EDUCATION IN THE “STRENUOUS LIFE”:
HOW AMERICAN PROGRESSIVES REJECTED LIBERAL ARTS
EDUCATION AND ENDED UP WITH MILITARISM

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Abstract:

One of the greatest objects of reform in the Progressive Era was a new kind of education, narrowly focused on the social sciences and totally divorced from the liberal arts. The other was militarism. Both were seen as the conditions of progress: education was the training of experts for a vast administrative state, if not citizens completely immersed in the busy, active life of social democracy; similarly, militarism meant nationwide mobilization, driven by a sense of urgency in the face of social and economic problems. Figures like Herbert Croly, Theodore Roosevelt, Lester Frank Ward, Richard Ely and Woodrow Wilson were clear, though, that prior views of war and education – that war was for the sake of peace, or that education was for the good of individual human beings – were contrary to evolution, and the obvious source of human misery. This essay is a study in the legacy of the progressive era in shaping our own views of learning and war: just as there is no end or purpose to human life, so too is there no peace; just as there is not education of the human person, so too is there no purpose for the state other than warlike social planning. I will propose a plan for how we might disinherit this tendency in our colleges, and recognize the pre-modern way of understanding the relationship between liberal arts education, peace, and liberty.
The United States, according to Columnist Naomi Wolf, was on its way to fascism in 2007. “[B]eneath our very noses,” she wrote, “George Bush and his administration are using time-tested tactics to close down an open society.” But it was not only the Bush Administration simply that posed such an ominous threat: it sprung from the usual delusions about American exceptionalism used to expand an “American empire.” It required a terrifying pretext for domestic militarization, gulags for dissenters, and, inevitably, a form of education that would ensure absolute devotion of all citizens. The administration had “successfully used the fear of more terrorist attacks and the intoxicant of ruthless jingoism to sedate the country and make it compliant.”

Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe concurred, though she insisted that long before September 11, socially conscious people were “tracking the militarization of American daily life – from Super Bowl bomber flyovers to yellow ribbons on family cars – and its intimate connections to the cult of masculinity that has recently tightened its grip on American politics.” And what gains traction on American politics, she observes, runs deep into American culture – especially the vulnerable, malleable youth culture. This called for new levels of resistance from those who refuse to embrace what she clearly deems a vicious militarization of society “anti-militarizing strategies that challenge seemingly trivial ideas and practices.”

Critics of this trend point out the uniqueness of today’s cultural militarism in American history. It is at once far more nuanced than in previous times of war, and more all-encompassing in times of peace: World War II era enlistment posters and war bond ads were overt and explicit in their intention; the current culture of militarism, however,

is far less centralized, thriving on popular tastes and social norms. In “liberal
democracies in particular, the values of militarism do not reside in a single group but are
diffused across a wide variety of cultural locations,” according to Chicano Studies
professor Jorge Mariscal. Today, “no one is exempt from militaristic values because the
processes of militarization allow those values to permeate the fabric of everyday life.”

Mariscal takes issue with the Marine Corps’ “Lethal and Compassionate” slogan – “a
psychological sleight of hand” which portrays combat as both clean and morally
rewarding. It is the sort of instant satisfaction one would expect in the commercial
society that potential recruits have grown up in.

Sociologist Julia Himberg catalogs the long list of military-style pieces of popular
culture – the clothes, the music, the TV shows, and, of course, the video games marketed
to teenage boys (with some even set in Iraq and Afghanistan). Above all, she looks to the
popular, over-sized sport utility vehicles, particularly the H3 Hummer, whose
advertisements and presence on the road “reflect and maintain the nation’s cultural re-
structuring; they signify the military’s strong presence in daily, civilian life” – not
because of a fascist coup or martial law, but because of consumer taste. Andrew J.
Bacevich, author of The New American Militarism, confirms this trend: “Today as never
before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power,” having married “a
militaristic cast of mind with utopian ends.” Soon, he writes, “[w]e will rob future
generations of their rightful inheritance.”

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3 Jorge Mariscal, “The Militarization of US Culture,” in CounterPunch.com (May 3-5,
2003). http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/05/03/the-militarization-of-us-culture (Accessed January 1,
2013).
4 Elaine Cardenas and Ellen Gorman, eds. The Hummer: Myths and Consumer Culture (Lanham:
5 Andrew J. Bacevich, The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1; 3; 225.
For many, the most upsetting trend is the presence of military recruiters on high school and college campuses, pursuing enlistments that were being prepared long beforehand. Critics pointed to the recruiters’ “unrestricted access to kids in the schools, cafeterias and classrooms” during the Bush years. “They’ve even brought Humvees onto campuses to make the prospect of going to war seem sexy and exciting.”\(^6\) “This is a conscious plan on the part of the government to drive our students out of the schools and drive them into the military to take part in the death and destruction,” another critic at UCLA said.\(^7\) Such sentiments led to a flurry of incidents on college campuses where recruiters at job fairs were mobbed and forced out. Campus recruiters gave rise to new activist organizations like the National Network to Oppose the Militarization of Youth (NNOMY) and the Campus Anti-War Network (CAN), which continue to pull together a wide array of anti-war and civil libertarian groups intent on eliminating the appeal of all things military in schools.

The ire against recruiters was shared by those on the libertarian right, who viewed it as yet another abuse of education for dangerous political ends. “You are up against a government that hires high-powered ad agencies and psychologists to figure out how to lure you into the military,” *Washington Times* columnist Fred Reed warned the young men. “They know that young men, the ones that are worth anything anyway, want to prove themselves, want adventure, want to show what they can do. Everything a recruiter does is carefully calculated to play on this.” Most notably, the excitement and allure of enlisting, going through basic training, and travelling around the world stands in

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great contrast with the drudgery of higher education – which, as Reed describes it, can only mean “getting some silly associate degree in biz-admin at the community college.”

The culture of militarism “pervades foreign and domestic policy, popular culture, educational discourse, and language, educating citizens in the virtues of violence,” according Ken Saltman, professor of Educational Policy Studies at DePaul University. This trend, he points out, is especially prominent in the schools. Such attempts to militarize students is “exemplified by [JROTC] programs, the Troops to Teachers program that places retired soldiers in schools, the trend of military generals hired as school superintendents or CEOs, the uniform movement,” among many other offenses, indicates an entire generation being conditioned to accept war as part of life, and to view themselves as key participants in a grand cause. Most importantly, Saltman places abundant blame on the curriculum. Learning must be “understood in relation to broader social contexts, histories, and competing notions of what counts as valuable knowledge” – and it must be always willing to ask, “[w]hose class, racial, and gender perspectives does such knowledge represent?” Short of that, the curriculum is weak, if not complicit in the militarist drift.

Whether the concern is about cultural militarism, psychological tricks, hyper-masculine fantasies, or recruiters on campus, all agree on one thing: war and education, whether cultural or formal, should be as far removed from each other as possible. Education at its best is supposed to prevent such distortions of reality. The desire to

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purify the young of such falsehood is truly one of the noblest and most praiseworthy desires in us.

But these critics seem to have little to offer in the way of educational solutions. Fred Reed insists that those interested in enlisting should be familiar with the horrors of combat, the terribly things they might see and experience – as if it could convey anything young men don’t already experience (and often fantasize about) in violent films and video games. Jorge Mariscal calls for militarization to be “systematically exposed” – as if exposure per se will somehow trigger the appropriate emotional response and move people to action. Cynthia Enloe can only offer praise for an “anti-militarism fashion show,” and hip-hop clothing designers avoiding “camouflage cargo pants and T-shirts.”

Nowhere is there any idea about what a healthy, life-affirming culture actually looks like, what the right sort of schooling is. Nor is there any indication of what instills sound judgment in the youths who are targeted for manipulation.

Even those of us who support strong U.S. foreign policy and robust military prepared to actively confront a dangerous world can agree with anti-war activists that, indeed, manipulation is manipulation, and it is shameful no matter how much we may agree with foreign policy. War is dehumanizing enough without its supporters being fed inaccurate fantasies, and enlisted men being denied a true picture of why they are truly serving. The goal of any war worth waging must always be peace, and all militarization should aim at that end. Similarly, no matter how just the cause may be, the only military worth sending off to fight is a voluntary one, whose volition is pure. It should be an exercise of the liberty that we all hold sacred, which young people were educated in as citizens, and whose principles are clear in their minds before they become soldiers.

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10 Enloe, Ibid.
It is, of course, a liberal arts education we should have in view, or the sort of learning becoming of a free people. As Thomas Jefferson put it when outlining his plan for the education of Virginians, the people “are the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty. For this purpose the reading in the first stage, where they will receive their whole education, is proposed, as has been said, to be chiefly historical.” Such an examination of human history “will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”

Alexis de Tocqueville believed that liberal arts education would actually be vital for Americans, given their “restiveness” and tendency to sacrifice liberty before the tyranny of the majority: “There is no literature that puts the qualities naturally lacking in the writers of democracies more in relief than that of the ancients,” he wrote. “There exists no literature better suited for study in democratic centuries.” Only such texts can “counterbalance our particular defects. They prop us up on the side where we lean.”

Matthew Arnold understood it as the past coming the rescue of the present, “as the great help out of our present difficulties,” which we could receive by simply “getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”

Probably no one saw the issue as keenly, though, as W.E.B. DuBois, who understood well how important liberal education was for a liberated people – especially his fellow African Americans. “The function of the university is not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for

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the public schools or to be a centre of polite society,” he wrote; “it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.”

This is what is meant by liberal arts: the education of the human person to realize their own natural end, to be free from the constraints of culture and the spirit of the times, and to contribute to society out of free will and a sense of duty, felt from the inside and not compelled from the outside. In a free society, we would expect that as soon as they are able to read, at least through the mandatory four years of high school, all students should be trained to discern between what is truly beautiful and what is cheap and crass, through a careful study of literature, art and music – i.e., between patriotism in a regime dedicated to a proposition of human equality, and the nationalistic fervor of the most powerful. It is rooted, of course, in the Great Books, and the accumulated wisdom of the ages, whose authors speak directly to every generation about the eternal truths of the human experience; it is in the humanities, the music, the art, the poetry, and other expressions of what is finest and noblest in our fallen state, where the best in us touches on the Eternal. It is the sort of learning that stands neutral between the cultural left and right, affirming the highest values of both. It is colorblind, and its lessons are gender-neutral; it aims only at instructing each individual citizen in the freedom of the community, just as it directs every individual soul to its ultimate happiness. It also means teaching future soldiers – though they may be trained for war – to still carry within them a love for peace.

In contrast to such an education stands the nature of young men. They crave the camaraderie of the platoon, as well as the explosive, destructive excitement of war for its

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own sake. Perhaps “lethal and compassionate” is indeed a foolish phrase, but not for the reason Mariscal claims: the error has far more to do with how overpowering the “lethal” side naturally is. Social researchers who look beyond militarization per se find again and again how much young men crave the group dynamics of the platoon, strategizing and fighting together. Anthropologist David Gilmour observes how masculine aggression and martial spirit, though not always appearing in Western terms, nonetheless shows itself in every culture, to the point where “triumph over the impulse to run from danger can be found in some cultures not normally associated with… hypermasculine bravado.”¹⁵ The problem is made clearer when we understand men in relation to women in the variety of recent “sex differences” studies. Public policy analyst Steven Rhodes traces the starting outcome of the 1960s: “feminists originally loved sex difference research because they were sure the results would show that such differences were either nonexistent or inconsequential. Then, the patriarchy would collapse.” But despite the powerful vision of that era and its monumental success in both academia and society, “the new evidence has pointed to significant and enduring differences,” i.e., of women being more feminine, and, indeed, not a few men being less masculine – but many others becoming frighteningly and uncontrollably aggressive.¹⁶

*Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright gives one of the best looks at this cultural dynamic among the young Marines who invaded Iraq in 2003. “Culturally, these Marines would be virtually unrecognizable to their forebears in the ‘Greatest Generation,’” he writes. They were raised on nothing more sublime than “hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer… For some, slain rapper Tupac is an American

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patriot whose writings are better known than the speeches of Abraham Lincoln.” They spent their younger years being viewed as “America’s first generation of disposable children” – and were then asked to fight a war and behave like gentleman-heroes. They come from broken homes, and were raised by absentee parents. “Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and Internet porn.”

Sebastian Junger put it even more bluntly, though, in his memoir about his time with a U.S. Army platoon in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley: “[F]or a nineteen-year-old at the working end of a .50 cal during a firefight that everyone comes out of okay, war is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of,” he writes. “In some ways twenty minutes of combat is more life than you could scrape together in a lifetime of doing something else.” Troops understand this in a way that cannot be expressed to regular civilian life. As one admitted: “I’m worried I’ll be looking for that when I get home and if I can’t find it, I’ll just start drinking and getting in trouble. People back home think we drink because of the bad stuff, but that’s not true… we drink because we miss the good stuff.” This is the nature of the monster in the human heart, and to know its nature is to realize that no amount of righteous moralizing can contain it. To shift the blame for these impulses to other causes, however – corporate America, government power, or SUV’s – is to ignore the problem, and wait for it to devour us.

But modern education simply fails to confront that monster – or, more often, it doesn’t try, because for about the past century it has not been designed to do any such thing. This is not to say that curriculum itself can contain such destructive power. But so long as teachers are going to teach the young anything in their formative years, and

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perhaps guide the better natures through high school and college, it is wise to ask what kind of material is most conducive to formation of good character and sound judgment, and most capable of shaping and containing the violent, warlike impulses.

The reasons for this are complex, buried in the tortured history of American education in the twentieth century. But the origin is clear: there was a very deliberate rejection of the sort of education expected of a free people in the Progressive Era, the definitive moment between the 1890s and the 1930s that shaped so much of American consciousness.

In this essay, I will first explore the progressives’ rejection of liberal arts education; second I will examine the cultural education intended for regular people of that era, and how it was explicitly focused on militarism; third, I will look at the progressive ideal of strong-armed leadership in manufacturing public opinion; and, finally, I will suggest how critics of militarism – and those who fear the “mass-effects on modern life” in general – might recover the value of our lost inheritance of liberal arts education in the Great Books.

The Progressive Rejection of Liberal Arts Education

No one was quite as attuned to the whims of popular opinion as the journalist, Walter Lippman. His experiences with domestic policy and the shape of public opinion during the two World Wars give us a timeless perspective on the dangers of mass-behavior in modern times. He was abundantly aware that consent could be manufactured, and how society could take all kinds of monstrous forms with the right touch of social engineering. For him, the problem had one simple cause: “during the past
forty or fifty years those who are responsible for education have progressively removed from the curriculum of studies the Western culture which produced the modern democratic state.” This means that primary schools and even colleges have been “sending out into the world” graduates who have been “deprived of their cultural tradition.” It was not that they lacked the secrets of social consciousness or the awareness of cultural manipulation. They instead “no longer possess in the form and substance of their own minds and spirits the ideas, the premises, the rationale, the logic, the method, the values of the deposited wisdom which are the genius of the development of Western civilization.”

Why was there such a rejection of the Western intellectual heritage in this era?

Thorsten Veblen offers the first clear answer to that question: the liberal arts, for him, were simply the means of perpetuating a centuries-old fraud. His most influential book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), identifies leisure as the mark of a “predatory instinct”: the classes of society that once dominated through conquest and oppression of the weaker classes now do so by trickery. The greatest fraud of all, which he examines in his concluding chapter on “The Higher Learning,” is, of course, education in the classics, and the reading of Great Books. This was long held to be the truly human form of education, setting apart a free people from the world of busy work. Veblen rightly identified liberal arts education as “[k]nowledge for its own sake,” and “the

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exercise of the faculty of comprehension without ulterior purpose.” It was precisely that “free study,” though, that was a sign of hidden oppression.

Veblen insisted that such an education no longer had a place in modern society—or, more importantly, it had been revealed for the fraud that it had always been. What was once viewed as a humane, freeing education was little more than how wealthy elites impressed each other at garden parties, or the wink-and-nod code of mutual elitism between the rich and powerful. The truer form of education was one that did not concern itself with the judgment and development of the human person, Veblen taught, nor was it knowledge for its own sake. Instead, a true education was one that provided useful skills, as well as ability to see beyond tradition and other oppressive social contractions, allowing each individual to contribute to the whole and find a place in a democratic society. Thankfully, for Veblen, that utilitarian education, meant to provide people with know-how rather than abstract philosophic ideas, had made great headway in colleges and universities. It had brought a “partial displacement of the humanities – those branches of learning which are conceived to make for the traditional ‘culture,’ character, tastes, and ideals – by those more matter-of-fact branches which make for civic and industrial efficiency.” The whole claim that education in the humanities and great books could develop the character of a free people was all a façade for a “self-centered scheme of consumption”: true judgment came from sociological knowledge, which did not offer discernment between true beauty and cheap propaganda, but the ability to expose both as

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power struggle and secret oppression, which occurred under even the most esteemed intellectual traditions.\textsuperscript{21}

This was most apparent in the core curriculum that lingered in major universities. “It is currently expected that a certain number of years shall have been spent in acquiring this substantially useless information,” Veblen wrote. All of this “is conventionally recognised as evidence of wasted time.” But since it is primarily the dominant upper classes who have the time to read such books, it has “secured to the classics their position of prerogative in the scheme of the higher learning, and has led to their being esteemed the most honorific of all learning.” That revealed how complete the scam was – when even those trying to raise social consciousness and make people more community-minded were not held in nearly as much esteem as those who “wasted time” of reading classic texts. The word “Classic,” after all, he wrote, “always carries this connotation of wasteful and archaic, whether it is used to denote the dead languages or the obsolete or obsolescent forms of thought.”\textsuperscript{22} Social science could liberate students from that, showing them the raw truth, and giving them the power to expose it to others.

It was likely that the humanities \textit{had} become the study of upper-class, privileged members of society. They were, after all, the ones with the time to study such books, and attend the sort of prestigious institutions that featured them in the curriculum. But that is to assume that the intention of figures like Plato, Homer, or Shakespeare intended only elites to study them. It is hard to imagine the poverty-stricken Socrates or the popular preacher Saint Augustine believing such a thing, much less Homer’s epic poems recited for centuries by \textit{all} Greeks, or Shakespeare’s plays performed for the masses of common

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 390.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 395; 396-397; 398.
folk in the Old Globe. And they would certainly resent their thoughts and writings being used to shore up the privileged against plebeians.

It is likely that Veblen hardly read old books, and had greater animosity against the people with the reputation for reading them than the content of the works themselves. But then there were those who understood that content, and rejected it precisely because it stood in defiance of their own progressivism.

The great American philosopher of education John Dewey, for instance, explained progressivism as a matter of “laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency.” It had “introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion.” The greatest educational duty to society was “a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them”; it was “a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.” True “intellectual progress” is practical progress, not growth in knowledge according to Dewey. Hence, the “old questions” are not solved by going back to old answers, or how those questions have been dealt with throughout history; they are “solved by disappearing [and] evaporating.”23

Dewey pointed to the “plasticity of the young” as the greatest advantage of the educator, but it is the sort of thing that society, when steeped in a rigid and revered intellectual tradition, refuses to see. “The inert, stupid quality of current customs perverts learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into conformity, constriction, surrender of scepticism and experiment.” The young are forced to suffer

through “stocks of information adults wish to impose and the ways of acting they want to reproduce.”

It is not hard to imagine the soundness of Dewey’s criticism. Even the best and noblest traditions – even those most open-minded, willing to question, experiment and adapt – can indeed settle down into stagnant, cold repetition. Matthew Arnold admitted that “a notion of something bookish, pedantic, and futile has got itself more or less connected with the word culture, and that it is a pity we cannot use a word more perfectly free from all shadow of reproach.” But common sense would seem to dictate that we try to redeem culture rather than abandon it – that we simply approach the Great Works with a more critical eye, and understanding the content of great ideas before simply dismissing them out of hand.

But there was a reason why Dewey took the latter route: he understood that the content of liberal arts education, even if taught in the very best way, was wholly contrary to the progressive project, and presented the greatest obstacles to its goals. Ultimately, it showed “evidence of a wrong educational attitude.” It was not the books themselves, but what they taught that was such a problem – i.e., the idea that “‘applied’ knowledge is somehow less worthy than ‘pure’ knowledge.” This had no place in democratic times, partly because it was so unequal, but also because it held to the idea of permanence, and the notion that there really was one single goal for the human person, which neither they nor society could create. Dewey could admit that there “should always be the amplest opportunities for making [the] acquaintance” with classic texts. “But to regard them as par excellence the humane studies involves a deliberate neglect of the possibilities of the

25 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, 5.
subject matter which is accessible in education to the masses, and tends to cultivate a narrow snobbery.” The true humanities, the true study that shapes human character, does not come from the past; it is oriented to the present, and focused on technological power, which is valuable “because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Any subject matter which accomplishes this result is humane, and any subject matter which does not accomplish it is not even educational.”

Lippman saw the inevitable consequence of this: there was an “enormous vacuum” left by what was once the substance of education. “When one realizes that they have no common culture is it astounding that they have no common purpose? That they worship false gods? That only in war do they unite?”

**Educating the Masses in Militarism**

The void left by such tendencies in education was indeed filled by an explosive new American nationalism. Lippman explained that by abandoning the teachings of Western civilization, we have not only given up on the books, but we have also abandoned the content of that teaching, “that man’s reason is the ruler of his appetites.” Education reformers like Dewey have now “reduced reason to the role of servant to man’s appetites.” They have insisted, of course, that the appetites like kindness, compassion and benevolence should prevail, but they have offered no framework for how they would be more powerful than cruelty and belligerence. “The logic of this conception of the human reason must lead progressively to a system of education which sharpens the acquisitive and domineering and possessive instincts,” Lippman wrote.

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“And in so far as the instincts, rather than reason, determine the ends of our activity, the end of all activity must become the accumulation of power over men.”

There was no greater proponent of this than Theodore Roosevelt, who set the tone for so many of his fellow progressives. Roosevelt understood that goal as the “strenuous life,” which was the title of his famous speech delivered in 1899. Flowing out of his Darwinian concept of human affairs, he condemned all leisure as what he called “slothful ease,” and called instead for “the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife,” in the upward struggle to be the “fittest” over the unfit, for the benefit of both. It was to be an international cause: the United States had to prove itself to the rest of the world, and demonstrate its superiority to itself. This “strenuous life” was meant to overflow through military might, spreading civilization and order to the backward places in the world.

Domestically, that meant letting go of such key American concepts as “‘liberty’ and the ‘consent of the governed,’” which were simply excuses for an “unwillingness to play the part of men.” On this point, Roosevelt was abundantly candid: “Resistance must be stamped out,” and that the “first and all-important work to be done is to establish the supremacy of our flag.”

Education for Roosevelt was not concerned with individual human persons, nor was the American regime related in any way to the broader story of the West. History was fundamentally to be used in enhancing American self-understanding. All curriculum and all subjects were to be fashioned around a single agenda: “education in its highest and finest sense, means the growth in the sense of solidarity throughout the country, in the feeling of patriotic pride of each American in the deeds of all other Americans – of

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28 Ibid., 420-422.
pride in the past history and present and future greatness of the whole country.” This was, of course, the outlook that Roosevelt brought with him to William McKinley’s Administration, and to his own presidency after McKinley was assassinated. The world experienced the “Great White Fleet” sailing around the world; the Roosevelt Corollary in Latin America; and a long series of small military strikes against European interests there.

Roosevelt’s intellectual counterpart was, of course, Herbert Croly, who devoted much of his career as a writer to giving a philosophic rationalization for Roosevelt’s aggressive nationalism. It was, again, a key aspect of his book, *The Promise of American Life* (1909); the promise was fulfilled, “not by sanguine anticipations, not by a conservative imitation of past achievements, but by laborious, single-minded, clear-sighted and fearless work.” A life of stillness, contemplation and leisure – much less a love of peace and order – were wholly at odds with Croly’s idea of democratic flourishing. There was no real gift from the past, least of all the collected wisdom of our human heritage in the liberal arts; there was only the way each generation created meaning for itself – and how progress was possible only when there as collective action aiming at an urgent new goal.

Such an accomplishment, though, meant admitting one devastating truth: “An individual has no meaning apart from the society in which his individuality has been formed.” There were no rights aside from those the community decided to construct for itself, nor was there any such thing as individual judgment to question the thought of the whole. It was only when all impulses are unified around a single goal that a people can

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claim such a thing – and even then, they can only claim it for the community, and never for themselves. “The growing and maturing individual is he who comes to take a more definite and serviceable position in his surrounding society [sic] he who performs excellently a special work adapted to his abilities,” Croly wrote. “There is no way in which a higher type of national life can be obtained without a corresponding individual improvement on the part of its constituent members.” Only in this way could a people truly progress into their own self-made promise – and nothing could achieve that but the urgency of war, and the ensuing culture of militarism.

Croly admitted as much in his chapter titled “Militarism and Nationalism”: an active, living democracy “always remains an organization based upon force,” depending “upon the strong arm.” Left to itself, a democratic society will allow each individual to drift off into their own lives and priorities, leaving the nation to stagnate and even more in reverse, in a counter-progressive direction. All kinds of social movements may appear, many of them claiming to be “progressive,” but the fragmenting and detachment of society will prevent them from working together. War, however, will offer grounds for perfect unity. “War may be and has been a useful and justifiable engine of national policy,” Croly wrote. “A war waged for an excellent purpose contributes more to human amelioration than a merely artificial peace.”

**Leaders as Conditioners**

More than anyone else, it was President Woodrow Wilson who marked the culmination of the progressive synthesis between education and militarism, which he

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32 Ibid., 263.
33 Ibid., 256.
brought to the 1912 Presidential Campaign in his run against incumbent William Howard Taft and Progressive Party challenger, Roosevelt. Having completed his Ph.D. in the new field of Political Science, and having served as President of Princeton University, Wilson saw the importance of a specialized education, particularly the training of elites in American colleges. That training was to fulfill Roosevelt’s vision that the most educated elites would contribute to “clean politics,” where “disinterested motives are appealed to, and that men are made to feel that they are working for others, for the community as a whole as well as for themselves.”34 The way to achieve that, according to Wilson, was education in the social sciences – sociology, economics, and his own political science.

Only these fields could provide the education of experts, who could be so narrowly focused on their task that the thought of self-aggrandizement would never occur to them. Equally absent, though, was the study of their own humanity, and the sort of learning that would occur in a classic liberal arts education expected of a free people. All that liberal education would do is “multiply the number of intelligent critics of government” – particularly those jealous of their liberty. It “will create no competent body of administrators,” nor would it “necessarily foster skill in conducting government.” The education of experts was to replace the education of whole persons. The narrowness of expertise, and the narrow tasks assigned to administrators, would ensure that they would never abuse their power, but remain “at all points sensitive to public opinion.” The problem, of course, is that public opinion says a variety of different things. How would it be unified in such a way that the vast bureaucracy could respond to it with such sensitivity? For Wilson, the answer was in all-powerful, visionary, electrifying leadership.

“Those only are leaders of men, in the general eye, who lead in action,” Wilson wrote. “The men who act stand nearer to the mass of men than do the men who write; and it is at their hands that new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds.” This concept leadership was fully developed when he entered the White House in 1913, and they were deeply rooted in his philosophy of progress. Progress happened, not through deliberation, and certainly not through ideas, but by powerful assertion. Yet it was not so much the leader’s own assertion as the way he reflected the people, particularly through sympathy. “That the leader of men must have such sympathetic insight as shall enable him to know quite unerringly the motives which move other men in the mass is of course self-evident,” he wrote. The leader was to be the sum of their hopes and dreams; he was one who could understand the people as a multitude, and become the embodiment of their general will. “The competent leader of men cares little for the interior niceties of other people’s characters: he cares much – everything for the external uses to which they may be put,” Wilson wrote. In words that evoke a long slew of twentieth century horrors, Wilson stated his true understanding of leadership: “It is the power which dictates, dominates; the materials yield. Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader.”

As the history of Wilson’s presidency during the First World War indicates, the shape of the public designed under the single leader’s power is meant to be something quite nationalistic. Consider the 1918 aerial photograph of 21,000 servicemen standing

35 Woodrow Wilson, “Leaders of Men,” in Ibid., 211.
36 Ibid., 214.
37 Wilson drew much of this idea from his predecessor, Roosevelt – particularly his campaign speech, “The New Nationalism,” delivered at the Progressive Party Convention in 1910. There, his militaristic vision of American society as fully developed. The urgency of progressive goals called for nothing less than a rapid mobilization for war – even if there was no war to fight. “I ask that civil life be carried on according to the spirit in which the army was carried on,” he wrote, meaning free of politics, with action over deliberation –
in an arrangement that formed Wilson’s face (a striking resemblance to the cover of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*). This was the dawn of flag-waving patriotism that Naomi Wolfe finds so frightening. This was the era that gave us J.M. Flagg’s “Uncle Sam” painting – the stern look, pointed finger, and the desire for “you” to join the U.S. Army that Jorge Mariscal and Fred Reed find so manipulative. Uncle Sam was, no doubt, the quintessential image of the “American type of man,” according to Wilson, “and those who have exhibited this type with a certain unmistakable distinction and perfection have been great ‘Americans.’” In words that sound as “macho” as anything Cynthia Enloe detests, Wilson wrote that “no sound type of manliness could have been dispensed with in the effort.” It was this “manly” assertiveness that allowed us to construct “our canons of Americanism.” There should be no mistake: according to Wilson, such “manly” dominance and control “is progressive, optimistically progressive, and ambitious of objects of a national scope and advantage.” It is “not dominated by any formalism whatever,” i.e., such formalities as human rights or basic equality, aside from what the “great man” and his “Americanism” allow.38

Hence, the drift away from liberal education – a culture able to meditate on things good for their own sake, and educational traditions in schools that could transmit the best

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38 Woodrow Wilson, “A Calendar of Great Americans,” in Ibid., pp. 81; 86. Emphasis added.
ideas possible to even the most common and ignorant people – was made to yield to what can only be identified as power. American patriotism had to be washed of all principle, and constructed anew, as violent, militaristic Americanism. It had to find its highest end in the “leader of men” far more than any other concept of national identity. American exceptionalism was not to be derived from the Founders’ vision for the nation, much less the traditions that emerged through the nineteenth century; instead, it had to come from the sort of national cult that would allow progress to happen – something a powerful leader could create, and force the people to fight for by the illusion of their own free will.

**Conclusion: Destruction, Freedom, and Liberal Arts Education**

Despite this historical lesson, the hostility toward of liberal arts education and the Great Books endures in force – even among those who most lament American militarism, and those who partake of the Progressive legacy in American politics. Progressive luminary Noam Chomsky, by far the most popular and influential critic of U.S. foreign policy, claimed that great books curriculum was “set up like a variant of the Marine Corps, in which you just march the students through a canon of ‘great thoughts’ that are picked out for everybody.” For him, such an education, despite its legacy of humanizing culture and showing tremendous joy in the students who encounter it, is still as degrading as boot camp, from which “students will end up knowing and understanding virtually nothing.” It is hard to imagine exactly what movement toward the Great Books Chomsky is referring to, or what universities have anything more than an inkling in even the most specialized curriculum. Reading Plato may have its value, to be sure, “but you try to
figure out what’s right, what’s wrong,” etc. – all things which Plato cannot offer as far as Chomsky can tell.  

A careful look at what Plato actually said, though, would serve Chomsky well. “What then is the history of the party whose bent is rather toward strong action,” Socrates’ companion asks in Plato’s *Statesman* said, “Do we not find them forever dragging their cities into war by bringing them up against powerful foes on all sides just because they love a military existence too fiercely?”  

If Chomsky and like-minded dissenters were the actually read Plato, they would find the heart of the problem in “spiritedness” in the human heart – that explosive, dynamic, warlike tendency that must be contained and channeled into better things before it destroys the community. As Plato puts it: “Surely the most terrible and shameful thing of all is for shepherds to rear dogs… for the flocks in such a way that due to licentiousness, hunger or some other bad habit, they themselves undertake to do harm to the sheep and instead of dogs become wolves.” Left to themselves, without the right conditioning, people are more inclined to turn out like wolves, or “savage masters instead of well-meaning allies.” This shows why “they must get the right education, whatever it is, if they’re going to have what’s most important for being tame with each other and those who are guarded by them.”

But, alas, Chomsky dismisses Plato and a the whole Western cannon as worthless, no matter how much valuable insight they shed on his own views, at least in comparison

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39 Noam Chomsky, “The Function of Schools: Subtler and Cruder Methods of Control,” in *Education as Enforcement*, 27. It is worth nothing that this speech was delivered soon after the release of Allan Bloom’s best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which Chomsky dismissed as “mind-bogglingly stupid.”


with the philosophers of the present day: “some of the best, most exciting, most active philosophers in the contemporary world, people who’ve made a real impact on the field, couldn’t tell Plato form Aristotle, except for what they remember from some freshman course they once took.”

But while Chomsky is dismissive of the value of the great books, believing they cause students to avoid serious questions of contemporary philosophy and social studies, others find a direct connection between the classics and war, at least among those teachers who take the books themselves seriously. According to Anne Norton, for instance, the schools who encourage this tendency “have a great books program or a ‘core curriculum’ in which students are required to study works in the canon of political philosophy.” They are, in fact, a slight of hand for the disciples of Leo Strauss, who can persuade students to back militarism under the guise of careful examination of texts. They feature a distinctive ignorance of the truly important social conditions; they “don’t teach comic books or fotonovellas, the National Enquirer or Cosmopolitan, as a cultural studies professor might,” Norton writes. “Seeing the richness of the canon – or indeed of a single work – may persuade a student that all the knowledge of the university can be found within a single text. Aristotle and – astonishingly – the Federalist Papers seem to have this effect on the susceptible.” All of this, Norton insists, is a vast educational justification for a militarized culture, always under the guise of a Great Books education. The Great Books have their value, she claims, but only when read in the broader canon of works, which include both classic texts and contemporary studies, rather than the primary documents alone.

Perhaps there was a Straussian slight-of-hand during the Bush years in the United States’ most notable colleges and universities. But that does not change the truth of what Aristotle actually said: that peace is a matter of meditating on what is “loved for its own sake,” which Aristotle called contemplation. “[W]e are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace,” he wrote. Nor does it alter Alexander Hamilton’s understanding of what American military might was for in the Federalist Papers. It was indeed meant to be a powerful force, which “ought to exist without limitation,” he wrote. But it was not an unlimited power for the sake of military power itself. It was instead a truth that “rests upon axioms as simple as they are universal.”

Echoing Aristotle and his understanding of peace as the final end to all things, Hamilton observed that “the means [of military might] ought to be proportioned to the end; the persons, from whose agency the attainment of any end is expected, ought to possess the means by which it is to be attained.” That end, of course, was the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

These are but two small cases of thinkers who fear American militarism, and yet view classic liberal arts education in the great books as enemies, when they are, in fact, friends. The great works of the Western canon offer wisdom that confirms their values—and, more importantly, could actually steer their minds to a much fuller and richer outlook than they allow themselves in the short-sighted progressivism in which they continue to think.

Bibliography


