

The Tocqueville Forum  
on the Roots of American Democracy

Introduction to Keynote Lecture,  
Conference on “The Future of Civic Education in America”  
delivered by  
The Honorable Antonin Scalia, C’57  
of the Supreme Court of the United States  
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Introduced by Patrick J. Deneen  
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Good evening. My name is Patrick Deneen. I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Government and the Founding Director of the Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy, an initiative housed in Georgetown’s Department of Government.

This is a very special evening for us, most of all because of the guest we welcome to campus tonight. But it is also a special evening because it marks the inaugural event of the Tocqueville Forum, a conference on the theme of “The Future of Civic Education in America.” Before I introduce our guest – who really needs no introduction – I’d like briefly to say a few words about the idea behind the creation of “The Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy.”

Perhaps the best way to describe the impetus behind the “Tocqueville Forum” is by reflecting for a moment on the storied Hoya tradition according to which students step around, and avoid treading upon, the seal of Georgetown University that lies on the top of the steps of this very building, Healy Hall. I, for one, admire traditions such as these, and praise Georgetown and its students for observing, transmitting, and celebrating them.

However, traditions can be, and often are, double-edged: they can often obscure the very thing that they seek to preserve. Traditions are always in danger of becoming

thoughtlessly repeated rote practices. In this case, the habituated automatic avoidance of stepping upon the seal can in fact serve to blind us to the reasons that lie originally behind the very creation of this tradition. What do we enact when we avoid stepping upon the seal? What does the action represent?

As with any tradition, its origins have been obscured by time and by the passing from this place of the people who began its practice, those who began it NOT that it become a tradition, but because it was a conscious and meaningful act. We can only surmise the grounds for the practice by the practice itself, and in this instance, an educated guess leads us to one obvious conclusion: to step on something is to treat it with disrespect. “Don’t Tread on Me” was the watchword of our colonial forefathers in demanding respect from the British Crown. Not to tread on the seal is most obviously a reflection of the respect accorded to that symbol by our forbears at this University.

A further question then comes to mind: *what* about the seal is deserving of respect? We see the seal almost constantly on this campus – even now, it occupies a place of esteem at the front of this august Hall. If familiarity, in this case, does not breed contempt, it can all too easily result in indifference and neglect. There it sits in the background, emanating legitimacy and authority without by itself demanding attention or reflection upon its meaning on our part.

The seal, which symbolizes Georgetown’s self-understanding, is really quite remarkable and worthy of reflection. It portrays an American eagle emblazoned with the nation’s shield, and surrounded by 17 stars that represent the number of States at the time of the Seal’s creation. Below the Eagle is highlighted the number 1789 – the year of Georgetown’s establishment, as well as that of the ratification of the American Constitution. In one claw the eagle holds the globe, adorned with calipers – an instrument used for precise mathematical measurement. In the other, it holds the cross. The motto in a scroll clenched in the eagle’s beak reads “Utraque Unum” – both one.

What the seal reflects is Georgetown University's deep and fundamental identification with the United States of America, and especially America's founding and its roots in the Western philosophical and religious traditions. Drawing upon reason and faith, Athens and Jerusalem, upon the Jewish and the Christian Bible, and later, seeking to reconcile the Blue and the Grey, Georgetown's self-understanding is that of a synthesis of the great traditions of the West that together form the roots of America's constitutional order – a constitution of ordered liberty. The seal of the University, an institution located HERE in this nation's great capital city, is a reminder, and promise, that Georgetown will attend to preserving and deepening our understanding of the American regime with which it was simultaneously born.

The tradition of stepping around the seal is at once praiseworthy and worrisome. As a tradition, it represents a mechanical act that no longer draws upon the original sources of reverence for Georgetown's own self-understanding as an American institution devoted significantly to a deeper understanding of America and its roots in the West. The daily repetition of this tradition is practiced amid a growing and widespread decline of civic literacy and a corresponding lack of deeper knowledge about American institutions and America's founding ideals among many of today's students.

The Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy was conceived as an initiative to redress this decline, and, in effect, to make us conscious of the grounds for stepping around the seal. It does not seek whatsoever to overthrow this tradition, but rather to foster vibrant and conscious understanding, and a respect for, the very grounds for this practice. At the same time, the Tocqueville Forum will not adopt an uncritical stance nor serve as a giddy cheerleader of this tradition and American institutions. In keeping with its namesake, the great French analyst of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, the Tocqueville Forum seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of our tradition, with all of its virtues and too, its faults, as the truth guides us. However, we believe that any critical perspective must begin first with a firm understanding of, and sympathy for, the conditions that made possible such a critical enterprise, and the freedom to engage upon it, including the freedom that made the establishment of this University possible.

Criticism without sympathy and respect too often takes the form of petulant ingratitude. True criticism is the result of gratitude and loyalty.

I, for one, do not attribute to, nor lay blame for, this decline of understanding about America and its philosophic sources on undergraduates themselves, but rather to dominant numbers of leaders and faculty in America's institutions of higher education. A conscious decision has been made in America's leading academic institutions that an informed knowledge about American institutions and the political philosophy that informed the founders of this nation is no longer what Universities should be in the business of providing. This decision takes the appearance of a kind of benign neglect, but in fact in many instances that appearance serves simply as a mask for a widespread hostility shared among many of today's academics and administrators toward mere parochialism in the form of an emphasis upon one's own nation. The buzzwords today on college campuses are multi-culturalism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism. The quaint tradition of stepping around the University's seal continues even amid the hollowing out of the more substantive tradition, at Georgetown and elsewhere, of requiring as a part of a university education the knowledge of American political thought and its roots in the Western philosophic and religious traditions.

I could speak at greater length about why this decision represents a deep disservice to our students, but I will limit myself to the following observation: the apparent benign neglect of an education in American ideals and institutions, and their sources in the Western tradition, is often implicitly made under the assumption that students already know what is their own. We urge our students to look outward, beyond their ready and limiting familiarity with America and the Western Tradition. If, in fact, our students lack any such easy familiarity, if in fact they have not been provided a deeper encounter with their own tradition – a fact that survey after survey, and anecdote after anecdote all attest to – then we, the caretakers of America's Universities, are actively depriving our students of self-understanding. At the entrance of the oracle of Delphi were inscribed the words *gnothi seaton* – “Know Thyself.” Before one seeks the wisdom of the cosmos, one must know oneself. Appropriately, all too often, those who sought out the counsel of the

Oracle of Delphi misunderstood its counsel because they lacked self-knowledge, often with catastrophic results. If knowledge and wisdom begin with self-understanding, can one hope to understand anything if one is ignorant of whom one is?

It is then altogether fitting and meet that the inaugural event of the Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy be a conference on the Future of Civic Education. Far from simply assuming that Civic Education - that is, an education in citizenship - *has* a future, at the heart of this conference, and indeed, the mission of the Tocqueville Forum, is the belief that any such future, if there is to be one, needs active and conscious articulation and defense. One cannot simply take for granted that students can or will acquire a deeper knowledge of their own tradition and its sources. The Tocqueville Forum will endeavor to sponsor events such as this, and other colloquia, lectures, and workshops, support faculty and student research and sponsor courses and seminars, all in an effort to defend and extend the teaching and exploration of the American democratic order and its roots in the Western tradition.

Perhaps most fittingly, we begin the activities of the Tocqueville Forum with a keynote lecture by one of Georgetown's own, a graduate of the Class of 1957, and a man who has devoted his adult life to deep reflection upon, and a spirited defense of, the American constitutional order. We are deeply honored to have with us tonight, in order to speak on the subject of "Constitutional Government and Civic Education in America," Associate Justice Antonin Scalia of the Supreme Court of the United States. Justice Scalia was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Ronald Reagan in 1986 after serving for four years on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Often considered to be the court's leading intellect, Justice Scalia's jurisprudence of textualism has become one of the guiding philosophies in defense of judicial restraint, by which the will and desire of the judge is restrained by the rule of law. It is this devotion to the rule of law, and not the will of the self, that above all makes Justice Scalia the truly ideal speaker on this subject tonight. For there can be no greater measure of citizenship than that capacity to subordinate one's own desires to the laws of the republic.

It gives me great pleasure and it is with gratitude and great pride that I welcome back to his alma mater, a member of the Class of 1957 of Georgetown College, and Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States, the Honorable Justice Antonin Scalia.