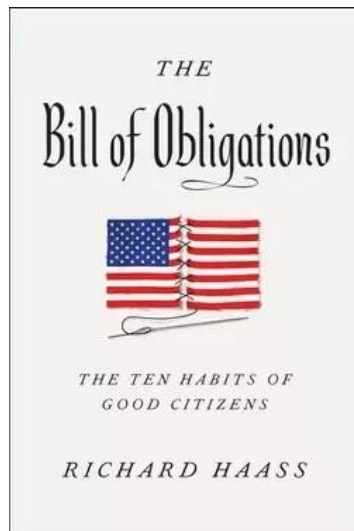


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Teaching Notes

The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens

By **Richard Haass**

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Summary

The United States faces dangerous threats from Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, terrorists, climate change, and future pandemics. The greatest peril to the country, however, comes not from abroad but from within, from none other than ourselves. The question is whether Americans are prepared to do what is necessary to save our democracy.

In *The Bill of Obligations*, Richard Haass argues that for American democracy to survive, or better yet thrive, the very idea of citizenship must be revised and expanded. The Bill of Rights is at the center of our Constitution, yet our most intractable conflicts often emerge from contrasting views as to what our rights ought to be. As former Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer pointed out, “Many of our cases, the most difficult ones, are not about right versus wrong. They are about right versus right.” The lesson is clear: rights alone cannot provide the basis for a functioning, much less flourishing, democracy.

But there is a cure: to place obligations on an equal footing with rights. The ten obligations that Haass introduces here are essential for healing our divisions and safeguarding the country’s future. These obligations reenvision what it means to be an American citizen. They represent commitments

that we make to fellow citizens and to the country to uphold democracy and counter the growing apathy, anger, selfishness, division, disinformation, and violence that threaten us all.

The Bill of Obligations is divided into two main sections. The first includes chapters devoted to rights and their limits and to the causes and consequences of democratic deterioration. They provide a primer of the structure and history of American democracy and how rights came to occupy so central a place within it.

The second part of the book introduces the ten obligations for good citizenship that if adopted by U.S. citizens would go a long way toward ameliorating the issues. These obligations are:

1. Be informed
2. Get involved
3. Stay open to compromise
4. Remain civil
5. Reject violence
6. Value norms
7. Promote the common good
8. Respect government service
9. Support the teaching of civics
10. Put country first

Discussion and Essay Questions

Foundation and Value of Democracy

1. What is a democracy and what are its critical elements?
2. What are the main characteristics of American democracy and how did they come to be?
3. Is American democracy worth preserving despite its past mistakes and existing flaws? If so, why?
4. What does a democracy require of its citizens that makes it difficult to sustain?

American Democracy in Trouble

1. What are the causes of democratic deterioration in the United States?
2. What do you believe are the most worrying signs of “democratic backsliding”?
3. Do you believe that the biggest threat to the United States is the state of its democracy?
4. What do you think should be done to fix the flaws in American democracy?

Rights versus Obligations

1. How did rights come to occupy so central a role in American democracy?
2. What are the vulnerabilities of a democracy that is based on rights alone?
3. What is an obligation? How does an obligation differ from a law or legal commitment?
4. How can obligations help uphold American democracy?

The Ten Obligations

1. Be informed
 - a. Why is it important for citizens in democracies to be informed?
 - b. What does it mean to be informed?
 - c. What can you do to become/remain informed?
2. Get involved
 - a. What evidence is there that U.S. citizens are not active enough in American democracy? What are the causes of this growing apathy?
 - b. Why do you think citizens should be involved in politics?
 - c. What is one way that you think Americans should be more involved?
3. Stay open to compromise
 - a. What are the advantages of agreements that are reached through compromise?
 - b. When is it right to choose compromise and when is it better to stand firm?
 - c. Pick an issue you have a strong opinion about (e.g., gun control, abortion, etc.). Research the other side of the argument and propose a workable compromise.
4. Remain civil
 - a. How do you define civility?
 - b. What is the link between civility and democracy?
 - c. How can civility be promoted?
5. Reject violence
 - a. Some argue that certain political objectives are so important that violence is permissible. Do you think any causes justify violence?
 - b. What are the alternatives to using violence to achieve political objectives? What are the advantages of these other approaches?
 - c. How does the Supreme Court mark the difference between free speech and inciting violence? Is the definition too narrow, too loose, or appropriate?

6. Value norms
 - a. What is the difference between a norm and a law and what are some examples of norms?
 - b. What norm do you think is particularly important for democracy?
 - c. What evidence is there that important norms have eroded in the United States?

7. Promote the common good
 - a. Why should we care about others?
 - b. At some point, one's obligations to fellow citizens will come into conflict with individual rights. How do you think the government should balance promoting the common good over individual rights?
 - c. Do you believe it is ever appropriate to curtail individual rights in order to promote the common good? Use specific examples to illustrate your points.

8. Respect government service
 - a. Why is government important and what role does it play in the United States?
 - b. What is the connection between respecting government service and improving the quality of a democracy?
 - c. Should the United States do more to incentivize that its citizens perform a period of public service? Should public service be mandatory?

9. Support the teaching of civics
 - a. Why do some argue that the United States is particularly vulnerable to a failure to educate its citizens about the country's history?
 - b. Should civics education be required for all students and why?
 - c. What should a civics education entail?

10. Put country first
 - a. What does the phrase "loyal opposition" mean?
 - b. Can you name examples in American history when a political leader put country ahead of his or her personal or party interests?
 - c. Why is it important to put country first?

Classroom Simulations

1. Mock government:
 - a) City council: Identify one local issue that is important to your community and run a mock city council session with students representing various constituencies and local

officials (i.e. mayor, zoning, finance, school board, etc.). Try to pass a resolution that addresses the issue.

- b) State legislature: Identify an important issue for your state and debate it by holding a mock session of the state legislature, with students playing the role of state House and Senate members. Students should attempt to pass legislation that addresses the issue at hand.
- c) Congress: Students should debate one of the nation's most divisive issues (e.g., climate change, abortion, vaccine mandates, gun control, etc.) by holding a mock session of Congress. Their aim should be to draft and pass legislation that addresses this issue.

2. Convene a modern constitutional convention and propose, debate, and write amendments to the existing Constitution.