

Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Evidence 18: Noah Webster on Educating Young Americans, 1790

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Introduction

Noah Webster is best known for the dictionary he completed in 1828. His *American Dictionary of the English Language*, however, was just one of his many contributions to the cultural independence of the United States. Webster was also a strong advocate of developing an educational system more properly suited to American values and institutions than was the system we had inherited from England. Webster's *On the Education of Youth in America* captures perfectly his determination to create a new way of educating the citizens of a new nation.

Questions to Consider

- Why was education so important to the republic?
- What contrast did Webster note between American forms of government and American forms of education? How did this contrast create problems for the American people?
- How did Webster propose to remedy the situation?

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In despotic governments the people should have little or no education, except what tends to inspire them with servile fear. Information is fatal to despotism.

In monarchies education should be partial and adapted to the rank of each class of citizens. But "in a republican government," says the same writer, "the whole power of education is required." Here every class of people should know and love the laws. This knowledge should be diffused by means of schools and newspapers, and an attachment to the laws may be formed by early impressions upon the mind.

Two regulations are essential to the continuance of republican governments: 1. Such a distribution of lands and such principles of descent and alienation as shall give every citizen a power of acquiring what his

industry merits. 2. Such a system of education as gives every citizen an opportunity of acquiring knowledge and fitting himself for places of trust. These are fundamental articles, the sine qua non of the existence of the American republics.

Hence the absurdity of our copying the manners and adopting the institutions of monarchies.

In several states we find laws passed establishing provision for colleges and academies where people of property may educate their sons, but no provision is made for instructing the poorer rank of people even in reading and writing. Yet in these same states every citizen who is worth a few shillings annually is entitled to vote for legislators. This appears to me a most glaring solecism in government. The constitutions are republican and the laws of education are monarchical. The former extend civil rights to every honest industrious man, the latter deprive a large proportion of the citizens of a most valuable privilege.

In our American republics, where government is in the hands of the people, knowledge should be universally diffused by means of public schools. Of such consequence is it to society that the people who make laws should be well informed that I conceive no legislature can be justified in neglecting proper establishments for this purpose.

When I speak of a diffusion of knowledge, I do not mean merely a knowledge of spelling books and the New Testament. An acquaintance with ethics and with the general principles of law, commerce, money, and government is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state. This acquaintance they might obtain by means of books calculated for schools and read by the children during the winter months and by the circulation of public papers.

"In Rome it was the common exercise of boys at school to learn the laws of the twelve tables by heart, as they did their poets and classic authors." What an excellent practice this in a free government!

It is said, indeed by many, that our common people are already too well informed. Strange paradox! The truth is, they have too much knowledge and spirit to resign their share in government and are not sufficiently

informed to govern themselves in all cases of difficulty.

There are some acts of the American legislatures which astonish men of information, and blunders in legislation are frequently ascribed to bad intentions. But if we examine the men who compose these legislatures, we shall find that wrong measures generally proceed from ignorance either in the men themselves or in their constituents. They often mistake their own interest, because they do not foresee the remote consequences of a measure.

It may be true that all men cannot be legislators, but the more generally knowledge is diffused among the substantial yeomanry, the more perfect will be the laws of a republican state.

Every small district should be furnished with a school, at least four months in a year, when boys are not otherwise employed. This school should be kept by the most reputable and well informed man in the district. Here children should be taught the usual branches of learning, submission to superiors and to laws, the moral or social duties, the history and transactions of their own country, the principles of liberty and government. Here the rough manners of the wilderness should be softened and the principles of virtue and good behavior inculcated. The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities, and for this reason the heart should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head.

Such a general system of education is neither impracticable nor difficult, and excepting the formation of a federal government that shall be efficient and permanent, it demands the first attention of American patriots. Until such a system shall be adopted and pursued, until the statesman and divine shall unite their efforts in forming the human mind, rather than in lopping its excrescences after it has been neglected, until legislators discover that the only way to make good citizens and subjects is to nourish them from infancy, and until parents shall be convinced that the worst of men are not the proper teachers to make the best, mankind cannot know to what a degree of perfection society and government may be carried. America affords the fairest opportunities for making the experiment and opens the most encouraging prospect of success.

Source:

Noah Webster, *On the Education of Youth in America* (Boston, 1790), in

Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 41-77.