Inside the Vault

A Plain Political Catechism
with Dr. Adam Laats

Thursday, July 6, 2023

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
How to Participate

- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.
- The views expressed here are those of the historian.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.
Adam Laats is a professor of education and history at Binghamton University (SUNY). He taught middle school and high school for ten years in Milwaukee and earned his PhD in US History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006. He is the author of several books, including *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and the forthcoming *Mr. Lancaster’s System: The Origins of US Public Education, 1800-1840*. Professor Laats offers commentary about history and education at the *Atlantic*, *the Washington Post*, *Slate*, and *the Chronicle of Higher Education*. 
“We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient – that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent – that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.”

John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776.
(Massachusetts Historical Society)
The Big Question

How to educate children into republican citizenship?

- PROBLEM ONE: RELIGION UNCERTAIN—but seen as absolutely necessary
- PROBLEM TWO: SCHOOLING UNEVEN—but seen as absolutely necessary
QUESTION XX.
What are the powers delegated to the congress of the United States?

ANSWER.
They are these eighteen, which follow.

1st, To lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises; to pay the debts, and provide for the common defence, and general welfare of the United States: but all duties, imposts and excises shall be uniform throughout the United States.

2d, To borrow money on the credit of the United States.

3d, To regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes.

Republic? Or tyranny?

"Therefore, it is very unlikely they should seek to tyrannize over us, even if it is in their power. And should their conduct give just occasion of offense, we shall soon have it in our power to displace them constitutionally, and to choose such as are agreeable to our wishes. So that no riots, mobs, nor tumultuous proceedings are necessary, to gain, what we can much easier obtain by legal, peaceable, and constitutional means; and the minority should never try to rule the majority.

**Question LII.**

Is the true knowledge of the principles of liberty and government, and especially the constitution and laws of the United States of America, improper for the youth of this free and happy country?

**Answer.**

By no means; but, on the contrary, highly proper; and these noble principles should be early impressed upon the minds of the rising generation, that so the liberties of mankind may be known, revered, cultivated, valued, and preserved amongst us to the latest period.

**Question LIII.**

Will the early knowledge of the principles of our country, tend to introduce disorder, discontent, division, animosity, and rebellion amongst the young people, as some persons pretend?

**Answer.**

On the contrary, it may be fairly presumed, that the knowledge of the principles of true liberty, &c., will tend to promote union, peace, happiness, and submission, in this country; for a very plain reason: because, our
Republic? Or tyranny?

Republic? Or tyranny?

his wheat, tending to destroy it, or almost totally to hinder its growth.

**QUESTION LIV.**

Can infidels, acting according to their own principles, be looked upon as faithful citizens, or good subjects of government, or the true friends of mankind?

**ANSWER.**

No, by no means; for it cannot be expected that they who cast the laws of God himself behind their back, and trample his authority boldly under their feet, should pay much regard to the constitution of their country, or the wisest and best laws that can be framed by men. For they can make as good an excuse for not receiving them, as they can for rejecting divine revelation, as has been observed before. Besides, it is very obvious, that infidels acting consistent-ly with their principles, cannot be faithful citizens; for it is a principle with them, that no such thing as disinterested benevolence exists in the world, which is a full confession that they have none; and, without disinterested benevolence, there can be no patriotism, nor true love of liberty: for all sincere lovers of their country, must act from true principles of disinterested benevolence, or very little would ever be done for the good of mankind; for much of the real labor of true patriots is concealed from the observation of the people at large: and very frequently the best and noblest actions of the lovers of their country, are ascribed to wrong motives, and they are treated with the greatest ingratitude, and sometimes suffer disgrace, and even death, for those very deeds that ought to have
The New-England Primer Improved, for the More Easy Attaining the True Reading of English, to Which Is Added, the Assembly of Divines' Catechism, Boston 1785.

(Courtesy of Houghton Library)
Infidels? Or citizens?

"L’enseignement mutuel ou Histoire de l’introduction et de la propagation de cette méthode"

1818

Joseph Hamel, L’enseignement mutuel ou Histoire de l’introduction et de la propagation de cette méthode, Paris, 1818. (© Fondation vaudoise du patrimoine scolaire, Yverdon-les-Bains)
Joseph Lancaster Papers
1796-1840

Joseph Lancaster papers, 1796-1840.
(Courtesy American Antiquarian Society)
Upcoming Programs

**Inside the Vault:** August 3 at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT)
- We will be joined by Barbara Perry (University of Virginia) to discuss materials related to twentieth-century voting rights.

**Book Breaks:** July 9 at 2 p.m. ET (11 a.m. PT)

**Teacher Seminars**
- Registration is still open for seven of our online Teacher Seminars; visit gilderlehrman.org/teacherseminars to learn more about current offerings and email seminars@gilderlehrman.org with any questions.