

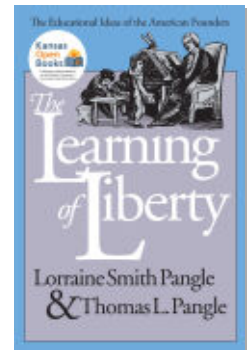


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Preface to the Kansas Open Books Edition

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Kansas Open Books Preface

This book was written at end of the Cold War, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was a time of great hopes for liberal-democratic constitutionalism, especially in countries emerging from Soviet control, including Russia itself. Now, well into the twenty-first century, we find liberal democracy on the defensive—in retreat or having been discarded in much of the former USSR; oppressed after an all-too-brief Arab Spring in most of the Middle East; subjected to strong men and beset by mass protests in much of Latin America; explicitly opposed by a growing Chinese world power; and showing signs of senility in Western Europe.

In the United States we find our Constitution still functioning but our populace gripped by deep civic doubts. We find declining faith, not least among the young, in crucial pillars of our political community: distrust, rooted often in deep misunderstanding, of major institutions; a loss of firm commitment to freedoms of speech and of the press, even or especially on campuses of higher education; and intensifying polarization of opinions accompanied by scorn for reasoned discourse in public debate, with people living more and more in bubbles of the like-minded. We find the country torn over immigration and over the question of what it means or should mean to be an American. Few of us think that there is a better form of government than the one we have inherited; most of us nonetheless have come to sense that it has ceased to work well for us. More and more of us lack an adequate understanding of the basic principles that underlie and that must animate this inheritance. These facts, we submit, are not unrelated.

In these ways the time since the original publication of our book has only vindicated the American Founders' belief that representative, constitutional democracy does not work of its own accord; that human beings are not simply by nature equipped to so govern themselves; that a careful education and cultivation of a people's hearts and minds is required to produce and foster a citizenry that sustains such a democracy.

We urgently need a stronger and more effective commitment to civic education in America at every level of schooling, including in our public schools where students graduate with scant knowledge of America's history and constitutional

principles. We need renewed attention to the fostering of all sorts of associations, formal and informal, that knit citizens together in meaningful and thus educative cooperative action. And even more than a quarter of a century ago, we need a renewed commitment to civic education in our universities, where our high school graduates' low level of civic understanding is seldom remedied. Facts and principles need to be taught, but equally essential is cultivating a spirit of respectful inquiry into and debate over those principles, debate that brings the Founders' thoughtful reflections into dialogue with their explicit and implicit rivals and critics from other times and places. The time is past for transmitting any civic faith merely through appeals to authority, but prospects are still good for reanimating our civic project in a more deliberate and critical spirit.

For rethinking the substantive content of such education as is needed in America's universities as in its schools, we contend that there is scarcely a better starting place than a renewed engagement with the reflections of our Founders. In this volume we try to approach and study those reflections with appreciation and with eagerness to learn from wiser minds by engaging them in questions and argument, aimed at understanding how their thought transcends their immediate times and continues to offer a framework for each generation's renewal of understanding of what our civic life has from the beginning aspired to be.

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