

**Securing the Blessings of Liberty in the 21st Century: Why
Democracy Cannot Be a Spectator Sport
Orlando, Florida
November 19, 2008**

I want to begin by thanking you all for supporting our democracy. I celebrate the presence of so many good folks here advancing the cause of education about our democracy. I think there are a lot of happy ancestors reflecting kindly on America generally in the last two weeks. In particular, I think many would reflect happily on this gathering in Florida with this group of educators assembled here. In a real sense, I think Florida is as good a place as any to recall that education is the single most important enterprise that a nation can engage itself in if it wants to ensure a great future for itself. That has never been truer than today, and yet some forget that the founders of our nation had a keen sense of the importance of education in the future of our country.

I recall Jefferson's words, "Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are the only safe depositories....to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree. An amendment to our constitution must here come in aid of public education." This call for an amendment to the Constitution in favor of public education from the most avid proponent of state's rights and the founder of the oldest political party in America.

His counterpart, who founded the opposing political party, John Adams, not to be outdone, wrote, "Laws for the liberal education of youth....are so extremely wise and useful that to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose should be thought extravagant."

In 1862, during the darkest days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln had good reason to limit funding on things like education. Instead, he started the Land Grant College System by signing the Morrill Act. He dreamed that every state in America would have at least one such college. Here in Florida you have the University of Florida and Florida A & M, all because Lincoln took a courageous risk and acted on a marvelous vision.

In the immediate aftermath of the War Between the States, while America was reeling from the costs and losses in the Civil War, we did not hunker

down and say, “We cannot afford things like investing in education.” Instead America became one of the first countries on earth to invest in compulsory public education. State by state, we began educating all of our people. And America prospered because of those brave choices.

In 1944, in the midst of the greatest conflict our nation faced in the 20th century, our leaders did not say, “Tisk, tisk, we are at war, and therefore cannot consider spending on education.” Instead, Franklin Roosevelt signed the GI Bill of Rights, designed to provide greater opportunities for returning war veterans. The bill provided federal aid to help veterans especially in the area of education. It alone is estimated to have doubled the college population. More than 2 million students attended colleges and universities because of the GI Bill or Rights. It is estimated that over 230,000 became teachers.

In 1946, the Congress passed legislation identified as the National School Lunch Act. Its purpose “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s Children...” Truman signed it into law.

Under President Eisenhower, the promotion of education and the protection of children continued to be treated as a matter of national defense. After Sputnik was launched by the Soviets, Ike encouraged the Congress to increase investment in education. In 1958, he signed the National Defense Education Act, to greatly increase the number of students who would become scientists, engineers and teachers.

In the early 1960’s, President John Kennedy challenged our nation to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Many forget how roundly criticized Kennedy was.

“It is too expensive,’ said some.

“The schedule is too ambitious,” complained others.

“It is too hard,” complained still others.

President Kennedy replied, “We go to the moon, not because it is easy, but because it is hard.”

Today I want to talk about something that is hard, yes, that is expensive, but something even more important than that giant leap for mankind made in the last several generations.

I have lived long enough now to make this observation:
There is nothing wrong with our children and our young adults.
I am, however, worried about some of the grownups.

The global economy has fundamentally changed the importance of education. Once upon a time, all you needed was a strong back and a willingness to work hard if you wanted to get ahead. Now we require much higher skill levels in many subject areas.

But for all of the time spent on the importance of academic skills and knowledge necessary for success in the global economy, another goal that has been too often neglected is the importance of participation in our democracy. *No Child Left Behind* has actually reduced the emphasis on science, history and social science such that in some elementary and secondary schools, in certain grades, only math and reading are taught, because *No Child Left Behind* only requires we test science in two grade and history in two grades. As a result many schools only teach these subjects the years they are tested. Sad but true.

Moreover, democracy is so much more than a study of history. Democracy actually comes from two Greek words: *demos* (people) and *kratos* (govern). Democracy means “government by the people”. The ancient Greeks believed that the most important part of democratic government was participation. Indeed they believed, that more important than the government created was the transformation of the individual who participated in the political process. The ancient Greeks thought that political participation was like participation in drama (and music) in that once you participated in politics you were changed forever. The Greeks believed that civic participation created both a better governance system and stronger individual citizens.

In fact the Greeks invented the word *idiot*, which meant one, who does not participate in politics.

So the Campus Compact, Florida Learn and Serve, Americorps and all of you here in Florida, as much as in California or any other state, you here who are involved in civic engagement are strengthening not only our democracy but this event and the related activities will strengthen each individual who participates as well as the students whose lives you touch.

Whether you are novices or old hands, whether you are in k-12 or higher education you are engaged in important developmental work here. In a study of districts in California, (Ammon et. al. in 2002) teachers who received structured professional development before implementing service learning reported greater success and fewer obstacles. A similar study of higher education (Billig et.al. in 2002) came to similar conclusions in higher education. Taking time to learn skills, share experiences and insights with each other, and develop curriculum and teaching methodologies is critical to our success. Thank you for taking time to teach each other how we might better encourage our democracy. Thank you for taking time to visualize policies and practices that will allow us to mobilize a new generation of citizens in our democracy.

I have visited schools throughout our great country where powerful learning through service and civic engagement is occurring.

I met students who were restoring streams and rivers and protecting vernal pools from development.

I have observed students tutoring younger students and peers.

I have met students nurturing school gardens and community gardens to better engage students and to improve the food options for themselves as well as for the needy and the elderly.

I have seen industrial arts students engaged in building a house for doctors who travel long distances to work at a rural community hospital.

When I was teaching at Mills College in Oakland, I administered the Center for Civic Engagement and Women's Leadership. Contained within the Center was the Institute for Civic Leadership or ICL. All of our Mills students involved in ICL are working around the country and around the globe with Doctors Without Borders, Engineers Without Borders, CARE and UNICEF, to name just a few.

As Superintendent of Public Instruction in California, I have been to over 600 schools in all 58 California counties. I also visited schools here in Florida, Kentucky, New York, Arizona, and many other states.

I have seen high school students in auto shop classes in Eureka California who provided free oil changes for low-income families.

I have seen elementary school students in the third grade in San Francisco building a ramp for wheelchairs at their school. They consulted with local architects, school administrators, grounds staff, parents and representatives of the disabled community. Students learned about city ordinances and about geometry.

In Oakland, at a middle school, students began growing food for the homeless and vandalism at that school virtually stopped, as the homeless became the school's defender.

In San Bernadino, California, high school students provided translation services for the local Head Start agency.

I could go on and on. The important point is that while all this is empowering, we can and should do so much more.

Remember that great civilizations inspire great personal achievement and great social responsibility.

Great civilizations arise from the imagination and hard work of people who are nurtured by their societies to develop their gifts.

In a word: EDUCATION.

Education...the place where personal and social responsibility come together for personal and social greatness.

BOTH. TOGETHER.

That is where you and I come in.

In a great civilization, schools are an institutional incubator of human potential. In every subject and in every sense of the word, your job as part of the Campus Compact, or Florida Learn and Serve or any school here today, whether K-12 or higher education, is to create institutional incubators of human potential in our democracy.

We must insure that our schools are the repository of past success and the laboratory for future adventures in our time. Now. For the future greatness of not only our country, but of each individual student, we must make our democracy a living, breathing place for the engagement of our students.

We must say to each and every student, “We need you. There are talents in you we do not yet know about. Maybe you know what they are, maybe you don’t—yet. That’s OK. We will help you identify them. We will help you light a passion for them. We will help you develop them and put them to use. We—the society that loves you and needs you—we –your human family—we have good productive work for you. But you must work with us, you must participate.

The journalist Richard Cohen once observed, ”Those with nothing to gain...have nothing to lose.”

The poet Nietzsche, said it said even more eloquently, “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how”. It was that line of Nietzsche’s that Victor Frankel quoted when asked how he survived the Nazi concentration camp in the Holocaust. “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how”.

Our students are looking for the “why” and you hold the key. Remember, the young people were very involved in this election. Participation was up dramatically. That should not be so surprising. Our college students are closer to the age of our founders than most college presidents are.

Think about the Founders for a minute. In 1776, most had already been active in politics for a few years. Washington was a senior leader at the ripe age of 44. Jefferson was all of 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Madison was just 25, Hamilton was 21 and Monroe was but 18. Young people can and do make a difference in 2008 as well as 1776.

Archimedes, in the ancient Greek democracy was asked, when he explained his new invention the lever, “Just how powerful is this thing?”

Archimedes, said, “Let me tell you how powerful it is. Give me a place to stand, a lever and a fulcrum, and I will move the world.”

I believe that education is our lever and I hope you do too.

Through service-learning and civic engagement, communities throughout this state and across our nation are benefiting from the work of young people, and the young people themselves can use the knowledge and skills they have learned in their involvement with all of you here to improve their communities even as they develop their personal efficacy. Service learning and civic engagement make education experiential and alive.

As a teaching and learning strategy service learning is complex. It requires our students, under increasing financial burdens and academic pressures, to take time away from more traditional academic pursuits. But I urge educators, parents, students and community members to embrace this strategy because through service-learning our young people will become not only more adept learners and better workers, they will be active citizens, which is just what America needs, what the world needs. This is the lever of our time.

America's young people want to learn how to read and do mathematics but they also want to know where they fit in their schools, neighborhoods and communities. We, who have just lived through an historic election, must seize the day and say to every student, "This really is your time." As our young people look for meaning and ask, "How is what I am learning today preparing me for tomorrow?" We involved in civic engagement have some of the best answers.

Let me remind you that both John McCain and Barack Obama promised to make national service a priority in his administration. This is not partisan and it should not be partisan.

Here in America we must develop policies and plans to ensure that all students have academically meaningful, sequential and sustained service-learning experiences throughout their school. I am thrilled at the prospect of President-elect Obama developing a strategy for students who serve in the community to receive financial credit toward their college education. Performing a period of national service in return for a college education, was not just a huge applause line for Obama, it is a huge opportunity for America.

We must encourage that kind of thinking to work collaboratively with our community partners and national service providers, such as AmeriCorps and

VISTA, to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and that service is meaningful.

America is hungry to participate. Time magazine recently reported (September 22, 2008) there were a million more volunteers in America in 2007 than there were in 2002.

It is time to include adequate funding, resources and time to infuse service learning fully into our schools and communities. Students must understand the relevance of what they are learning in K-12 and in college and apply that knowledge and skill to the outside world.

Our only hope for social competence and for economic success and for the prevalence of democratic values is to improve the education of the next generation.

The day after the election, November 5, 2008, Thomas Friedman's column in the New York Times said, "Yes, the struggle for equality is never done. But we can start afresh now from a whole new baseline. Let every child and every citizen and every new immigrant know that from this day forward: Everything really is possible in America."

Later in that same column, he quotes Harvard University political philosopher Michael Sandel, who said, "In this election the American public rejected these narrow notions of the common good. Most people now accept that unfettered markets don't serve the public good. Markets generate abundance, but they can also breed excessive insecurity and risk. Even before the financial meltdown, we've seen a massive shift of risk from corporations to the individual. Obama will have to reinvent government as an instrument of the common good—to regulate markets, to protect citizens against the risks of unemployment and ill health, to invest in energy independence."

Friedman cautions, "But a new politics of the common good can't be only about government and markets."

Quoting Sandel again, "It must also be about a new patriotism—about what it means to be a citizen.... Obama's campaign tapped a dormant civic idealism, a hunger among Americans to serve a cause greater than themselves, a yearning to be citizens again."

Our less well-educated forbears, seemed to understand this. They were generous and visionary with the future. Coming out of wars and depression with no real research to lead them, they made courageous, hard, expensive choices.

Education, quality education, goes so much beyond learning our multiplication tables. Education is most certainly about learning the real work of democracy. I sincerely hope you will make it happen here. I sincerely hope you will support a new patriotism.

I want to say that as an educator, policy maker and public policy administrator, I consider educational research to be of great importance. I must also say that great research in the land of petty, small-minded, shortsighted political figures can be an exercise in futility. I think the fault in Florida, in California and in America, is not a lack of research but the failure to embrace the research and do what we know will work.

We need a hunger among Americans to embrace the great causes and challenges, whose solutions are laid out in our research.

Too often the policies of our leaders are quick fix boutique solutions, usually solutions we can do on the cheap, but sometimes there is real money invested in some shortsighted sexy sounding palliative that is not steeped in research but makes a fine sound bite. It is the lack of courage, vision and heart of those who are the policy makers that is the greatest source of educational mediocrity in our nation.

Susan B. Anthony observed, “Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, can never bring about a reform...” Be bold. Take chances. Lead. Obama demonstrates what a hunger there is for such leadership.

It is important to remember that the budget of a nation, a state, a college or a school district is like the budget of the family in that it is a statement of values. That is important insofar as our state budgets and our federal budget are in such amazing deficits and there will soon be another raging debate about how to repair the problem. The federal government is broke and talking about what to do.... I hope as you observe the debate, you will ask, “What would Jefferson do? What would Adams do? What would Lincoln

do? What would Susan B. Anthony, Franklin or Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman or Eisenhower do?" Be thinking about that. I will return to these questions.

Some years ago when the Contract with America was the talk of the nation, Newt Gingrich and others suggested that there should be no role in education played by the national government. They suggested that the founders had not intended for the federal government to be involved in education. They proposed abolishing the Department of Education and the National School Lunch Program. I was invited to our nation's capitol to answer questions related to "Does the national government have a role in public education?" and if so, where in the Constitution did I find a justification for that role.

I debated former Secretary of Education and now Senator Lamar Alexander. It was then that I became more enamored of some of the thoughts of our founders on education.

I told the Congress, "Yes," there is and should be a federal role in education. And in answer to the question of where in the Constitution of the United States I found justification for this proposition, I read them the Preamble to the Constitution:

"We the people of the United States, in order to provide a more perfect Union, to establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States."

Our posterity—the only interest group important enough to be singled out in the Preamble.

For many decades the leaders of our nation and our state played an extraordinary role in advancing the education of children. There are those who forget that the founders of our nation had a keen sense of the importance of education in the future of our country as I mentioned at the outset of my talk.

We are at a crossroads in America where some people, with a straight face, were proposing tax cuts in lieu of preschools,

**rebuilding Iraqi public schools when many American schools are in shambles,
cutting support for teachers in classrooms while complaining about how many police we need on the streets...**

I am not talking rocket science here.

I am talking common sense.

Educate them or incarcerate them. Love them or they will not love our nation and its values.

The founders of this country and great leaders for more than 200 years knew that we must be about “securing these blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity”.

When thinking about our posterity it seems self-evident to me that educational excellence and civic engagement in America should be as obvious as saving Yosemite

or digging the Panama Canal

or building the Golden Gate Bridge

or the supporting the Manhattan Project or the Marshall Plan

or building Cape Canaveral and going to the moon....

Some believe it to be more important than any single thing our country could embark upon at this moment.

Some believe it is the next big idea.

Count me in as one of those who believes.

But democracy is a living, breathing concept as we have seen in the last two weeks.

We must be bold as we go forward, bold as our founders and as our ancestors were.

I would like to share with you some important thoughts from another great President Dwight David Eisenhower:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

This world in arms is not spending money alone.

It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

In this autumn of 2008, there is a spirit of hope in America that I have not felt for a long, long time. A friend and former student called me on election night from North Carolina sobbing with joy. Another former student told me she had never felt such pride in her country. My niece studying abroad said that Europe was over the moon with joy at the prospect of our new American President. Two older couples, friends in their '60's and '70's, were dancing in the street on election night.

I found the words of both John McCain and George Bush to be quite wonderful reflecting on our new President-elect and I acknowledge their graciousness. But America is not out of jeopardy. We have much important work to do.

No work is more important than getting our young people in the game of democracy and we adults can use their wonderful optimism. You have begun that important work in Florida already. I salute your work. This work can do much to bring back America's optimism....which I might add we often get from children.

Remember children can leap great barriers in a single bound.
They have imagination.

Children can see through anything. They see with their hearts.

Children move mountains the old-fashioned way. They have faith.
Remember St. Paul to the Corinthians?

Over the years of visiting schools, I've had an awakening. At first it may seem to you like a trivial semantic distinction. To me, it is much more. To me it explains the power of a child's dream.

When we look into the eyes of a child, we often say we see the face of hope. I now realize, after talking with so many children, that it's the face of optimism.

There is a difference. We hope with our fingers crossed. Optimism is a hand waving in the back of the classroom.

Optimism is running to the library.

Optimism is trying again and again at the language lab, the computer lab, the basketball hoop.

Optimism is a homeless girl wading in the tide pools dreaming of being a marine biologist. I met her in California. She is here in Florida I am certain.

America is not just in need of hope. The beautiful possibility is obvious. America is in need of a good case of optimism. You catch it from children and young people.

And ladies and gentlemen, I am a carrier.

Let us continue our important work on this wonderful morning in America. And let us do so with optimism. Thank you.