

31 of 44 DOCUMENTS

Richmond Times Dispatch (Virginia)

November 29, 2002 Friday City Edition

CIVIC EDUCATION CAN TRANSFORM DEMOCRACY

BYLINE: Greg Werkeiser, * **Greg Werkheiser** is chairman of the Governor's Commission on National and Community Service and founder of the Virginia Citizenship Institute.,

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. A-25

LENGTH: 719 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

Americans' disengagement from the process by which we choose our national destiny has only become clearer in the days since the election. While we wrestle with the short-term implications of the outcome for specific policy positions, we miss the devastating big picture: 60 percent of our countrymen have abandoned the concept of government by the people. While 23 percent of Virginians chose Republicans and 7 percent chose Democrats, more than 70 percent of us shunned the easiest form of civic discourse. Our great Commonwealth had the lowest voter turnout in the nation.

A story from our past illustrates our present predicament. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson was bequeathed two large silver chalices upon the death of his friend and mentor George Wythe, our nation's first professor of law. The chalices were magnificent in their design, but in their scratches and dents they showed the signs of long and frequent use. Jefferson revered the gifts, which he placed on a shelf and admired for many years.

One day Jefferson took up his pen and prepared a blueprint that he sent to a Richmond silversmith with the chalices and instructions that they be melted down and recast into eight smaller cups. Those cups recast, engraved with Wythe's and Jefferson's initials, served Mr. Jefferson until his death in 1826, and then his children and grandchildren.

THE STORY of the Jefferson cups is the story of American democracy. Like Jefferson, Americans are the beneficiaries of a gift from colonial Virginians - only our gift is a Republic, magnificent in design, but showing the nicks and scratches of long and frequent use.

In light of the record disengagement of our citizenry from public affairs, the challenge is to follow Jefferson's lead. We can no longer preserve our tarnished political life in its current form and hope to maintain the illusion of a Republic based on broad public governance. Instead, we need to take the raw material we have inherited and fashion expressions of citizenship that work for our time.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our political parties could work together to help craft educational programs powered by a shared belief that a citizen's engagement is more important than the citizen's individual choices once engaged? Our public, private, nonprofit, and academic sectors can commit their intellects and their resources to the design and support of new forms of civic education. More Americans could then develop the three requisites of modern civic service: (1) knowledge of the public challenges facing their communities; (2) commitment to a coherent set of personal principles to guide solutions to those challenges; and (3) the practical skills required to advocate for change. Our bipartisan goal would be to foster an informed, thoughtful, and active citizenry, prepared to meet the complicated challenges facing our

Commonwealth and nation.

TO REINVENT civic education is not to dishonor our nation's Founders, or to betray the differing principles that define our political parties. After all, as surprising was Jefferson's act, he was true to the memory of Wythe. The chalices served the same end in their new form, and they bore the name of their benefactor, but because they were transformed, more people could, and did, drink from them. So too must we be courageous enough to recast public engagement from its basic elements so that more people can and will quench their thirst on the promise that it holds.

Robert Kennedy reminded his generation that direct participation in political activity is what makes a free society. While the threats to our freedom posed by terrorists are very serious, the single greatest test we face in the first decades of the 21st Century is that of renewing our public life at home. After 9/11 we understand that the metal of national unity remains, even if we have not yet figured out how to shape it.

Never in our history has the opportunity been so ripe to recast and therefore rescue our tradition of rule by an informed majority. Beginning in 2007, America will commence a 10-year celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. That year will also mark 200 years since two magnificent silver chalices were left to one bold son of Virginia.

Let's find a silversmith open for our business.

LOAD-DATE: December 3, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO

Copyright 2002 Richmond Newspapers, Inc.