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.