



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on July 19, 2012

The Leftist Attack on Achievement

There was a time, within living memory, when the achievements of others were not only admired but were often taken as an inspiration for imitation of the same qualities that had served these achievers well, even if we were not in the same field of endeavor and were not expecting to achieve on the same scale.

The perseverance of Thomas Edison, as he tried scores of materials for the filament of the light bulb he was inventing; the dedication of Abraham Lincoln as he studied law on his own while struggling to make a living — these were things young people were taught to admire, even if they had no intention of becoming inventors or lawyers, much less President of the United States.



Somewhere along the way, all that changed. Today, the very concept of achievement is de-emphasized and sometimes attacked. Following in the footsteps of Barack Obama, Professor Elizabeth Warren of Harvard has made the downgrading of high achievers the centerpiece of her election campaign against Senator Scott Brown.

To cheering audiences, Professor Warren says, “there is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You build a factory out there, good for you, but I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers that the rest of us paid to educate.”

Do the people who cheer this kind of talk bother to stop and think through what she is saying? Or is heady rhetoric enough for them?

People who run businesses are benefitting from things paid for by others? Since when are people in business, or high-income earners in general, exempt from paying taxes like everybody else?

At a time when a small fraction of high-income taxpayers pay the vast majority of all the taxes collected, it is sheer chutzpah to depict high-income earners as somehow being subsidized by “the rest of us,” whether in paying for the building of roads or the educating of the young.

Since everybody else uses the roads and the schools, why should high achievers be expected to feel like free loaders who owe still more to the government, because schools and roads are among the things that facilitate their work? According to Elizabeth Warren, because it is part of an “underlying social contract.”

Conjuring up some mythical agreement that nobody saw, much less signed, is an old ploy on the left — one that goes back at least a century, when Herbert Croly, the first editor of *The New Republic* magazine, wrote a book titled “The Promise of American Life.”

Whatever policy Herbert Croly happened to favor was magically transformed by rhetoric into a “promise” that American society was supposed to have made — and, implicitly, that American taxpayers



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should be forced to pay for. This pious hokum was so successful politically that all sorts of “social contracts” began to appear magically in the rhetoric of the left.

If talking in this mystical way is enough to get you control of billions of dollars of the taxpayers’ hard-earned money, why not?

Certainly someone who claimed to be part Indian, as Elizabeth Warren did when applying for academic appointments in an affirmative action environment, is unlikely to be squeamish about using imaginative words during a political election campaign.

Sadly, this kind of cute use of words is not confined to one political candidate or to this election year. The very concept of achievement is a threat to the vision of the left, and has long been attacked by those on the left.

People who succeed — whether in business or anywhere else — are often said to be “privileged,” even if they started out poor and worked their way up the hard way.

Outcome differences are called “class” differences. Thus when two white women, who came from families in very similar social and economic circumstances, made different decisions and got different results, this was the basis for a front-page story titled “Two Classes, Divided by ‘I Do’” in the July 15th issue of the *New York Times*. Personal responsibility, whether for achievement or failure, is a threat to the whole vision of the left, and a threat the left goes all-out to combat, using rhetoric uninhibited by reality.

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