

Book review

Haass, R. (2023). *The bill of obligations: The ten habits of good citizens*. Penguin Press.

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Liberal democracies—from Europe to Asia to Latin America—are under increasing threat. This “democratic backsliding” includes challenges to free and fair elections, declining trust in government institutions, and growing attacks on individual freedoms and rights. Long seen by other countries as an exemplar of democracy, the United States faces its own challenges—most notably, the unsubstantiated claims about the 2020 U.S. presidential election and subsequent attack on the U.S. Capitol.

It is in this unsettling climate that Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, felt compelled to write his latest book entitled *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens*. As a foreign policy expert who worked in the State Department, Pentagon, and White House, Haass brings a unique perspective to this topic. Accustomed to focusing on national security threats from overseas, Haass now believes that the “most urgent and significant threat to American security and stability stems not from abroad but from within” (p. xi).

Maintaining that American democracy is worth saving, Haass calls for a new definition of citizenship that focuses on not only rights but also obligations. He defines obligations “as moral and political rather than legal commitments to be undertaken voluntarily” (p. 14). The book’s central thesis is that to sustain American democracy, obligations must take on the same importance as rights.

The Bill of Obligations—divided into two parts—is well-written with coherent and concise chapters. Part One examines the historical evolution of American rights-based democracy from the Articles of Confederation to the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. Haass argues that while it is healthy for citizens to disagree in a democracy, overfocus on rights has led to polarization and weakening of democratic institutions. He cautions readers on the dangers facing these institutions as Americans increasingly question the legitimacy of the political and electoral

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process. Haass identifies several contributing factors to U.S. “democratic deterioration,” including the high threshold to pass a constitutional amendment and the unequal representation of voters (e.g., U.S. Senate and Electoral College). He also deems the proliferation of media and misinformation a threat to American democracy.

In Part Two, Haass lays out 10 obligations to help safeguard U.S. democracy. The first is to “be informed.” In a functioning democracy, Haass stresses the importance of understanding the inner workings of government and public policy options. The second goes one step further—calling for citizens to “get involved.” This includes voting, educating others, volunteering, or championing a cause.

The next four obligations relate to compromise, civility, peace, and norms. To “stay open to compromise” means conceding, at times, for the greater good. To “remain civil” requires treating others with respect and dignity, even in disagreement. To “reject violence” and advocate peaceful resolution during conflict separate democracies from autocracies. And good citizens “value norms” when it is right, even when not required by law.

The last four obligations concern collective responsibility. Responsible citizens “promote the common good” (even when it may conflict with their individual rights), “respect government service,” and “support the teaching of civics.” They also “put country first” over party, ideology, or personality.

Of his 10 obligations, the first—being informed—is perhaps most important for preserving American democracy. With the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, it is imperative that citizens readily distinguish facts from opinions and engage in evidence-based policy debates. This requires laying a foundation, at an early age, for critical thinking, responsible consumption of media, and information literacy.

In fact, several states across the U.S. have recently passed laws that require schools to teach media and/or information literacy. These skills should be front and center in any civics course. Additionally, civics educators can encourage participation through experiential or service-learning activities, community initiatives, and capstone projects. Field experiences can provide invaluable lessons for high school and college students.

There are other recurring themes in the *Bill of Obligations* worth mentioning. First, history has shown democracies (including the U.S.) are vulnerable and difficult to maintain. Second, democracy requires ongoing participation and vigilance from citizens, along with leaders who

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exhibit virtue and integrity. And third, a vibrant and functioning democracy in the U.S. is inextricably linked to global peace and security. As Haass repeatedly warns, when American democracy is in peril, world democracies are in peril.

By elevating obligations to the level of rights, Haass offers a unique take on responsible citizenship. With the rise of populism and authoritarianism around the world, Haass provides a clear roadmap for a concerned citizenry. While the book's intended audience are American citizens, his ten obligations can apply to the citizens of any liberal democracy. This is a timely read and call to action for all citizens regardless of political party affiliation. In writing this book, Haass starts an important and necessary conversation for the future of American democracy.

About the Author:

Evan Saperstein is an adjunct professor of educational leadership at William Paterson University and a high school social studies teacher in New Jersey. He also has served as a postdoctoral fellow in the citizenship education and history teaching research lab at the University of Montreal.