A Vote for Latin

At first glance, it doesn't seem tragic that our leaders don't study Latin anymore. But it is no coincidence that the professionalization of politics — which encourages budding politicians to think of education as mere career preparation — has occurred during an age of weak rhetoric, shifting moral values, clumsy grammar and a terror of historical references and eternal values that the Romans could teach us a thing or two about. As they themselves might have said, "Roma urbs aeterna; Latina lingua aeterna."*

None of the leading presidential candidates majored in Latin. Hillary Clinton studied political science at Wellesley, as did Barack Obama at Columbia. Rudy Giuliani had a minor brush with the language during four years of theology at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn when he toyed with becoming a priest. But then he went on to major in guess what? Political science.

How things have changed since the founding fathers.

Of the 7,000 books originally in Thomas Jefferson's library, only a couple of dozen are still at Monticello. The rest were sold off by his descendants, and eventually bought back by the Library of Congress. The best-thumbed of those remaining — on a glassed-in shelf in Jefferson's study — is a copy of Virgil's "Aeneid."

Jefferson started learning Latin and Greek at age 9 at a school in Virginia run by a Scottish clergyman. When he was at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, a Greek grammar book was always by his side. Tacitus and Homer were his favorites.

High school, Jefferson thought, should center on Latin, Greek and French, with grammar and reading exercises, translations into English and the memorizing of famous passages. In 1819, when Jefferson opened the University of Virginia in Charlottesville (built according to classical rules of architecture), he employed only classically trained professors to teach Greek and Roman history.

This pattern of Latin learning continued for more than 150 years. Of the 40 presidents since Jefferson, 31 have studied Latin, many at a high level. James Polk graduated from the University of North Carolina, in 1818, with top honors in math and classics. James Garfield taught Greek and Latin from 1856 to 1857 at what is now Hiram College

in Ohio. Teddy Roosevelt studied classics at Harvard.

John F. Kennedy had Latin instruction at not one, but three prep schools. Richard Nixon showed a great aptitude for the language, coming second in the subject at Whittier High School in California in 1930. And George H. W. Bush, a Latin student at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., was a member of the fraternity Auctoritas, Unitas, Veritas (Authority, Unity, Truth).

A particular favorite for Bill Clinton during his four years of Latin at Hot Springs High School in Arkansas was Caesar's "Gallic War."

Following in his father's footsteps, George W. Bush studied Latin at Phillips Academy (the school's mottoes: "Non Sibi" or not for self, and "Finis Origine Pendet," the end depends on the beginning).

But then President Bush was lucky enough to catch the tail end of the American classical tradition. Soon after he left Andover in 1964, the study of Latin in America collapsed. In 1905, 56 percent of American high school students studied Latin. By 1977, a mere 6,000 students took the National Latin Exam.

Recently there have been signs of a revival. The number taking the National Latin Exam in 2005, for instance, shot up to 134,873.

Why is this a good thing? Not all Romans were models of virtue — Caligula's Latin was pretty good. And not all 134,873 of those Latin students are going to turn into Jeffersons.

But what they gain is a glimpse into the past that provides a fuller, richer view of the present. Know Latin and you discern the Roman layer that lies beneath the skin of the Western world. And you open up 500 years of Western literature (plus an additional thousand years of Latin prose and poetry).

Why not just study all this in English? What do you get from reading the "Aeneid" in the original that you wouldn't get from Robert Fagles's fine translation, which came out just last year?

Well, no translation, however fine, can ever sound the way Latin was written to sound. To hear Latin poetry spoken smoothly and quickly is to hear a mellifluous, rat-a-tat-tat language, the rich, distilled, romantic, pure, heady blueprint of its close descendant, Italian.

But also, learning to translate Latin into English and vice versa is a tremendous way to train the mind. I think of translating concise, precise Latin into more expansive, discursive English as like opening

up a concertina; you are allowed to inject all sorts of original thought and interpretation.

As much as opening the concertina enlarges your imagination, squeezing it shut — translating English into Latin — sharpens your prose. Because Latin is a dead language, not in a constant state of flux as living languages are, there's no wriggle room in translating. If you haven't understood exactly what a particular word means or how a grammatical rule works, you are likely to be, not off, but just plain wrong. There's nothing like this challenge to teach you how to navigate the reefs and whirlpools of English prose.

With a little Roman history and Latin under your belt, you end up seeing more everywhere, not only in literature and language, but in the classical roots of Federal architecture; the spread of Christianity throughout Western Europe and, in turn, America; and in the American system of senatorial government. The novelist Alan Hollinghurst describes people who know history's turning points as being able to look at the world as a sequence of rooms: Greece gives way to Rome, Rome to the Byzantine Empire, to the Renaissance, to the British Empire, to America.

You can gain this advantage at any age. Alfred the Great, the ninth-century king of England, who knew how crucial it was to learn Latin to become a civilized leader, took it up in his 30s. Here's hoping that a new generation of students — and presidents — will likewise recognize that *"if Rome is the eternal city, Latin is the eternal language."

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Harry Mount è autore del libro "Carpe Diem: Put a Little Latin in Your Life."

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