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### **National Review**

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### **Hand It to Them - Rediscovering American Scripture. (American Citizens Handbook)**

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Looking idly at my bookcase the other day, I fixed on a volume I had never noticed before: The American Citizens Handbook. It had come to me, I realized, from an old friend who was moving and unloading some books. It had sat on my shelf, ignored, for years. As I fingered this book, it seemed a relic from a distant, and glowing, past. What's more, it was the product of—could this be true?—the National Education Association. Coming to know this book made me practically weep for a liberalism that has been lost, and an Americanism, too.

I did some poking around, and soon learned that I was not the first "conservative" (as descendants of Jefferson are now forced to call themselves) to take an interest in the Handbook. Michael Farris, the home-schooling leader in Virginia, discovered it in the mid 1980s. Then the education secretary, William Bennett, used it in a speech. He challenged the NEA to reissue the book, or, if it would not, to permit others to do so. The association responded flummoxed and embarrassed. One spokesman explained, "The world has changed a lot" (ah, and so has the NEA). Another sniffed, "We've got lots of other books if [Bennett] wants to pay for them."

Some years later, Lamar Alexander, running for president, mentioned the Handbook as a "virtual user's guide to America." Mike Farris tells me that he once met the man hired by the NEA to destroy the final 10,000 copies of the book. Had he been asked to burn them? asked Farris. That would be too good to be true—and it was. The man had buried them.

The NEA should hardly be embarrassed by this volume; it may be the highest service it has ever performed. The book first appeared in 1941, to coincide with National Citizenship Day (September 17). It went through six editions, of which I have the last, published in 1968.

The book was the project of Joy Elmer Morgan, a Nebraska-born

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educator and writer who lived from 1889 to 1974. For several decades, he was editor of the NEA's Journal. (I should affirm here that Joy Elmer Morgan was, indeed, a man. When I was quite young, I knew an old man named Shirley, who one day confided to me, "Everything was fine in my life till that damn Shirley Temple came along.") Morgan's name is seldom mentioned today, although he is reviled in certain right-wing publications as a proponent of world government and all-around threat. If Morgan could stand as the "Left," however, conservatives would dance in the streets.

The Handbook is a great treasury. It was originally intended to prepare young citizens for their responsibilities as voters, and as adults generally. It is a compilation of just about everything that is significant and outstanding about the United States. The work is serious, earnest, heartfelt. It is, as the NEA noted in the 1968 edition, both "inspirational and informative." It is, of course, patriotic, but in the most thoughtful way. There is nothing blinkered or rah-rah about it. The book might appear to the contemporary reader quaint-something on the order of a girl's memory album, circa 1909-but, as I absorbed its pages, I was startled by the power it carried. It puts forth an American creed, although this creed is a big and generous one, waiting to be embraced by anyone, or rejected by anyone-including the NEA.

At the end of his introduction, Morgan exhorts: "Read this book carefully; study the documents on which your rights as a citizen are based; memorize its songs and poetry." A body could do worse.

The opening essay, as well, belongs to Morgan: "Your Citizenship in the Making." Its most striking quality, along with wisdom, is gratitude: "It is a high privilege to be a citizen of the United States. There are those in less fortunate circumstances who would gladly give all they possess for the mere chance to come here to live." That is a bracing statement, and an obviously true one. Try out a couple more of Morgan's bracing, obviously true statements:

Democracy can find its fullest expression in the roots of religion, which has ever emphasized the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. For democracy to reach its highest fruition, our society must include that larger liberty and justice preached so eloquently by the Hebrew Prophets and by Jesus.

No one would contend that the Constitution is a perfect document. The very men who framed it were conscious of its shortcomings. . . . We have our difficulties agreeing among ourselves as to what we want the Constitution to be and how we want it to be interpreted or administered. But these are small matters as compared with the great fact of the Constitution itself, standing between us and chaos, between us and a return to the brutalities and confusion of earlier centuries.

Talk like that can, today, get you laughed out of school-quite literally.

The next section of the Handbook lays out the "Characteristics of the Good Democratic Citizen." (A lot of these titles cannot help provoking present-day giggles, which is part of our problem.) In 1949, a branch of the Defense Department asked a branch of the NEA to come up with a description of the "good democratic citizen." A committee was duly formed, and a document resulted, listing 24 characteristics, with subsets for each. What is most remarkable about them is the balance they achieve. They are a beautiful melding of the "liberal" and the "conservative." For example, under "Respects and upholds the law and its agencies," we have, "[The good democratic citizen] respects and supports officers who enforce the law, but does not permit his zeal for law enforcement to encourage officials to infringe upon guaranteed civil rights." (We also read, "understands what perjury means and testifies honestly"-ahem.) On the international front, we have, "Knows about, critically evaluates, and supports promising efforts to prevent war, but stands ready to defend his country against tyranny and aggression."

Several of these characteristics, the NEA would choke to enunciate today. "Since the people are intelligent enough to govern themselves, they do not need protection by censorship"-this would appear to preclude campus speech codes. Furthermore, that good democratic citizen "rejects all group claims to special privilege"-bad news for affirmative action. And get a load of this one: Under "Puts the general welfare above his own whenever a choice between them is necessary," we read, "avoids the abuse of public benefits (e.g., the misuse of unemployment compensation by a process of malingering)." This is truly a foreign language.

This section, like the Handbook itself, is hardly naive or unrealistic. The effect of the whole is not at all treacly or goody-goody. Yet it is a strong antidote to cynicism and the suffocating cloak of irony: Our good democratic citizen "is critically aware of differences between democratic ideals and accomplishments, but works to improve accomplishments and refuses to become cynical about the differences."

An essay by Henry Steele Commager comes as a hell of a jolt. If anyone represents the old liberalism-the liberalism of this volume-it is Commager. The gulf between him and, say, Eric Foner today is enormous. Of course, Professor Foner is no liberal; we simply have to call him that, in accordance with a foolish and misleading political taxonomy. (Angela Davis, the Communist Party official, is often described in the press as a liberal, as we Right-types have long liked to note.) In "Our Schools Have Kept Us Free" (another of those titles), Commager makes a stirring case for common education, and in particular for its assimilative power. "How, after all, [are] millions of newcomers to become 'Americans'-in language, in ways of life and thought, in citizenship?" The common school, he writes, has served "the cause of American democracy." The truth is, this most heterogeneous of modern societies-profoundly varied in racial background, religious faith, social and economic interest-has ever seemed the most easy prey to forces of riotous privilege and ruinous division. These forces have not prevailed; they have been routed, above all, in the schoolrooms and on the playgrounds of America.

Commager wrote these words in 1950. And how are the "forces of riotous privilege and ruinous division" faring now? Pretty well, huh? This is what compels us "conservatives" to retreat to school choice and let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom, the common school, which bound the country together, having crumbled, not least because of the illiberal urgings and practices of the NEA.

The Handbook is stocked with key documents (the Magna Carta, the Gettysburg Address), portraits, mini-bios, aphorisms, telling facts, assorted tidbits. Its second half is dominated by the "Golden Treasury" (sigh, snort), which is an anthology of literary and other items with which civilized people should be acquainted. It begins with the Bible, moves on to Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, et al., and continues in a glorious potpourri, a storehouse of pluralism and diversity (a good word stolen and perverted by a race-obsessed New Left). We have in this book the evidence of a nation, and a civilization. Here, the bond holds firm; the salt retains its savour.

But who will taste? America is a young country, as everyone says, but we seem to have lost so quickly our . . . our nationhood. Our cultural and spiritual nationhood. This handbook was last published in 1968, but it might as well be an archeological find, a dusty curiosity. An NEA statement produced in the book-"Education for All American Youth"-seems almost reactionary today. Why? How did what was liberal become "conservative" (or worse) so fast? How did it happen that "liberals," in the late 1990s, rallied around-with pulsing passion-a president who had a) used a 21-year-old intern for sex, b) perjured himself in court proceedings, c) abused his office, d) tampered with witnesses, e) cheated, lied, defamed, f)-but that is another rant (though a clearly related one). The good liberal fashioners of The American Citizens Handbook could never have been Clintonites.

This little book-or not so little: over 600 pages-undeniably did something to me, and for me: It stirred what some guy once called "mystic chords of memory." It would do the same for others. And if that memory were totally absent, the book would install it.

I tell you, I will never give up my copy-I would fear not finding another. I would like to share it with children. While reading it, I refrained even from making notes in it, unwilling to deface it. It is sick, though-positively sick-that I should feel this way. That I should feel that I possess something rare and talismanic, something quasi-forbidden, almost underground. This stuff should be as common as water- and it was. It should be again. It could be again, if people wanted it, demanded it. All those volumes that lie a-molderin' in their grave: We should dig 'em up.

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