought their district *would* give them ...

[Civics Education Testing Only Required In 9 States For High School ...](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/.../circle-study-finds-most-s_n_1959522.ht...)  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/.../circle-study-finds-most-s\\_n\\_1959522.ht...](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/.../circle-study-finds-most-s_n_1959522.ht...)

Oct 12, 2012 - A study by the Center for Information and Research on Civil Learning & Engagement at Tufts University has found that most states *do* not emphasize *civic* education, which includes learning about citizenship, government, law, current events and related topics. In the current *school* year, 21 states require a ...

[Teach civics in schools — but do it right - The Boston Globe](https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/.../teach-civics-schools.../story.html)

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/.../teach-civics-schools.../story.html>

Apr 18, 2015 - THESE DAYS, American *schools* are focused on two big “C’s,” college and career readiness. Many believe we’re neglecting a third “C:” citizenship. Today, only eight states require that *civics* be *taught* at all.

[Why Teaching Civics in America's Classrooms Must Be...](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/civics-education-trump-bullying/)

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/civics-education-trump-bullying/>

I *still* remember his face—hazel eyes, closely cropped blond hair—and his navy uniform jacket over a white shirt. ... Until the late '60s, three different courses in *civic* studies *were* common in American high *schools*, and *they* often focused on helping students apply the dry mechanics of government to solving problems in ...

[Why Don't They Teach Civics Anymore? | Bedrosian Center | USC](https://bedrosian.usc.edu/blog/why-dont-they-teach-civics-anymore/)

<https://bedrosian.usc.edu/blog/why-dont-they-teach-civics-anymore/>

Jun 16, 2014 - What I also remember is how he challenged a room full of 12 year olds to think about communism, democracy, due process, and a host of other political concepts that *were* playing out in the daily news. But even then, *civics* education was on the wane — in high *school* we talked about *civics* mainly in the ...

[50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies](https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/)

<https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/>

Dec 12, 2016 - Click on the questions below for 50-state comparisons showing how all states approach specific *civic* education policies. Or, choose to view a specific state's approach by going to the individual state profiles page. 50-State Comparisons. *Civics*, Citizenship or Social Studies High *School* Graduation ...

## [The Lack of Civics Education Has Shaped the Election - The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/ignorance-does.../506894/)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/ignorance-does.../506894/>

Nov 8, 2016 - ... example, that in 2009, 89 percent of those who took a test on *civic* knowledge expressed confidence *they* could pass it; in fact, 83 percent *would* have failed. .... But it's undeniable that the state of America's education system, from the small classrooms in rural areas *teaching* high-school students to the Ivy ...

## [Flunking Civics: Why America's Kids Know So Little - ABA Journal](http://www.abajournal.com/In-Depth-Reporting)

[www.abajournal.com › In-Depth Reporting](http://www.abajournal.com/In-Depth-Reporting)

by M Hansen - [Cited by 4](#) - [Related articles](#)

Of the *school* districts surveyed, 71 percent said *they were* spending less time on subjects like social studies, music and art to devote more time to reading and math, the two subjects tested under NCLB. A 2007 survey of ... Levine says that *schools* are *still teaching civics* as much as or more than ever before. The amount of ...

## [How to teach civics in school - Civics lessons - The Economist](https://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2017/07/civics-lessons)

<https://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2017/07/civics-lessons>

Jul 6, 2017 - Across the country, pupils took classes like “Problems of Democracy,” a popular post-war *civics* course in which *they were* expected to read the newspaper and debate issues in the classroom. But by the 1980s, it had been phased out. Parents and politicians became concerned about *schools* “politicising” ...

## [High-school civics classes could be the best hope for the future of ...](https://qz.com/.../overhauling-one-high-school-subject-is-our-best-hope-for-the-future...)

<https://qz.com/.../overhauling-one-high-school-subject-is-our-best-hope-for-the-future...>

Jan 23, 2017 - Ten years ago, today's 17 year olds *were* in kindergarten, smartphones didn't exist, and Facebook was less than 1% the size it is today. In 2017 ... Incremental improvements at the edges of more affluent *school* districts won't cut it: We need a national drive to renew *civics* education, new *teaching* tools and ...