

# Making the Past into Prologue: A Response to Professor Bennett

Stephen T. Leonard, *University of North Carolina*

I am reticent to reply to Professor Bennett's comments for two related reasons. First, because he and I generally agree on the importance of civic education in the mission of academic political science,<sup>1</sup> and I do not wish this point to be lost in our disagreements. Second, because much of his argument actually augments the case for pessimism about that mission. I find myself in the uncomfortable position of wishing his more-hopeful reading of the discipline's past was right, even while I turn it into grist for doubts about the future. Bennett reworked Shakespeare in order to set a positive tone for thinking about the future of civic education in academic political science. "The Past Need Not Be Prologue," his title proclaims. Unfortunately, however, in this matter the Bard's original phrase, "what's past is prologue," fits the evidence—including Professor Bennett's evidence—much better than Bennett's revised version.

Consider, first, Bennett's attempt at argument-by-exemplars.

As he sees it, civic education advocates may have reason for hope because there have been and are famous political scientists like Charles Merriam and M. Kent Jennings whose careers show that scholarship and civic education need not be at odds.<sup>2</sup> But as is often the case, exemplars that are also exceptions only serve to prove the norm. Both Merriam and Jennings gained their reputations from their research, not their civic education activities. Or put differently, the examples of Merriam and Jennings show that successful scholars can also be committed civic educators, but in the final analysis it is wise to remember (in Professor Bennett's own words) that "success in political science departments, as is true throughout academe, comes to researchers and, in lesser measure, trainers of graduate students."

Consider, too, Bennett's attempt to resuscitate the civic education credentials of William Bennett Munro. Bennett says he finds "troublesome" my reading of Munro's assertion that civic education was "pure futility and waste," claiming instead that Munro meant "that money spent on 'campaigns for the promotion of better citizenship' (Munro 1928, 7) in the absence of scientific methods to improve understanding of politics was wasted."

Bennett is right: Munro was opposed to unscientifically informed civic education. But the problem, as Munro's 1927 APSA Presidential Address reveals, is that for Munro this meant every form of civic education that had ever been tried. On Munro's view, the advancement of science must precede the advancement of civic education, which is why he called for more research, and why he called civic education efforts "pure futility and waste." Moreover, the kind of civic education that could be consistent with Munro's conception of science probably isn't exactly what Bennett and other civic educators have in mind. My understanding is that Munro's ideal civic education would have entailed little more than convincing "citizens" to defer to the authority of experts in all matters political.

That Bennett would choose to defend Munro is puzzling enough, but what is most troubling is that Bennett himself lends support to present-day advocates for the priority of research. Even today, a full 70 years after Munro issued his call for more research, Bennett believes "we need more research on how young people learn and we need to apply improved understanding of the psychology of learning to designing more effective civic education experiences." Following Munro, this would mean more support for research and less effort spent on the

"futility and waste" of unscientific reformism.

I hope Professor Bennett will forgive me if I remain skeptical about such calls, especially after reviewing the intellectual achievements and civic contributions of academic political science over the better part of the last century. More to the point, I hope that Professor Bennett will forgive me if I continue to believe that the intellectual and political failures of academic political science are not the result of insufficient or incomplete research, but the effect of having all too often failed to ask the right questions in the first place (about which, more below).

Consider, finally, what is the most important, and most problematic, theme in Bennett's comments.

Somehow, Bennett hopes, the current trends of declining numbers of majors, high levels of student political apathy among students, and (potential) downsizing graduate programs, might together serve to reinvigorate the discipline's commitment to civic education.

With all due respect, it is beyond my ken to understand why Professor Bennett has pinned his hopes on these developments. In the first place, the historical evidence from other disciplines that have experienced similar declines, like rhetoric, philosophy, history, or classics, shows that academics did not abandon the research model even when the institutional status of their disciplines was eroding. My bet is that the response of political scientists will keep (and in some places already have kept) to this script. The pattern will be familiar: Adopt a Maginot Line mentality in relation to cost-cutting university administrators and, when the Line begins to collapse, watch as the "prominent scholars" in the affected departments abandon their colleagues and students in order to take jobs at more "prestigious" institutions

where greater support for research and fewer teaching demands await. In this, I am nearly certain that what's past is prologue.

In the second place, Professor Bennett seems to assume that better civic education might attract more students, if not necessarily to political science at least to civic education programs in other disciplines. About this assumption I have very serious reservations. Indeed, I am convinced that even the most exciting and effective civic education programs will do little to stem the persistence of political apathy in American politics or to bring students back in to political science.

With this, we come back to the fundamental issues at stake in the debate about academic political science and civic education. As I tried to suggest in my earlier article, whether political scientists should commit themselves to civic education is merely one of a larger set of concerns over how civic commitment

and civic engagement can survive in societies like the United States. When power and status is for the most part, and increasingly, predicated on practices that set every citizen (as Adam Ferguson once put it) "in competition with his fellow creatures, and he deals with them as he does with his cattle and his soil, for the sake of the profits that they bring" (Ferguson 1995, 24), it is difficult to imagine that civic commitment will be high in most peoples' minds. To believe that such a people would flock in droves to civic education programs is to believe that they would commit themselves to a value system often designed to undermine everything they have learned about how one "gets ahead." And, as I said previously, this is no less true in the academic republic than it is in the political republic.

It is not encouraging to note that the intellectual legacy and dominant research programs in academic political science have probably done

more to obscure than clarify our theoretical understanding of these issues or that, initiatives like the TFCE notwithstanding, this legacy has led political scientists to virtually ignore them as matters of pedagogical concern or professional ethics.

But these issues are perhaps best explored more fully in other venues. For the moment, I will have to be content with once again posing the problem in stark terms that most academics can readily grasp: How far will excellence in civic education get you when you are trying to get hired, tenured, and promoted? Professor Bennett suggests that such endeavors may be worth doing if only for the fact that they are "a line on a *vita*." But he knows full well, as his own evidence shows, that the lines that count—the ones that get you hired, tenured, and promoted—are listed in the "Publications," not the "Public Service," section of the professional resume.

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## Notes

1. I regret that I did not make perfectly clear my position on civic education. Bennett warns that I "should be careful of what [I] ask for" if political scientists turn their backs on civic education. My intention was only to write a historical sketch that helped explain

why political scientists actually have neglected civic education—not to advocate such neglect. I apologize for my lack of clarity if others, like Bennett, have taken my analysis as an expression of advocacy.

2. Bennett believes that I assume an "in-

compatibility" between research and civic education. If I made such a claim, I surely mis-spoke. My aim was only to suggest that many academics find it very difficult to commit time and energy to civic education when faced with the pressures of publishing or perishing.

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## References

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