MULTUM, NON MULTA: TEACHING GOVERNMENT THROUGH HUMANITIES COURSES

by Rick Trumbo, Veritas School

Classical Christian schools feel pressure from a variety of sources to "be like everyone else." Parents who were not classically educated may wish their children's experiences to resemble their own. Some wonder how colleges will interpret transcripts that don't look like the typical progressive school's. Will universities have categories for courses like logic or rhetoric? Will they dismiss the credits for Bible and theology?

Let's be honest. Sometimes the most intense pressure to "be like everyone else" comes from classical educators ourselves. Many of us were not educated classically, and departing from our experiences and habits of thinking is hard. The absence of a course labeled "U.S. Government" on our transcripts causes no little discomfort for many of us. After all, is it not one of the goals of education to cultivate good citizens? Should classical schools be offering courses on U.S. Government? I will argue that a number of mission-aligned paths to equipping our students with the skills, knowledge, and habits of virtuous citizens enables us to meet that goal without a dedicated course.

Every school is plagued by the practical scarcity of time, and Veritas is no exception. On top of typical school classes, logic, rhetoric, and fine arts requirements crowd the schedule. Our students carry heavy loads. What would give way for yet another course? How would our students manage yet more work? For over a decade I taught Advanced Placement U.S. Government in a more progressive school; such a course would place very heavy burdens upon students who are already grappling with great ideas, great literature, and great writing assignments.

MULTUM, NON MULTA

Classical educational philosophy seeks the integration of disciplines and connections between topics. A U.S. Government course moves contrary to that philosophy. Classical schools should offer fewer but more broad-ranging courses in the spirit of the ancient educational dictum, "Multum, non multa" ("Much, not many things").

While narrow specialty courses fill progressive schools' offerings, integrationist classical educators recognize that students learn best when topics are studied in meaningful context. In other words,

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lyAmerican government is better understood within humanities courses than when isolated by itself. In humanities courses, students meet models of good government in concrete situations, allowing them to see and reflect on the historical evolution of such concepts as liberty, the law of Nature, and rights. In contrast, the AP Government exam dictates that a government course be taught with a "presentist" focus.

Consider the arguments of C. S. Lewis in "On the Reading of Old Books," a preface to his book on one of the church fathers. He asserts that each era has its own blind spots, assumptions that are universally, but unconsciously, held in a given society. Lewis argues that the best corrective to our blind spots is to read books from earlier eras. These eras, too, will have had blind spots, but because they differ from ours, the writings that those eras spawned will expose and challenge our assumptions. Exposure to old books makes us less blind in our own age.

Contemporary texts in U.S. government are beset by contemporary blind spots, and specialized government courses rarely question the current age's assumptions. Who among us has taken a government course that challenged the legitimacy of democracy or the notion that authority arises solely from the consent of those ruled? When was the last time we read a serious defense of monarchy? During Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation, many of his critics and nearly all of the media—folks well-instructed in modern U.S. government—were appalled that he believed in the Law of Nature! Setting government instruction inside the study of history and literature might heal such ignorance and will certainly equip students to think for themselves about issues of governance and politics by exposing them to the range of ideas and practices that fill history. Our country's foundations and our Constitution are best understood by those who study the great books, political debates, and ideas that shaped the thinking of our Founding Fathers.

Metaphors and analogies offer enriched understanding of both terms being compared. Teaching U.S. Government in the context of ancient and medieval humanities courses brings the power of those comparisons to bear. I have always included large amounts of U.S. political theory when I teach these courses. Students better understand ancient governments by comparing and contrasting them with the United States. Simultaneously, their understanding of American government and practice is enhanced as they learn about governments of the past. Alexander Hamilton, in Federalist 69, explained how the president would be like a king, "only weaker in all respects." That explanation is far clearer to a student familiar with ancient Greek or medieval kingship.

Rejecting the temptation to be "just like everyone else" and embracing classical education thoughtfully, we must jettison the notion that our students' transcripts conform to progressive school models. In the early modern era, government and economics were studied as elements of moral philosophy. Adam Smith—author of *The Wealth of Nations*—and John Locke—writer of *Second Treatise on Government*—were professors of moral philosophy, not of economics or government.

Like those early modern schools, we ought to integrate study of government into the most natural and fruitful settings: humanities, Bible, and logic classes.

WHAT DOES SUCH INSTRUCTION LOOK LIKE AT VERITAS?

Early in our eighth grade Classical Humanities course, students read a debate in *Herodotus* between Persian leaders arguing for different forms of government. One lauds democracy, another aristocracy, and Darius (who wins the debate) monarchy. Students, after discussing the arguments, write an essay on what they believe to be the best form of government, and why. The study of Greek history opens another opportunity to discuss various forms of government. The discussion leads to the annual Athens vs. Sparta debate, pitting Athenian democracy against the Spartan "mixed constitution." We discuss Plato's criticisms of democracy after having read Pericles' "Funeral Speech" defending Athens. Later in the course we read Polybius on the Roman constitution, with his emphasis on the necessity for the separation of powers and checks and balances. Sophocles' *Antigone* raises the issue of individual conscience versus the obligation to obey the community; Romans 13:1–7 offers students biblical instruction on the question. Throughout these discussions, I compare Greek and Roman practices to elements of the United States system of government. We draw connections from the Athenians' selection of their highest officials by lots to our country's contemporary use of lots to select jurors!

Through this broader approach, students at Veritas learn the workings of American government, including technical terms such as judicial review, sovereignty, confederation, legitimacy, and legislative initiative, as well as the broader concepts such as checks and balances, separation of powers, natural law, and fundamental rights. These terms and concepts are more concrete for our students because they are embedded in the workings of ancient classical governments and in the history of these regimes. These ideas are also enriched by the analogies between classical and modern governments. Veritas students additionally have the opportunity to discuss aspects of government in a moral framework, drawing upon the great works of classical antiquity, such as Livy, who insists that the character of leaders and citizens is crucial to sustaining liberty.

If students are to be truly educated in American government, they must learn more than the technical data of civics. If they are to think classically and biblically about politics and government, they must be encouraged to raise questions and to apply biblical and ethical insight to political issues. The integration of U.S. government and politics into our humanities courses allows this broader, richer discussion in a way that specialty courses typically do not.

FOR FURTHER READING

Parents who wish to read further might begin with some of the primary texts mentioned within the main body above. *The Federalist Papers* clearly demonstrate that the U.S. Constitution was the product of deep reflection upon Greek and Roman history. For those who do not have the leisure to read all of the papers, numbers 9, 10, 51, 63, and 69 will be a helpful overview. The single best book on government I have ever read is Aristotle's *Politics*, which should be read in its entirety. The book raises the right questions and offers crucial categories for thinking about government. More contemporary reading that will help parents understand what is at stake include Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction* (which includes a trenchant biblical critique of modern philosophies of history, economics, and sociology), C. S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, and a secular writer's critique of contemporary education, *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom.

Grammar holding the keys to the door of the seven liberal arts. Woodcut from 1508.