

The Third Great American Revolution

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT

The theme for this year's NAIS Annual Conference, appropriate for the venue in Philadelphia, was "Revolutionary Traditions: Think Big, Think Great." While it is designed to encourage schools to consider their past traditions and current innovations, the theme also makes me think about three great revolutions in America, as well as the concept of leading a "revolution" itself.

More than anything, *revolutionaries are dreamers.*

The American Revolution — our first great revolution — had its roots in Richmond in 1775 and Monticello in 1776, immortalized in Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty" speech and made manifest in Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. It was fueled by the dream of freedom from tyranny and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That dream produced a rebellion that grew into the Revolutionary War and, after victory in that war, was made manifest in the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The dream compelled our forefathers to create a new kind of government, to quote Lincoln's later observation at Gettysburg, "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

The second great American revolution, as I see it, had its roots in the March on Washington in 1963, immortalized by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech. Once again, a group of Americans envisioned a better nation and did everything they could — including putting their lives on the line (though, this time, peacefully) — to make their dream a reality. We are still fine-tuning our understanding of civil rights, working for equity on multiple fronts, with that day in 1963 as our lodestar.

The third great American revolution — which is part of a larger global revolution — is occurring now, in 2013, around this great country and the world. It's a dream of educational revolutionaries regarding how we define schooling in the increasingly open Internet age. It's a dream that, when manifest, is destined to have as large an impact on America — and the world — as the

first two revolutionary dreams.

But revolution is dangerous and hard.

The First Revolution

Anyone who is a student of American history appreciates that the signers of the *Declaration of Independence* fully recognized they stood a more than even chance of being captured and executed for treason against the King of England, which makes John Hancock's bold signature all the more provocative and Patrick Henry's unambiguous "Give me liberty, or give me death" call to arms all the more inspiring. And to say it was a miracle that the outnumbered, ill-equipped, and inexpertly trained Continental Army defeated the world's best-trained, best-armed, and most-disciplined army at the time, is almost an understatement. Knowing the odds, how did the handful of patriots think they could succeed?

Revolutionaries are dreamers.

Anyone reading a James Madison biography would discover that the institutionalization of the first great American Revolution was set for eternity at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, but not without struggle. Almost every delegate arrived thinking the assembly would "reform" the *Articles of Confederation*. Madison came prepared to lead the conversation toward the alternative — an altogether new form of democratic government ultimately to be enshrined in a revolutionary *Constitution*. Initially, most delegates feared the talk of a strong centralized government, with memories of the last one they had just defeated in war, the British monarchy, fixed in their minds. But Madison — sup-

ported by his allies Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and eventually George Washington — carried the day by the power of his expertise (reading original documents on forms of government in numerous languages, including English, French, Latin, Ancient Greek, and Hebrew), by the strength of his relationships (Madison was a prototype of Malcolm Gladwell’s “tipping point” leader), and by the persistence of his voice (speaking more than 200 times at the convention).

I might add that Madison’s open-mindedness and pragmatism also served the Constitutional revolution. Although the primary voice for concentrated federal power, Madison would shift to become the primary author of the first 10 amendments — the *Bill of Rights* — that limited the very power of the federal government that he had fought for at the convention. After the convention, he lobbied for those restraining powers and rights in the *Federalist Papers* so persuasively that he ultimately carried the day in the ratification of the Constitution, state by state.

Yes, *revolution is dangerous and hard*, but America’s first revolutionaries were big thinkers and dreamers — courageous, undeterred by overwhelming odds, singularly purposeful in the knowledge that they must do what was right at any cost, and inspired by brilliance in imagining what the future could hold. And the freedoms we have as Americans — including the freedoms that make independent schools work better, in my opinion, than any other educational model in the world — were planted in the soil of that document so many generations ago.

The Second Revolution

As a student of the 1960s and 1970s (graduating from public high school in 1966 and from Williams College in 1970), I found myself in the middle of the second American revolution, the Civil Rights Movement. The “Madison” of that time was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the coun-

Callout

terpart of the Philadelphia Convention was the 1963 March on Washington and King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, a vision of the future so powerful that it is routinely identified through polls as one of the most moving and influential speeches of all time (up there with Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address”).

Revolutionaries are dreamers, and in the case of King, the sharing of the dream galvanized a movement that changed our nation for the better and continues to challenge us to live up to our national ideals of equity and justice.

But, of course, *revolution is dangerous and hard*.

The Civil Rights revolution was powerfully disruptive to the unjust status quo, but it was also lethal for many of the foot soldiers, and long to develop deep roots. Persistence, faith, vision, and moral fortitude kept them going. And now we see the effects of that movement in every segment of society today. In independent schools especially, I see the harvesting of the fruit of that difficult tilling. In many locales, independent schools and colleges are the institutions that most reflect the mosaic that is America, often much more so than neighborhood-bound public schools. The shared mission of independent schools to educate students to be both smart and good, along with their diversity initiatives and public-purpose outreach, are fueled by that revolutionary movement.

The Third Revolution

I believe that the third great transformational revolution in America — and, indeed, the world — is upon us, enabled by the Internet and the new technologies that open up limitless possibilities for how we live and work, and most important, how we teach and learn.

This third revolutionary game-changer is made possible by the advent of the Internet, particularly by the democratized access to information and knowledge, and the ability of literally anyone to be a creator of information and knowledge. It is a great equalizer — a tool fueling a new vision of human society.

In a recent series of real-life experiments in poor sections of India, South Africa, Cambodia, and Italy, educational scientist Sugata Mitra and his Newcastle University colleagues gave poor, uneducated children unsupervised access to Internet-enabled computers embedded in walls. They also placed cameras nearby to record the children’s interaction with the computers. The findings were astounding. Without teachers or mentors of any kind, the children taught themselves how to use the computers and find information — and even how to speak and read English (since English is the primary language of the Internet). In one experiment, Tamil-speaking, 12-year-old children in a south Indian village taught themselves biotechnology in English.

When poor children in the barrios, favelas, slums, and ghettos around the world, who have never been to school, can use “hole in the wall” computers to teach themselves biotechnology and other subjects, it’s clear that a learning revolution is at hand. This essential new power shifts ownership of knowledge from the elites to the masses, from the educated aristocracy to *all* citizens.

In particular, the increasingly networked world is changing much of what we know about teaching and learning, including how we define school. The MacArthur Foundation has identified five great shifts happening related to learning — all either

The Big Shifts in Education (MacArthur Foundation Rubric, My Examples)

Old Model	Examples	New Model	Examples
Knowing	Memorizing facts for a pen and paper test	Doing	Applying knowledge and skills in a demonstration of learning
Teacher-centered	Textbook-derived lecture	Student-centered	Student-led seminar and partner “labs” in all disciplines
The Individual	Competition for grades, honor roll, and class rank	The Team	Collaboration in a project-based learning context
Consumption of Info	Knowledge is expendable with a short shelf-life	Construction of Meaning	Knowledge is a means to produce long-term meaning
Schools	Place-bound: learn inside the box of the classroom	Networks	Schools without borders: learn in the local and global communities digitally and/or via expeditions
Single Sourcing	Dated information with single point of view the source of information and knowledge — the textbook	Crowd Sourcing	Experts with multiple perspectives and points of view produce and curate information — Wikipedia, etc.

made possible or accelerated by the Internet and inexpensive mobile devices to access it. The shifts are from *knowing* to *doing*, from *teacher-centered classes* to *student-centered learning*, from *the individual* to *the team*, from *consumption of information* to *the making of meaning*, from *schools* to *networks*, and from *single-sourcing knowledge* to *crowd-sourcing* (see sidebar on page XX).

Independent schools that are at the vanguard of implementing these big shifts in teaching and learning are helping to lead this third American (and global) revolution.

At the conclusion of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, narrator Nick Carraway ruminates about the death of Gatsby, symbolic of a larger societal loss:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered

in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

That great loss that Nick bemoans and Fitzgerald captures is the *capacity to dream*, to think on a monumental scale but act on an individual level. It’s that spirit of pioneering faith and grit that brought the first settlers to America’s shores and their progeny across the West.

As beautiful as this passage is, and as appropriate as it is to the novel, I don’t believe that we’ve lost this capacity. Perhaps there are times when it seems to slip away. But it was more than evident in the Civil Rights Movement, and it’s evident in the current push for new directions in education.

Revolutionaries are dreamers.

I believe that, like the Dutch sailors in *The Great Gatsby*, our forward-looking educators are among our explorers in this enchanted moment, compelled into a philosophic contemplation — perhaps even holding their breath in

excitement — about what schools can become in the coming decades of the 21st century. We literally live in a time when we will reinvent teaching, learning, and schools — in service to a better society.

But revolution is dangerous and hard.

Skeptics and naysayers abound, of course. They’ll argue that technology is mostly an expensive distraction. They’ll try to convince us that colleagues won’t buy into a 1:1 laptop or tablet program. They’ll say that colleges aren’t particularly interested in such educational experimentation.

But mounting evidence of the transformational power of Internet-based technology on learning makes it clear that these new initiatives in teaching and learning hold great promise — for all children. Indeed, for all of us. That new shore is now before you. I encourage you to be the revolutionaries this country needs; be the pioneers who pave the path to a better civilization. You have it within your power, literally, to change the world so that it matches our better dreams.

Patrick F. Bassett is president of NAIS. After 12 years at the helm, he is retiring as of June 30, 2013. This is his 48th column for Independent School.