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DSDI Scholarship Essay

I plan, upon completing my PhD, to teach politics at an American University. This career appeals to me because I think that the years one spends at college can be among the most formative—it is at this age that young adults, usually living with their family until that point, begin to take responsible interest in their community. As members of the larger community of our nation, they begin to think about politics in a new way, according to their majority age status. Political questions are no longer hypotheticals: they are able to be acted on, even if only in the ballot box.

One would hope, however, that coming generations would be better invested in bringing about the well-being of their communities large as well as small. I believe that an essential goal of education ought to be forming good citizens. That goal is not unique to me: in fact, it's a goal I've borrowed from one of our Founders, John Adams. He wrote that “all the End of Study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.”

Adams' legacy and the legacy of the other Founders are worth preserving because the American Founding was uniquely intentional. In his Gettysburg address, President Lincoln recalls this intentionality when he presents America as a nation “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” This dedication was initially realized in the government established by the Articles of Confederacy and then, in a more secure form, in the American Constitution. The proposition preceding that dedication, however, is exhibited in the Declaration of Independence. The proof given by the Founders of our equality? None. For the Founders, the fact that men are created equal was a self-evident truth: it did not require proving, justification, or ten reasons why.

The self-evident proposition inspired intentional founding. It inspired action. Today, we still need citizens who take that proposition as self-evident. However I think today's students are often encouraged to read history in a jaded manner. Prudence is a fundamental political virtue, and sometimes apparent jadedness is actually prudence—however, without a basis of gratitude political action necessarily becomes destructive. Without a shared proposition of rights based in equality according to natural dignity, the political discourse essential to our Republican form of government becomes corrupted.

John Witherspoon, my ancestor, taught or aided in the education of many of the Founders and early American Political Leaders during his time at Princeton. I would be honored to continue his legacy. As a teacher, I want to teach my politics classes with a good dose of patriotism. In my undergraduate studies, I enjoyed leading a politics club at my college. My senior year, I brought a dozen students involved with the club to the capitol of Cheyenne for a “civics lesson” from members of each branch of the Wyoming state government.

Now, as president-elect of my graduate school's student association, I plan to take steps in the upcoming academic year to help develop the community of my school. Tocqueville wrote about the manner in which smaller associations are the school of American politics, about how American statesmen develop their political skills first in their household and then in the town—long before federal politics come into play. I like to think that my involvement with the “little politics” of getting a designated study space on campus for graduate students and overseeing the proper allocation of our conference reimbursement funds will help prepare me for the greatest political task there is: that of forming the minds that will make the decisions of our country.