



Written by [Fr. James Thornton](#) on January 10, 2023

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The Key to Freedom

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The more thoughtful among patriotic Americans have long held that education is the primary key to victory in overcoming the forces of collectivism that for several decades have threatened to overwhelm and enslave the people of our Republic. [John Birch Society founder] Robert Welch, for many years one of the chief spokesmen for those Americans who favor a return to constitutional government and genuine conservatism, put it succinctly: "Education is our total strategy, and truth is our only weapon."



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Welch and others have stated that if we could simply reach the American electorate, educate them in the fundamental principles that comprise our American way of life, and expose the nefarious plans of the exponents of all-powerful, socialistic government, then the victory of American principles would be assured. This is so for several reasons.

One Hope

First, if an electorate is thoroughly informed as to the ultimate objectives of socialism, it will oppose this alien ideology and opt for freedom. An intelligent, educated, informed electorate will not willingly submit to slavery. That is why the proponents of socialism are forced to use deception to achieve their goals. For collectivists, truth is indeed a most dangerous enemy. Thus, in place of truth, socialists invariably employ crude propaganda, mob psychology, envy, class hatred, and hysteria. Unless deceived, honest, morally upstanding people will never choose the socialistic path to serfdom.

Second, the very concept of a republican government, limited by constitutional law, is predicated on the notion that the electorate must be properly educated and fully informed if it is to make sound decisions. Generally speaking, a more thoroughly educated people, if it is made up of those who are also morally upright, will translate its knowledge into better government when it makes its choices at the polls.

By contrast, an ill-educated and poorly informed electorate will subject itself inevitably to purveyors of simplistic sloganeering instead of truthful information. Such a body of ignorant voters will make poor decisions about those it selects to lead government.

Patriotic Americans, in their opposition to collectivism and their fight to maintain our republican form of government and the freedoms and individualism that are fostered by that form of government, have but one realistic hope. That hope is to work for the ongoing education of the American people so that they know clearly what is at stake in the world struggle that has dominated the 20th Century, so that they appreciate the incomparable blessings that spring forth from a way of life that is free and so that



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they will avert the disaster represented by that dreary, downward-sloping road to totalitarian collectivism of various types, including especially both communism and its first cousin, social democracy. Let us consider this matter in greater depth and briefly survey the historical record as it touches on the subject of education.

Voices of History

The famed Greek philosopher Aristotle remarked almost two and a half millennia ago that the difference between a man who is educated and one who is ignorant is as great as the difference that distinguishes the living from the dead. An early Christian Father, St. Basil the Great, writing in the Fourth Century, observed that education allows for an informed choice between that which is beneficial and that which is unintelligent and injurious. The British essayist Joseph Addison (1672-1719) wrote: "Education is a companion which no misinformation can depress, no crime can destroy, no enemy can alienate, no despotism can enslave." Another Briton, Henry Peter Brougham (1778-1868), stated that "education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave." Our own Thomas Jefferson admonished future generations of Americans that ignorance is the enemy of liberty. He said: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

In his Farewell Address delivered in 1796, the Father of our Country, George Washington, expressed his confidence in the value of a virtuous, morally sound, educated citizenry when he said:

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free government.... Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.

Another of the American founders, Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), placed emphasis on the critical necessity for an educated, informed citizenry when he declared: "There is but one method of preventing crimes, and of rendering a republican form of government durable, and that is, by disseminating the seeds of virtue and knowledge through every part of the state." And the 20th President of the United States, James A. Garfield, spoke these words to the American people: "Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained."



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Embodiment of civic virtue: According to Washington, “virtue is a necessary spring of popular government.” This means that a people must be both educated and of high moral character to be capable of self-government.

It has been well appreciated down through history that a nation whose citizens are little more than an ignorant rabble, without moral bearings and without any sense of history, will quickly sell its birthrights of independence, freedom, and self-government in exchange for imagined security or supposed material well-being. In fact, for those who do not know better, the mere promise of security and material goods suffices. Wallowing in ignorance, a wretched, rootless *fellaheen*, even after its freedoms are gone forever — and after the security and material well-being for which it traded its freedoms are also gone and have become a bittersweet memory — will thrash around in futile rage, never suspecting the truth. It will drift fecklessly from one vicious tyrant to another.

The question now presents itself as to what, precisely, constitutes education and an educated public. There are several ways in which this question may be answered, all of them essential to our objective. Let us first examine the importance of education at its highest level.

Higher Education

Education is described in the dictionary as the process whereby, through the acquisition of knowledge, the mind and character are developed and shaped. However, this, I believe, is insufficient. One can see that, according to the definition just cited, the mind and the character can be shaped according to a variety of formulae. Depending on which formula is used, the final product might be as admirable as a Jefferson or as execrable as a Stalin. We are compelled to add, therefore, that true education must aim at the shaping of the character and mind not only through the acquisition of knowledge, but through the acquisition of tradition — more specifically, the tradition of the West. The Western tradition is a living tradition that has enjoyed a continual existence since the time of ancient Greece. It is the underpinning for our entire way of life and is unique in all the world for its emphasis on individual responsibility and individual liberty.

Of late there has been a concerted attack on the tradition of the West. Incredibly, that tradition is now characterized in certain circles as the outmoded striving for “cultural hegemony” by the followers of “dead white males” and is being expunged from high school and college curricula. It is being replaced



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by the vapid ravings, outpourings, and scratchings of Marxists, primitivists, lesbian liberationists, and a host of other assorted fanatics of various stripes, all united in one thing: their violent hatred for and desire to destroy Western Christian civilization. Knowing our enemies as we do, however, we must confess that their hatred is perfectly understandable. These enemies of freedom comprehend fully what some of us do not — that the Western Christian tradition is the final and most formidable bulwark against collectivistic slavery. The contemporary attack on the Western tradition is only the latest and most blatant attempt at the undermining of education in general. Some others are more subtle.

Ignorant of Ignorance

Professor Michael Bauman of Hillsdale College delineates the fundamental differences between, on the one hand, higher education as it was once universally understood (and is today understood only in a few places) and, on the other, the technologically oriented job training that has largely replaced the classical, liberal-arts education in the United States and Western Europe. The difference between the two is, the professor writes, “the difference between wisdom and information, between knowledge and data, between knowing and knowing about. Those who acquire the former are genuinely educated; those who gain only the latter are technological functionaries.”

To underscore his point, Bauman relates a story from the life of Socrates. Socrates once said to the Oracle of Delphi that he wished to know who was the wisest among men. “You are the wisest,” the Oracle told him. Socrates was amazed at this reply. “But I do not know anything,” he insisted. Socrates, we learn from this story, was wiser than other men because he grasped his own ignorance; so much so that he boldly affirmed that he knew nothing. As Professor Bauman says, “At least he knew he was ignorant; the others were ignorant and didn’t know it. As long as they were ignorant of their ignorance, they could never change it.” The man of real wisdom, in knowing his own ignorance, can strive throughout his entire life to overcome it.

Education, before the “progressive education” quacks came onto the scene, once aimed at revealing to students their own ignorance, so that upon that underlying premise could be erected the edifice of a sound, thorough, broad, classical education. That sort of education, we recall, produced great men such as many of our own American Founding Fathers. These men were true aristocrats: not of blood, but of profound wisdom, enduring honesty, strong character, and tenacity in the face of adversity.

Today such men are much rarer than in the past because few real institutions of higher learning any longer exist. Instead, job training and extremely narrow specialization are the rule. This produces not well-rounded men of wisdom, but, to use Dr. Bauman’s term, “technological functionaries,” who are frequently little more than fools and dilettantes when they step outside of their chosen professions. And a society led by technological functionaries is a society ignorant of the lessons of the past and ignorant most particularly of its own ignorance. While technological functionaries may well be brilliant in their own fields, they are not truly educated since they have been stunted in the growth and development of character and in the acquisition of a useful base of knowledge. Frequently, such men as these are radical pragmatists in the sense that they are not restrained by any measure of inward respect for law and morality. Indeed, such men are, at worst, potential building stones of a future totalitarian state. They are men who have been cut off from their roots and have become moral, cultural, and historical barbarians. But higher education, though it can be the training ground for future leaders, is only one part of the picture.



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Educating Yourself

One cannot denigrate also the value of self-education. One example of the power of self-education is Abraham Lincoln, whose life has been an inspiration both to Americans and all people of goodwill around the world. Lincoln was a man with little formal education. He was, nevertheless, a man who possessed a fine mind and good common sense and who, by assiduous and careful reading, came to acquire wisdom. Likewise, the beloved English author Charles Dickens was largely self-educated and grew to adulthood amidst many hardships. We must not forget to mention also the famous inventor Thomas Edison, and one of the greats of modern industrial production, Henry Ford. Both of these men were self-taught.

All men of learning are, to some extent, self-educated. Education, we remember, is not confined to the short span of a person's youth, but rather is a life-long quest. We may see this in the life of Robert Welch, too. A child prodigy, Welch attended the University of North Carolina and graduated in the top third of his class at the age of 16. Yet he never relinquished his thirst for learning or, as one writer put it, his "joy in the pursuit of knowledge."

Mr. Welch's devotion to a life of ongoing self-education is exemplified in his excellent book *The Romance of Education*. The writer Gary Allen says of Robert Welch that he "never slowed his frenetic pace. He never considered success in the financial and business worlds as anything other than a means to buy the time to pursue the world of scholarship and travel the globe. As he consumed one book after another, his personal library grew until it eventually comprised some five thousand volumes — most of which Welch had actually read!"

Welch acquired wisdom through a lifetime quest for knowledge and truth. The fruits of that quest, that joy and adventure in study and thought, he shared with others, most particularly with the members of the organization he founded. Those who knew him will testify that not only did this drive for knowledge serve to make him wise; it kept his mind youthful and agile.

This feature of Robert Welch's life brings to mind a statement made by another great American, Douglas MacArthur, on the occasion of the celebration of his 75th birthday. Though the General does not speak directly about education, he expresses an attitude towards life which is reminiscent, in many respects, of Robert Welch and which alludes to the same idea of life as a quest:

Youth is not entirely a time of life; it is a state of mind. It is not wholly a matter of ripe cheeks, red lips, or supple knees. It is a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions, a freshness of the deep springs of life. It means a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, of an appetite for adventure over love of ease.

Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, self-distrust, fear, and despair — these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust.

Whatever your years, there is in every being's heart the love of wonder, the undaunted challenge of events, the unfailing childlike appetite for what is next, and the joy and the game of life. You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt, as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear, as young as your hope, as old as your despair.



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In the central place of every heart there is a recording chamber; so long as it receives messages of beauty, cheer, and courage, so long are you young. When the wires are down and your heart is covered with the snows of pessimism and the ice of cynicism, then, and only then, are you growing old.

We have briefly discussed the importance of formal education, according to the traditional meaning of that term. We have also noted that self-education and a life of ongoing education are crucial to the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. All of these aspects of education are vital because they provide the basis, within the hearts and minds of individuals, for the shaping of a comprehensive philosophy of life, a worldview, or, to put it in more familiar words, a set of iron principles by which a person is guided throughout his life. We must go one step further, however, and see that not only individuals are so guided.

Men who have, through study, come to adopt a set of noble and ennobling principles by which they chart their life's course must, it seems, seek to share their ideals with others, so that these principles and ideals may continue to live beyond the short span of an individual person's life. Robert Welch did this when he founded The John Birch Society. The primary worth of The John Birch Society, as opposed to some other types of organizations, is that it is founded on a set of timeless principles which are themselves, quite naturally, based on Robert Welch's own lifetime of study and experience.

G. Edward Griffin, a former spokesman for the Society, once stated that political parties, even if they are initially founded by men of principle, are subject to constant change under a system whereby a party must appeal to the transitory whims of an electorate in order to achieve success. A political party must be as broad-based as possible and must, in the final analysis, sacrifice principle in pursuit of temporary victory. Griffin said: "Political parties are usually formed in the very beginning when a group of people who share the same political ideologies decide to get organized in order to be more effective in promoting their common goals."

In time, however, the vicissitudes of the democratic political process bring about change. The ideology is slowly whittled away, the shining ideals and principles become tarnished with time and compromise, until, at last, they are gone. As Griffin states: "I doubt if one person out of a hundred today even remembers what the ideologies were that led to the creation of our major parties. At any rate, whatever they were, they're certainly not the same today. And whatever they are today, chances are they won't be the same tomorrow. They're subject to democratic change, and, consequently, they do change every four years."

Changeless Principles



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Old-school leadership: In an era before the woke conquest of the upper echelons, American military leaders like Douglas MacArthur, products of the sort of classical liberal education that was once the norm in American schools and universities, led the country through times of crisis following an unswerving moral compass. (AP Images)

Here, then, is the reason that The John Birch Society was not founded as a political party: so that it would not be subject to the political process and would not need to seek “success” on the basis of the illusory and ever-changing tides of public popularity. The John Birch Society has never been and will never be in the business of making political promises in order to curry favor with this or that special interest group or faction. Thus, in Mr. Griffin’s words, “the people who join our organization a hundred years from now will be endorsing exactly the same principles for which we strive today. We think those principles are important, and we’re determined to preserve them.”

Now, if The John Birch Society is not a political party, a political action committee, or a political group of any kind, what is its purpose? The answer to this question is that the John Birch Society is an educational organization. The pressing need for this kind of organization was set down by Robert Welch at the founding of the Society: “There are all kinds of methods of opposing the communist conspiracy which seeks to enslave us,” he observed. “One is by political action. We insist, and all historical experience supports our insistence, that such political opposition is of no avail unless it is supported by a sufficiently widespread understanding of the strategy, the tactics, and the purposes of the conspiracy.”

In other words, if political activity is to be fruitful, the public must first be educated. It is not possible, after all, for every citizen to receive a traditional classical education. It is not practical to hope that every citizen can educate himself to the extent that Abraham Lincoln or Charles Dickens could. Only a select few men will ever imitate Robert Welch by reading thousands of serious books during their lifetimes.

What, therefore, must be done is to assure that Americans receive the benefits of the wisdom and experience that comes from education and a lifetime of study. That is the function of an organization such as the John Birch Society. Through the efforts of the members of that Society, the average citizen may stand upon the shoulders, so to speak, of the wise men of the past, and in so doing see farther and more clearly than they otherwise would. An organization that seeks to educate the American electorate



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cannot but contribute to better decisions at election time. Insofar as it continues to grow and expand its efforts, it must have a substantive and salutary impact on the “course of human events.” The actual course of history itself can be changed and the independence of the country and the freedoms of its people can be secured for the generations to come.

Economically and politically, the United States of America remains the leading power in the world today. Not only do other nations in the Free World rely on our nation’s economic strength, but, as we know, the communist world is also dependent, and has always been dependent, on American aid and trade for its own survival. And so, a fundamental change in American politics in favor of freedom would have enormous effects everywhere throughout the globe.

A truly conservative government would mean not only a return to constitutional rule in America and a renewal of all the individual freedoms for which this country is justly renowned, but, by removing government’s dead hand from our economy, it would mean a revival of free enterprise that would create a robust and thriving economy that would rival any in the world. It would mean, moreover, an instantaneous end to the subsidizing by the American taxpayer of world-conquering, Marxist totalitarianisms and an end to the bankrolling of would-be world governments like the United Nations. In short, it would mean “less government, more responsibility and — with God’s help — a better world.”



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