

## **The Public School Movement vs. the Libertarian Tradition\***

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Given the temper of the times it was surprising that following the American Revolution there appeared proposals for national systems of education. The libertarian tradition which fed the flames of the Revolution was staunchly opposed to a union of government and schooling. The greatest fear was that such a union would lead to despotism over the mind and be the enemy of freedom of thought and speech. Indeed, the advocates of governmental systems of education in the United States have been primarily interested in restraining and controlling freedom of thought and action and not in providing the intellectual tools for the expansion of individual freedom. To appreciate this argument, one must compare the eighteenth-century libertarian opposition to governmentally provided schooling with the several proposals for such schooling which emerged from the fears of popular political control after the Revolutionary War.

One of the major factors contributing to the despotic aspects of the post-Revolutionary education proposals was a belief by their proponents that they possessed knowledge of virtue and truth. It seemed to them natural that, if they knew how people should act and think, a system of schooling should be established to bring people into conformity with those values. The aftermath of the Revolutionary War appeared to be an opportune time to reconstruct both government and human character. To advocates of national systems of education, the reconstruction of government required control of human character and values. They believed firmly that a republican society could not exist unless people were trained to act according to certain moral and political values. The "correct" values for a republican society were, of course, those that they themselves held.

One of the lessons to be learned from the historical comparison—which we will here undertake—between the libertarian tradition and early educational proposals is the danger of the existence of any political mechanism by which people can use coercive power to impose their values on others. Most people believe they know what is right and would like to see the world conform to their vision of right

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action. In most cases this is a result not of any conscious attempt to do evil but of a firm belief in doing good and helping others. The attempt to impose values is most frequently a product of a moral crusade and not of an attempt to corrupt. If the mechanisms exist by which ideological control can be exercised over a population, these moral crusaders will use those means to further their ends. The early libertarians understood this issue and resisted attempts to give the state the power of ideological control through a centralized educational system.

The early educational proposals, with their emphasis upon molding individual character for the good of the state, set the pattern for all later discussions of the role of schooling in a republican or democratic society. Schooling was to provide the tools not for freedom but for conformity to particular values and political dogma. The early educational proposals, as we shall see, sought obedience, submission, and political conformity to the state and the law. They demanded uniformity in the educational system and control and censorship of the content of learning.

There are several important conceptual distinctions that help to clarify the differences between the early proponents and opponents of national systems of education. The most important of these differences centered around the meaning of liberty. For advocates of national systems of education, like Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, liberty meant primarily the freedom to live a Christian life. As we shall see in more detail later in the discussion, they equated virtue with leading a Christian life and argued that a Republican form of government could be maintained only if all people were virtuous. A republic provided the opportunity to be virtuous and required virtuous action.

In contrast, the libertarian tradition, as represented by Robert Molesworth, John Trenchard's and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters*, Joseph Priestley, and William Godwin, advocated liberty as a means for living a life guided by the use of reason. As Bernard Bailyn has shown in his now classic *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, it was this tradition, particularly as presented in *Cato's Letters*, which provided the intellectual underpinnings for the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> It was this tradition which put primary emphasis upon freedom of thought and speech as essential for the free exercise of reason and which, consequently, rejected the idea of government-provided national systems of education.

Another important distinction to be made is in the meaning and use of the terms "patriot" and "patriotism." This distinction will be important in considering the stress upon nationalism and patriotism by the "schoolmaster of America," Noah Webster, and the plans of Benjamin Rush to educate "republican machines" who would be subordinate to the interests of the community. When Tom Paine wrote his famous lines in 1776, "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer Soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country," he did not use "patriot" to mean an individual who was obliged to be obedient to the will of the state. "Patriotism" meant a loyalty to the spreading of freedom from tyranny. Paine wrote for the soldiers at Valley Forge, "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."<sup>2</sup> This brand of patriotism,

as we will see, is in sharp contrast to the controlling patriotic nationalism which Noah Webster sought to develop through a national system of government schools.

One American figure who stood between the politically constraining plans for national schooling and the libertarian tradition was Thomas Jefferson. On the one hand, his post-Revolutionary educational plans called for only minimal education of the great masses of citizens. His primary belief, in keeping with the libertarian tradition, was that political education should be a product of the exercise of individual reason in conjunction with a free press. On the other hand, he was concerned about education of a proper republican leadership and, to that end, prescribed censorship of the political texts to be used in that education.

Finally, before proceeding to examine these ideas more closely, we should note that neither the early libertarian tradition nor the advocates of national systems of education had very positive ideas about the education of the great masses of the people. Either they advocated education to teach people their place in society or they argued against schooling because it might lead people not to accept their place in society. When the working class movement for education developed in the 1820's and 1830's, it began as a movement stressing the importance of separating the education of the workers from the powers of government. This may, however, have been the only time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when there existed a truly popular movement for the creation of educational institutions.

### The Libertarian Tradition

The ideological struggle which provided the justification for the American Revolution took place in the vast number of pamphlets and newspapers issued from small presses in England and the colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The concern about the maintenance of a free press and free speech reflects the importance placed on the political education gained from this war of words. Bernard Bailyn has written with regard to his study of the pamphlets:

It confirmed my belief that intellectual developments in the decade before Independence led to a radical idealization of the previous century and a half of American experience, and that it was this intimate relationship between Revolutionary thought and the circumstances of life in eighteenth-century America that endowed the Revolution with its peculiar force and made it so profoundly a transforming event.<sup>3</sup>

The writings of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries which are considered to have had the most profound effect in raising revolutionary consciousness were Algernon Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698), which has been called a "textbook of revolution"; John Trenchard's and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters* (1721); and, particularly important in terms of the relationship of education to the state, Robert Molesworth's *An Account of Denmark as It Was in the Year, 1692*. Sidney died on the English scaffold in 1683 after presenting a statement to the sheriff which declared his opposition to all tyranny and stated, "I am persuaded to believe that God has left nations the liberty of setting up such governments as best please themselves."<sup>4</sup>

Caroline Robbins argues, in her detailed history of what she calls the "Commonwealthman," that heirs of Sidney's revolutionary tradition were a circle of close friends of Robert Molesworth. It was the writings of this group that not only inflamed the passions for liberty in England but also found their way across the ocean to provide an argument for revolution. The most popular writings of the group, in both England and the colonies, were *Cato's Letters*. Robbins has written about this group, "They produced a not inconsiderable body of political tracts and treatises which deserve to form a part of the English liberal tradition. None of them attained the stature of a Locke or a Sidney, but their publications attracted many readers on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a hundred years."<sup>5</sup> Bailyn writes: "So popular and influential had *Cato's Letters* become in the colonies within a decade and a half of their appearance, so packed with ideological meaning, that . . . it gave rise to what might be called a 'Catoic' image, central to the political theory of the time."<sup>6</sup>

Molesworth's *Account of Denmark* provided one of the earliest descriptions of the dangers of making the education of youth a function of government. One of Molesworth's reasons for writing his study of Denmark was that the country had undergone a transformation in 1660 from an older constitution to a modern hereditary absolutism. A key element in this transformation was the gaining of the people's absolute obedience to the state. This he found was made possible by linking religion to the state and making education a function of religion. Religious orders preached and taught a doctrine, he claimed, of submission and obedience to both heavenly and earthly rulers.

Molesworth's argument reflected the concern on both sides of the Atlantic for separation of religion from the state. His concern encompassed the broad issue of ideological control. He believed that when religion linked arms with government, religious doctrines were used to justify tyranny. When education was a function of a state-established religion, then religious doctrines were used to justify the power of the state and to mold future citizens into a condition of obedience.

In his study of tyranny in Denmark, Molesworth wrote: "enslaving the Spirits of the People, as preparative to that of their Bodies; . . . those Foreign Princes think it their Interest that Subjects should obey without reserve, and all Priests, who depend upon the Prince, are for their own sakes obliged to promote what he esteems his Interest."<sup>7</sup> After establishing the interrelationship of interests, he went on to lament that "'tis plain, the Education of Youth, on which is laid the very Foundation Stones of the Publick Liberty, has been of late years committed to the sole management of such as make it their business to undermine it."

It should be noted that Molesworth was not concerned solely with the relationship between government and the Catholic Church. In his preface, he makes it quite clear that he has found the same danger resulting, in other parts of Europe, from government support of Lutheranism. In part, Molesworth argued that the modern power of religions was their control over learning. He wrote that in former ages church people were ignorant and held in low esteem, "but since . . . through a Reformation of Manners, and Knowledge of the World, they have recovered

credit, and . . . the restored Learning of Europe is principally lodg'd among them, they have gained a much greater influence."

The major service that religion performed for the state through the education of youth, according to Molesworth, was "to recommend frequently to them what they call the Queen of all virtues, Viz. Submission to Superiors, and an entire blind Obedience to Authority." But of even greater importance was that it made the people forget that government was a product of human actions and not divine intervention. By making government appear divine in origin, religiously controlled education could teach obedience to government as if it were obedience to divine authority. In Molesworth's words, religiously controlled governmental education taught "that the People ought to pay an Absolute Obedience to a limited Government; fall down and worship the Work of their own Hands, as if it dropt from Heaven; together with other as profitable Doctrines."

One of the obvious conclusions of Molesworth's study was that education, if it were to contribute to liberty and freedom, had to be secular and separate from religion. He called for the professor to replace the priest and for students to learn the content of their classical studies rather than just the grammar. Education had to be free of religious dogma which served the state and free to lead the learner down the path of reason.

Two of Molesworth's friends, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, provided the broadest defense for the freedom of ideas and learning. Their writings gave sustenance to the endless political discussions in public houses on both sides of the ocean. Their essays were collected as the *Independent Whig* and *Cato's Letters*, first appearing in London between 1720 and 1723, and they were many times reprinted during the next twenty-five years. The essays contained the same anti-clerical attitudes as Molesworth's and sought relief in secularism and rationalism. Freedom was both a right and a necessity for the progress of nations.

Trenchard and Gordon defended freedom of thought and speech as essential for the economic and social development of a nation. In linking social progress and freedom they were able to give their defense in concrete terms rather than just as an appeal to abstract justice. They were able to say that a country needs freedom because without freedom there can be no growth in human wisdom and invention and, consequently, no progress in economic development. Tyranny and slavery stopped social development and improvement in human well-being, while freedom and liberty led to progress and happiness.

One of the earliest of *Cato's Letters* defined freedom of thought and speech as a right which could be abridged only to protect the freedom of others. In the authors' words, "Without Freedom, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as public Liberty, without Freedom of Speech: Which is the Right of every Man, as far as by it he does not hurt and controul the Right of another." This limitation, they declared, "is the only Check which it ought to suffer, the only Bounds which it ought to know."<sup>8</sup>

Humans in their original state of nature contented themselves with "the Spontaneous Productions of Nature." But these spontaneous supplies proved insuffi-

cient to support increasing numbers of human beings. The next step, then, was "to open the bosom of the Earth, and, by proper Application and Culture, to extort her hidden Stores." The differences in prosperity that existed between nations was considered largely a product of the differences in the advancement in the state of learning which allowed for greater productivity. Wisdom and art promote prosperity, which in turn provides full employment, economic well-being, and a general elevation of the spirit and culture of a people. Without the advancement of wisdom and learning would come unemployment and resulting human misery. "People, in most countries, are forced, for want of other Employment, to cut the Throats of one another, or of their neighbours; and to ramble after their Princes in all their mad conquests . . . and all to get, with great Labour, Hazard, and often with great Hunger and slaughter, a poor, precarious, and momentary subsistence."<sup>9</sup>

Such was the equation between freedom and the good life. Freedom of thought and speech promoted wisdom, which in turn provided the basis for prosperity and the elimination of the crime which grew from hunger and poverty. Within the framework of this argument, tyranny was to be avoided because it hindered the growth of wisdom, prosperity, and social happiness. "Ignorance of Arts and Sciences, and of every Thing that is good, together with Poverty, Misery, and Desolation, are found for the most part all together, and are all certainly produced by Tyranny."<sup>10</sup>

*Cato's Letters* expressed an uncompromising defense of all freedom of thought and action because of the necessity of being able to follow any line of reasoning. There could not be selective freedom of thought because knowledge was so complex that no person or groups of persons could determine before the investigation what areas of thought should be limited. "The least Cramp or Restrain upon Reasoning and Inquiry of any kind will soon a mighty Bar in the Way of Learning." The authors continued their defense of unrestrained freedom of thought in terms of the complexity of knowledge. "It is very true," they argued, "that all sorts of knowledge, at least all sorts of sublime and important knowledge, are so complicated and interwoven together, that it is impossible to search into any part of it, and to trace the same with Freedom to its first Principles, without borrowing and taking in the Help of most, if not all, of the other Parts."<sup>11</sup>

As examples of the limitation of freedom of thought, they wrote of a Bishop "burned before the Reformation, for discovering the World to be round; and, even in the last Century, the excellent Galileo was put into the dismal Prison of the Inquisition, for maintaining the Motion of the Earth round the Sun, as her Centre."<sup>12</sup> These situations resulted from government's arbitrary imposition of a religious orthodoxy which limited the search for truth by not allowing any conclusion which contradicted its dogma.

A short passage in *Cato's Letters* provides a forceful summary of the authors' arguments: "Ignorance accompanies Slavery, and is introduced by it. People who live in Freedom will think with Freedom; but when the Mind is enslaved by fear, and the Body by Chains, Inquiry and Study will be at an End." In this condition of fear, they claimed, "Men will not pursue dangerous knowledge, nor venture

their Heads, to improve their Understandings. Besides, their Spirits, dejected with Servitude and Poverty, will want vigor . . . to . . . propagate Truth; which is ever High-Treason against Tyranny." Of course, tyranny could not afford freedom, because "neither the Titles nor the Deeds of Tyrants will bear Examination; and their Power is concerned to Stupify and destroy the very faculties of reason and thinking."<sup>13</sup>

The link that *Cato's Letters* made between freedom of thought and material prosperity flowed naturally into the real set of events which sparked the industrial revolution in England. An emphasis upon reason, secularism, and practical application of knowledge to increase productivity described the intellectual conditions which were later claimed as necessary for the expansion of industrialism and technology. Technological expansion was justified in terms of promises of prosperity. Within this context, it was quite natural for the libertarian tradition to continue and grow in the later part of the eighteenth century in the industrial centers of Birmingham and Manchester. It was also logical for libertarians to expand earlier concerns about the government's use of religion to hinder freedom of thought and speech to fear of any governmental restriction on these freedoms. Fear of government's use of religious orders to educate the youth of a nation led to fear of government's direct involvement in education.

Caroline Robbins calls these late-eighteenth-century heirs of the libertarian tradition "Honest Whigs," who from the 1760's to the end of the century found themselves in the strong currents of industrialism and the reactions to the American and French revolutions.<sup>14</sup> Their main forums were the Lunar Society founded in Birmingham in 1766 and the Literary and Philosophical Society founded in Manchester in 1781. The membership of these organizations included thinkers who in their day were among the most advanced in the areas of science, economics, and politics. Their discussions, demonstrations, and debates ranged across the frontiers of knowledge.

One of the more famous members was scientist and political writer Joseph Priestley, who was a good friend of Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson and later sought refuge in the United States. Another important member was William Godwin, who was famous both for his political writings and for his wife Mary Wollstonecraft and daughter Mary Shelley. Godwin's political ideas can be found throughout the writings of his daughter's husband, Percy Shelley. Other important figures were Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Erasmus Darwin, Samuel Galton, and Josiah Wedgwood. In addition, all of these persons could claim contact with leading members of the important intellectual centers of Glasgow and Edinburgh. David Hume, Joseph Black, and Adam Smith are only a few of the names of those intellectual pioneers who freely interacted with the membership of the Lunar Society and the Literary and Philosophical Society.

In relation to freedom of thought and speech, one of the clear and often stated concerns was governmental systems of education. English historian Brian Simon has written concerning Priestley and this group of intellectuals: "In common with Godwin, however, and indeed all other dissenters, Priestley was adamantly opposed

to education becoming a function of the state. Should it do so, it would not achieve the object he desired, on the contrary, it would be used to promote uniformity of thought and belief." High regard for the importance of intellectual freedom permeated the thinking of this group, just as it had with the previous generation of libertarians. Priestley declared, "Let all friends of liberty and human nature join to free the minds of men from the shackles of narrow and impolitic laws. Let us be free ourselves and leave the blessings of freedom to our posterity."<sup>15</sup>

Priestley gave some very explicit examples of the results of state-controlled education—for instance, the attempt at Oxford to discourage the reading of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. Priestley believed that if any group gained control of the educational system they could greatly increase their power over the rest of society. He argued that education should encourage free inquiry and inspire the love for truth. State-endowed teachers would be more committed to instilling a particular set of religious, moral, or political principles than they would be to training the mind for the free use of reason. Caroline Robbins summarizes Priestley's feelings regarding education provided by the state: "The chief glory of human nature, the operation of reason in a variety of ways and with diversified results would be lost. Every man should educate his children in his own manner to preserve the balance which existed among the several religious and political parties in Great Britain."<sup>16</sup> Molesworth and *Cato's Letters* had emphasized concern with state-established religious control of education. Now there was added a concern about control by particular political groups.

Priestley's friend, William Godwin, considered national systems of education one of the foremost dangers to freedom and liberty. Godwin stated that the two main objects of human power were government and education. Of these two, education was the more powerful, because "government must always depend upon the opinion of the governed. Let the most oppressed people under heaven once change their mode of thinking, and they are free." If individuals can control the opinion of the people through education, then they can control government. If education is made a function of government, then those who control government can use education to maintain and strengthen their control. In his study of government, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin warned that "before we put so powerful a machine under the direction of so ambiguous an agent, it behooves us to consider well what it is that we do. Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions."<sup>17</sup>

It seemed obvious to Godwin that a governmentally supported system of education would not allow teachings that were contradictory to the ideology justifying that particular government. Under such a system, education would be shaped to conform to the dictates of political power. Godwin argued that "the data upon which their conduct as statesmen is vindicated, will be the data upon which their instructions are founded." Godwin based his concern on a belief that political institutions tended to favor the rich over the poor and to promote self-interested values, such as a quest for national glory, patriotism, and international economic and cultural competition between nations. From this standpoint, nationalized education would



be used to support chauvinistic patriotism and the political and economic power of the state.

For Godwin, constitutions and laws should exist only if accepted as beneficial by individual reason. Loyalty to the constitution and government, if instilled through nationalized education, would create an individual attachment based on belief rather than reason. If belief were substituted for reason then the door would be open for tyranny to reign. Godwin argued, "It is not true that our youth ought to be instructed to venerate the constitution, however excellent; they should be led to venerate truth; and the constitution only so far as it corresponds with their uninfluenced deductions of truth." Concerning law he argued that most people could understand that certain crimes were injurious to the public. Those laws which stood outside the realm of reason and had to be taught rather than understood were usually laws which gave advantages to some particular group in society. Godwin wrote, as an example, "It has been alleged, that 'mere reason may teach me not to strike my neighbour'; but will never forbid my sending a sack of wool from England, or printing the French constitution in Spain." He maintained that "all crimes, that can be supposed to be the fit objects of judicial administration are capable of being discerned without the teaching of law." People should not obey laws whose value and worth could not be determined by individual reason. Godwin declared: "Destroy us if you please; but do not endeavor, by a national education, to destroy in our understandings the discernment of justice and injustice."

While the concern of these libertarians at the end of the eighteenth century was more with political control than with the earlier concern about religious control, there are certain common elements. First was a belief in human reason and the necessity of allowing human reason to search for truth without hindrance of a particular orthodoxy. Fear of governmental appointment of religious groups to teach a dogma was replaced, at the end of the century, with a fear of governmental appointment of teachers to instill particular political doctrines. In either context, national systems of education were rejected because of their potential threat to freedom of thought.

### **Political Control through National Systems of Education**

A number of plans for national systems of education were proposed in America during this period of time. The reader should be reminded, before exploring these proposals, that it was the libertarian tradition of liberty and freedom which had contributed to shaping the ideology of the American Revolution. Indeed, as we shall see, the national systems of education which were proposed must be considered as a reaction against that tradition.

Contrary to present folklore there was no great rush to establish government systems of education following the American Revolution. The actual number of proposals was very small and none was adopted in its entirety. While the numbers were small and their ideas contrary to the libertarian tradition which fed the most radical parts of the American Revolution, these plans are nevertheless important in terms of the ideas they represented and their cultural impact, particularly in the

case of Noah Webster. Webster's plan was intimately linked to his attempt to create a national language and to the marketing of his extremely successful *American Spelling Book*. Benjamin Rush's proposal was important because of his leadership in medicine and his status as "father of American psychiatry." In many ways Rush's ideas were a prelude to what is now called the therapeutic state. Two additional proposals, by Samuel Harrison Smith and Samuel Knox, were the result of an essay contest conducted by the American Philosophical Society in the 1790's. Thomas Jefferson's proposal is important as a contrast both to these other plans for nationalized education and to the libertarian tradition.

Rush's proposal most directly challenges the libertarian tradition. His 1786 plan for the establishment of public schools in Pennsylvania declares: "I dissent from one of those paradoxical opinions with which modern times abound: that it is improper to fill the minds of youth with religious prejudices of any kind and that they should be left to choose their own principles." He stated flatly, "it is necessary to impose upon them the doctrines and discipline of a particular church. Man is naturally an ungovernable animal, and observations on particular societies and countries will teach us that when we add the restraints of ecclesiastical to those of domestic and civil government, we produce in him the highest degrees of order and virtue."<sup>18</sup>

Rush's rejection of the English libertarian tradition is interesting because his training in medicine and chemistry brought him into direct contact with their ideas and placed him in the leading ranks of the scientific and industrial revolution. Rush was born in Pennsylvania in 1746 and served as an apprentice to a Philadelphia doctor between 1760 and 1766. Between 1766 and 1769 he studied at what was considered the most advanced school of medicine, the University of Edinburgh, and traveled and studied in London and Paris. With letters of introduction from Benjamin Franklin he was able to make contact with some of the leading intellectuals and scientists in Edinburgh and London. Upon returning to the colonies he established his medical practice in Philadelphia and began teaching chemistry at the College of Philadelphia. During the Revolution he served as physician general to the Revolutionary Army.<sup>19</sup>

One of the unique features of the writings of this "father of American psychiatry" is his reduction of political and social problems into medical or mental problems which might be cured by the physician. At the heart of his conceptual framework was the belief that all human beings had a moral faculty which led them to avoid evil instinctively. Evil acts were often the result of disease or some other physical factor which weakened the moral faculty. He prophesied that it might eventually "be as much the business of a physician as it is now of a divine to reclaim mankind from vice."<sup>20</sup> As an example of this tie between political problems and mental problems, he once wrote in reference to Alexander Hamilton's financial program, "The funding system, and speculation in bank script, and new lands have been fruitful sources of madness in our country."<sup>21</sup>

During and after the Revolution, Rush expressed concern about the spread of democratic ideas and the rise of what he called "mobocracy." He believed that

popular control of government might lead to its control by the irrational emotions of the masses of people. In the one essay on the Revolution, he described the Tories as suffering from a hypochondria caused by exile and confinement. Among the Revolutionaries, there appeared after the war "a species of insanity, which I shall take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of Anarchia."<sup>22</sup>

Rush proposed that a governmentally provided system of education would strengthen the moral faculty and keep the American citizen from slipping into mobocracy and the disease of Anarchia. In one of his more famous passages on the goals of state education, he wrote: "I consider it . . . possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the government of the state."<sup>23</sup>

Both the justification and goals of Rush's proposed educational system centered upon subordination to the authority of government. In fact, one of the major goals of his educational system was to train the individual to be obedient and submissive to the will of the state and to give up ownership of self to ownership by the state. He wrote in his educational proposal, "Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it."<sup>24</sup>

Rush believed that a state educational system would provide for the necessary inculcation of republican duties. These duties meant primarily a willingness of the individual to sacrifice for the good of the state. This sacrifice extended to property. Rush wrote, "He must be taught to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the state."<sup>25</sup>

For the proper education of youth, Rush proposed that "the authority of our masters be as absolute as possible . . . . By this mode of education, we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic." Rush demanded very strong control over youth and argued that the most useful citizens were formed from those youths who "have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age."<sup>26</sup>

Rush was one of the first writers to argue for the superiority of government over the family in providing education. By the end of the nineteenth century one of the constant refrains was that the family was collapsing or failing in its duties and the school had to pick up the pieces. Rush made a similar argument in 1786 when he wrote, "society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to the deficiencies of parental government being supplied by those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools."<sup>27</sup>

The goal of producing submissive republican machines was reflected in the authoritarian political structure which Rush proposed for the educational system of Pennsylvania. He envisioned a single university located in the state capital at the top of a pyramid of schools. In this structure an individual would enter a free school in the local township and from there proceed to a county academy and then to one of four regional colleges. From the colleges the best students would go to the university.

All schools in this system were to be uniform in their teachings and conform to a single state philosophy. "The same systems of grammar, oratory, and philosophy will be taught in every part of the state, and the literary features of Pennsylvania will thus designate one great and equally enlightened family." To aid in creating this coherent system, teachers were to be produced by the system itself. "The University will in time furnish masters for the colleges," wrote Rush, "and the colleges will furnish masters for the academies and free schools."<sup>28</sup>

Here was a vision of republican education which promised obedience to a uniform curriculum and philosophy while at the same time reproducing the ideal character structure for the system by internal training of teachers. Rush justified the use of general taxation to support the system with another argument which, along with concern about the failure of the family, was to later become a constant refrain. Public education, he argued, would eventually provide an economic return to the taxpayer in the form of an improved economy and a reduction in the crime rate.

Whereas it might be difficult to measure the impact of Rush's ideas regarding education, it is not difficult to give specific figures regarding Noah Webster's impact on American culture and thinking about education. Webster, "the Schoolmaster of America," was one of the most extraordinary intellectuals of his time. A prolific writer of political and social essays, he left as legacy a standardized American Dictionary of the English Language, an American version of the Bible, and his famous "Blue-Backed Speller." Through the wide usage of the Speller and his development of the Dictionary, Webster cast a lasting mold for the American language.

It would also seem that Noah Webster made a political contribution to the development of the American common school system. Between 1815 to 1819 he served in the Massachusetts Legislature and worked actively for a state school fund. In a speech which captures the flavor of what he believed could be the result of a government system of common schools, he told the legislature, "I should rejoice to see a system adopted that should lay a foundation for a permanent fund for public schools, and to have more pains taken to discipline our youth in early life in sound maxims of moral, political, and religious duties. I believe more than is commonly believed may be done in this way towards correcting the vices and disorders of society." One historian claims that Webster's work in the state legislature began the movement for common schools which culminated in the work of Horace Mann in the 1830's.<sup>29</sup>

Born in Connecticut in 1758, he began his early career as a country schoolmaster. While teaching in 1779 he conceived the idea of developing a new system of American education. In 1783 he completed the Spelling Book which was the first of three volumes in a series entitled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. In 1784 he completed a grammar book as the second volume of the Institute, and a reader as volume three. In 1785 he packed his bags and rode through the country as an itinerant lecturer selling his instructional system.<sup>30</sup>

Both his salesmanship and the content of his textbooks proved a success. One

and a half million copies of the Speller had been sold by 1801, twenty million by 1829, and seventy-five million by 1875. The Speller became a model which was imitated by other spelling book authors. The extreme popularity of the Speller is demonstrated by the production of a Civil War edition in the South in 1863 which was adapted "to the youth of the Southern Confederacy."<sup>31</sup>

Besides the educational goal of teaching reading and writing, Webster also believed that his texts would produce good and patriotic Americans. Both the development of an American language and the content of the readers and spellers were designed to create a unified national spirit. As his biographer Harry Warfel describes: "This unified series of textbooks effectually shaped the destiny of American education for a century. Imitators sprang up by the dozen, and each echoed Websterian nationalism. The word 'American' became indispensable in all textbook titles; all vied in patriotic eloquence."<sup>32</sup>

Like Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster did not believe that republicans were developed by allowing the free exercise of reason. He believed that moral and political values had to be imposed on the child. Webster wrote that "good republicans . . . are formed by a singular machinery in the body politic, which takes the child as soon as he can speak, checks his natural independence and passions, makes him subordinate to superior age, to the laws of the state, to town and parochial institutions."<sup>33</sup>

Nothing better exemplifies the idea of imposing political values and the undemocratic nature of Webster's educational system than the "Federal Catechism" which appeared in the early versions of his spelling book. The idea of a political catechism was rather unique and somewhat startling in the context of developing republican institutions. The idea of children memorizing and parroting specific answers to specific political questions would seem to be a gross example of using an educational system for the purposes of inculcating standardized political values. It represents the complete opposite of the position advocated by William Godwin that individual reason rather than dogma should determine political actions.

The following passage from the "Federal Catechism" reflects the undemocratic nature of the values Webster felt should be drilled into American children.

- Q. What are the defects of democracy?
- A. In democracy, where the people all meet for the purpose of making laws, there are commonly tumults and disorders. A small city may sometimes be governed in this manner; but if the citizens are numerous, their assemblies make a crowd or mob, where debates cannot be carried on with coolness and candor, nor can arguments be heard: Therefore a pure democracy is generally a very bad government. It is often the most tyrannical government on earth; for a multitude is often rash, and will not hear reason.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of imposing dogma through education was also evident in the connection between the maintenance of a Christian culture and republicanism. In this context freedom and liberty meant Christian liberty or the freedom to act virtuously. Any action that was not Christian or virtuous was considered a threat to the Republic.

Those who proposed governmentally provided schooling saw as one of its functions the training of youth in moral virtues.

When Webster spoke of "principles of virtue," he specifically meant Christian virtues. Within his framework a republican culture was equated with a Christian culture. This is very evident in the "Moral Catechism," which was also part of his *American Spelling Book*. Like the "Federal Catechism" this was a process of learning which involved memorization of dogma and not the exercise of reason. The first part of the "Moral Catechism" is a perfect example of the equating of virtue and Christ-like actions.

Question: What is moral virtue?

Answer: It is an honest upright conduct in all our dealings with men.

Q. Can we always determine what is honest and just?

A. Perhaps not in every instance, but in general it is not difficult.

Q. What rules have we to direct us?

A. God's word contained in the Bible has furnished all necessary rules to direct our conduct.

Q. In what part of the Bible are these rules to be found?

A. In almost every part; but the most important duties between men are summed up in the beginning of Matthew, in Christ's Sermon on the Mount.<sup>35</sup>

One of the central goals of Webster's attempts to create a national language and an educational system was the promotion of nationalism and patriotism. Now an important distinction must be made between patriotism which is a result of reason and self-interest and patriotism which is a result of emotion. The libertarian thinkers, like Godwin, believed that political actions should be based on reason and self-interest, because if actions were a product of dogmatic teachings and emotion people might be led to act not in their own interests but in the interests of a tyrannical government. In contrast, both Webster and Rush believed that schooling should teach submission and obedience to the will of government.

Webster carried this idea one step further and called for the establishment of an emotional bond between the citizen and the government. Webster wrote that, "every class of people should know and love the laws." Love or attachment to the law, he believed, "may be formed by early impressions upon the mind." This goal was to be achieved through the creation of a national language and the patriotic content of his textbooks. His comment concerning his method of selecting items for his readers illustrates the patriotic goals of his texts:

In the choice of pieces, I have not been inattentive to the political interest of America. Several of those masterly addresses of Congress, written at the commencement of the late revolution, contain such noble, just and independent sentiments of liberty and patriotism, that I cannot help wishing to transfuse them into the breasts of the rising generation.<sup>36</sup>

His readers contained items like Washington's Farewell Orders to the Army, patriotic poems, and for the first time in a school book a history of the Revolutionary War. On the cover page of his 1787 reader appeared the words, "Begin with the infant in the cradle; let the first word he lisps be Washington."<sup>37</sup>

Webster makes one of the strongest links between the establishment of government and an educational system. He believed that a republican government could not survive without a national system of education which would shape youth into a particular political mold. In both his textbooks and his ideas, his educational model included dogmatic teachings about political and moral values, and building of emotional patriotism. In essence, his stress on the critical importance of a national educational system was based on his desire that all people should be trained to conform to his vision of the virtuous republican. People should be allowed the freedom to act only if their actions conformed to a prescribed pattern.

The two educational proposals which won the essay contest held by the American Philosophical Society in the 1790's paralleled the thinking of Rush and Webster. Of the essays submitted to the competition, only these two survive, but one can argue that they reflected what the members of the Society thought were the best educational ideas of the time. The American Philosophical Society had formed from Benjamin Franklin's *Junto* in 1769. Franklin was the Society's first president in 1769, followed by David Rittenhouse until 1796. Upon the death of Rittenhouse, Jefferson became head of the group. The general purpose of the group was to provide a forum for the spread of "all philosophical experiments that let light into the nature of things, tend to increase the power of man over matter, and multiply the conveniences or pleasures of life."<sup>38</sup> In these terms, its functions paralleled those of the Lunar Society and the Literary and Philosophical Society.

The two winning essays of the American Philosophical Society's competition are models of absolute and controlling systems of education. Both essays advocated centralization, uniformity, censorship, and control of the diffusion of knowledge. One of the essays, by Samuel Harrison Smith, called for the establishment of a board of literature and science which would have the duty of forming a system of national education including primary schools, colleges, and a national university. The board would also have the power to judge all literary and scientific productions, "and in case they shall pronounce any such work worthy of general perusal . . . it shall be printed at the public expense and the author rewarded."<sup>39</sup> As a result, of course, the board would have extreme power over the production and distribution of new knowledge. In order that the material be reproduced at public expense, the board would be given the power to force public financial support of certain creative works. Furthermore, Smith suggested, "It shall be the especial duty of the board to determine what authors shall be read or studied in the several institutions and at any time to substitute one author for another." The board would also control the content of a national system of libraries. In reference to libraries, Smith wrote, "it shall be in the power of the board to establish them wherever it shall see fit and to direct all original productions of merit to be introduced into them."<sup>40</sup> In Smith's plan the board would thus have tremendous control over ideological development by virtue of its control of the content and structure of both the educational system and the library system.

The other prize-winning essay, written by Samuel Knox, contained the same elements of uniformity and control. Knox also proposed a national board of education

which would supervise primary schools, academies, and colleges. Under his system, each state government would have its own printer who would produce for the schools within the state "such school books and other literary publications as should be recommended or directed by the board of education." In this manner, Knox wrote hopefully, there would be throughout the "United States the same uniform system of the most approved school books."<sup>41</sup> Knox believed that one of the proper functions of a national system of education was to gain allegiance and submission of the future citizen to the laws and Constitution of the United States. Part of his argument expressed the fear of political liberty and suffrage without virtuous character. "It is certainly of the highest importance in a country like this that even the poorest or most uneducated of its citizens be early impressed with a knowledge of the benefits of that happy constitution under which they live and of the enormity of their being corrupted in their right of suffrage." And to aid in this goal, he proposed the use "of a well-digested, concise moral catechism."<sup>42</sup> A nationally used moral catechism in a uniform system of public schools would most certainly have exerted a great deal of ideological control.

Both Smith and Knox argued for the importance of various types of censorship. Their national systems of education were not examples of freedom of speech and the press. Knox hoped that a uniform national system of textbooks would remove some of the material which he believed was injurious to the "delicacy and purity of sentiment which education ought rather to cherish than violate." Like Smith, Knox argued that throughout "all the primary schools, country academies, and even state colleges the same uniform system of books should be taught," and he suggested that the actual printing be done by only a few in order to achieve total uniformity of appearance of all textbooks.<sup>43</sup>

Smith hoped the board of education would exert censorship over all presses in the country. He fully recognized the enormous power he was giving the board when he wrote that because the board, in guarding the interests of virtue, "will only reward talents when exerted in its cause, we may expect that authors, as they regard the approbation of this board, will be careful to promote and not attack morals."<sup>44</sup> Smith believed and hoped that this would have a direct, nationwide effect on all publishing. "Hence it may be inferred that fewer vicious productions will issue from the press than at present disgrace it."<sup>45</sup>

It is important at this point to ask why the American Philosophical Society, which resembled in organization and membership the English organizations discussed earlier in this essay, would award prizes to essays which advocated such complete and total governmental control of the educational system. Certainly, the English libertarians would have rejected these plans. One answer might lie in their differing perspectives about government. English libertarians had a long history of suspicion of government and could not conceive of giving the monarchy and the Church of England such total control over the production and diffusion of knowledge. In part, this was because they did not believe that the Church or monarchy possessed any special knowledge of truth or understanding of social progress.



Quite in contrast, those people in the United States who proposed national systems of education saw their plans as a means of using government to impose their beliefs about virtue and truth upon the rest of the population. This is the crux of the difference and one of the important lessons to be learned from the past. When people believe they possess the truth, they often feel little compunction about searching for some way of getting all people to conform to their brand of truth.

The best example of this is Thomas Jefferson's proposal to censor and control the political texts at the University of Virginia. Jefferson is certainly America's best-known advocate and defender of freedom of speech and the press. In the libertarian tradition, he argued that, "It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself."<sup>46</sup> But when it came to the issue of teaching political theory, he could not resist the temptation of imposing what he thought were correct political values on future generations. In this case truth was not to stand alone but was to receive government support.

Jefferson did not advocate the censorship of all texts, but only those dealing with the "one branch in which we are the best judges, in which heresies may be taught, of so interesting a character to our own State and to the United States, as to make it a duty in us to lay down the principles which are to be taught." Jefferson's fear lay not in the teaching of some extreme form of totalitarianism but in the teaching of one political movement in the United States, namely his political enemy, federalism. Concerning federalism, he wrote: "It is our duty to guard against such principles being disseminated among our youth, and the diffusion of that position, by a previous prescription of the texts to be followed in their discourses."<sup>47</sup>

The other aspects of Jefferson's proposals for education did not reflect this obvious attempt to impose political and moral values. Unlike the other educational plans for the United States that have been considered, there is no heavy emphasis upon imposing virtue and morality and producing republican machines. He proposed simply that all children should receive three years of free education in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The purpose of the schooling was not to form the republican, but to provide the tools by which the individual, through the exercise of reason, could become a republican. The key to training the new citizen was not the school but a free press. Jefferson stated, in one of his most famous passages:

The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.<sup>48</sup>

Jefferson's concern that the educational system should produce future republican leadership was a reflection of the transitional nature of the post-Revolutionary period and the need which Jefferson and others saw for preserving the traditions of the English Constitution. They were particularly concerned with replacing the English system of checks and balances on power between the monarchy, the nobility, and the commons, for they saw this system as the heart of the English Constitution.

Part of the answer, for Jefferson, would be the creation of a natural aristocracy that he believed would arise through a system of education.<sup>49</sup>

His proposal called for selecting the best students from the primary school and sending them at public expense to grammar schools where a similar selection process would choose students for a free college education. In Jefferson's words, "By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually."<sup>50</sup> It was the political education of this future republican leadership that Jefferson wanted to control and censor.

The example of Jefferson demonstrates the danger of providing for any government involvement in the production and diffusion of knowledge. Most people believe that their views and opinions are correct and proper. If an institutional mechanism exists which allows for the imposition of values, then people will be tempted to use it for spreading their versions of the truth. If that mechanism is a governmentally supported system of education, then there is great danger that those who control the political system will want to impose their values on the rest of society through governmental control of learning and knowledge.

It was not Jefferson's ideas—of limited schooling and a free press—but those of Webster and other early proponents of national schooling systems that became the backbone of American political education. The goal of public schooling became that of creating a democratic citizen through the teaching of ideology and the shaping of individual character. Youths were to be made to conform to the values of those who controlled the schools. While the first part of the nineteenth century might evidence some popular control of the schools, by the end of the century all pretenses of popular control vanished in the arguments for expert and elite control.

The popularization of government schooling was not, however, a result of the arguments for training republican and democratic citizens. It was a result of the great myth that public schooling was and is the friend of the poor. It is this myth that has been most widely used to win the affections of the people for public schooling and to create dependence of the poor. The myth of public schooling as friend of the poor has been used to obscure the ideologically controlling aspect of schooling.

## NOTES

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2. Thomas Paine, "The Crisis," in *The Essential Thomas Paine* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 75.
3. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp. vi–vii.
4. Quoted in Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 44.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
6. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 44.
7. Robert Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark as It Was in the Year 1692* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1976). The pages of the preface are unnumbered. All of the following quotations from Molesworth are taken from the preface.
8. *Cato's Letters*, unabridged reproduction of 6th ed., ed. Leonard Levy General (1755; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 1:96.

9. *Ibid.*, 2:306-309.
10. *Ibid.*, 2:312.
11. *Ibid.*, 3:33.
12. *Ibid.*, 3:34.
13. *Ibid.*, 3:32.
14. See Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, pp. 320-77.
15. Quoted in Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education, 1780#1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1960), pp. 34-35.
16. Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, p. 350.
17. The present author has provided a more detailed discussion of Godwin's educational ideas elsewhere. That study and the quotes from Godwin used in this paper can be found in Joel Spring, *Primer of Libertarian Education* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975), pp. 13-33.
18. Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Library, 1965), p. 5.
19. See David Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 5-262.
20. Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
21. Quoted in Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789#1865* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1964), p. 8.
22. Quoted in Hawke, *Benjamin Rush*, p. 279.
23. Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education," p. 17.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Benjamin Rush, "Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools," in Rudolph, *Essays on Education*, pp. 4-6.
29. Harry Warfel, *Noah Webster: Schoolmaster to America* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), pp. 335-36.
30. See *ibid.*, pp. 119-50.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-75.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
33. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 21.
34. "Noah Webster's Federal Catechism" (1798), in Sol Cohen, ed., *Education in the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 769-70.
35. "Noah Webster's Moral Catechism," *ibid.*, p. 771.
36. Warfel, *Noah Webster*, p. 86.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
38. Allen Oscar Hansen, *Liberalism and American Education in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 105-10.
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40. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
41. Samuel Knox, "An Essay on the Best System of Liberal Education," *ibid.*, p. 323.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 324-25.
44. Smith, "Remarks on Education," *ibid.*, p. 215.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in Gordon Lee, ed., *Crusade Against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1961), p. 64.
47. Jefferson, "To Joseph Cabell," *ibid.*, p. 133.
48. Jefferson, "To Edward Carrington," *ibid.*, p. 102.
49. See Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp. 175-98.
50. Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," p. 94.