

Script of Video by James Palombo on Campaign for an Informed Citizenry

It appears to me that we are in "civic depression." In fact, amid our current economic and war concerns, this depression may indeed be our most drastic problem. In framing this depression, consider this. In this morning's paper, I again read a piece that referenced our president, Barack Obama, as a socialist. As I often do, I shook my head in dismay. This is not because I necessarily agree that he is or isn't. Rather, it is because I know that most Americans have little understanding of what this actually means. This realization comes after a quarter of a century teaching in the post-secondary arena, addressing countless students at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and after hundreds of discussions with both public and private citizens in my thirty years of involvement with community work. In short, it is clear that when it comes to understanding only the basic tenets of liberal and conservative logics, let alone how, given the natures of capitalism and democracy, these logics play out on their own, and in terms of socialism and communism, we, as a general public, are at a loss. And this to me, especially in a country like ours, truly represents a "civic depression."

One might ask "Why is this so important, particularly in the context of it being referenced as our most drastic problem?" Well, if one begins to consider this liberal-conservative-democracy-capitalism-socialism-communism line of non-understanding, it is not hard to imagine disturbing results. Simply put, in confronting both our national and international concerns, without this understanding, we cannot have a legitimate grasp of our current situations nor our future options – we are to a great extent "in the dark." Therefore, in terms of our national concerns like unemployment, the housing crisis, income disparities, crime, taxation and governmental responsibility, if the bulk of our citizenry is unable to measure these problems against a legitimate frame of analysis, then little could be expected in terms of addressing them. And the same holds true with our international concerns. Imagine trying to comprehend what those in Europe, the Middle East or the Far East are doing if we don't really have an understanding of the political and economic structures under which they live – which coincidentally extends from an understanding of our own ideological structure. As an example, how can it be possible for us to examine and/or justify our foreign and military strategies without this understanding?

Moreover, consider what this "gap" in civic understanding can mean in terms of the political chicanery that can ensue – where politicians can simply pander to public emotions, creating half-truths and lies along the way. Or where they will do or say anything all for the sake of attracting a vote or a campaign contribution. Wouldn't this simply make trusting our political processes and our government all that more difficult? By the way, doesn't this all ring a bell?

This has troubled me so much over the years that I've recently written a book about it all. The book is titled *Criminal to Critic-Reflections Amid The American Experiment*, done by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. In short, the book relays

my experiences from being a drug dealing wise-guy and convict, who by virtue of an education program developed in prison, transitions to a social worker, professor, world traveler and writer. Importantly, along the way, significant considerations are raised relative to political, economic and social America, with none being more significant than the above noted "depression." In fact, I reference this point in relationship to having a collective identity crisis – how can we actually know who we are without understanding things like our more than clear connectedness to the nature of our capitalist process?

Obviously I think the book is a worthwhile read as it does provide an interesting story connected to issues that range from crime to capitalism, and it does point to both how this might have happened and what we might do about it. But the book is not really at point here.

What is at point is that in discussing the elements of the book with people around the country, there has developed a group of like-concerned individuals who now want to carry the ideas put forth in a more complete way. And in that context, we have formed the "Campaign for an Informed Citizenry." In essence, the call is for developing a better understanding of ideological America, an understanding that will serve to make our country a better, more open, and more civic minded place. In this sense, we are planning a tour of some twenty universities across the country that will, using the book as a point of reference in terms of how I came to things as I did, interchange thoughts about things like the "depression" as well what our "collective identity crisis" – tied to mixing the practicalities of capitalism with the ideals of democracy – may mean. It will entail providing some research links to potential research projects, evaluating what develops, doing radio spots and public discussions, and connecting the effort to internet and other media outlets. We also anticipate the effort lending itself to documentary possibilities, as well as other conference-type gatherings.

What is being proposed is by no means meant as a panacea. Rather, this is meant as a grass-roots, educationally based effort by which to create dialogue from which more dialogue and action may be taken. Looked at it in another way, the Campaign and the related tour can be seen as a catalyst for more - more dialogue, more involvement, more action, a way to "get the ball rolling" on concerns that we must sooner than later face. After all, it is no secret that the world is bringing these concerns directly to our door as we speak. So we need to get on with these concerns before we lose control over the possibility.

With all this in mind, this video is being offered to you as a "call to action." We are seeking those who see the value of making a non-partisan, grass-roots, educationally based effort, focused on making our country more civically conscious, happen. Perhaps some grand things can follow, we might even see the development of secondary, post-secondary and adult education courses from which people can better frame and discuss political, economic and social America. We essentially did this with technological skills, why not with citizenship skills?