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## ABSTRACT

The need to involve the whole American society in education is stressed in this monograph. Education in the United States has a history of constantly attempting to accommodate the circumstances and demands of the New World. Although American education owes much to the Old World systems in areas of curriculum and stages of education, it exhibited early and decisive differences. The American system performed many services which were performed in other countries by the church, state, guilds, and families. The American secondary school trained boys for work, college, and "life," rather than strictly for university study. Often located in small towns, American colleges were small and simple, adopted open admission policies, and taught subjects which elsewhere were studied in secondary school. In the United States, all levels of education have taught conformity to the will of the democratic majority--a majority which was until quite recently a white, middle-class majority. Educational reformers, particularly during 1890-1910, suggested philosophies which schools should follow and specified functions which schools should fulfill. Results were that schools were required to do far more than they could do and they were deflected from those things they had done well in the past. Now, there is a need to bring American schools and the entire educational enterprise into harmony with the profound changes occurring in American life. (Author/DB)

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Among his publications are: *Growth of the American Republic* (with Samuel Eliot Morison, 1931-42); *Theodore Parker* (1936); *The Heritage of America* (1939); *Majority Rule and Minority Rights* (1943); *The American Mind* (1951); *The Commonwealth of Learning* (1968); and *Britain Through American Eyes* (1974). He was a contributor to the January, 1970, issue of the PHI DELTA KAPPAN.

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# **THE PEOPLE AND THEIR SCHOOLS**

**Henry Steele Commager**

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### THE OLD WORLD HERITAGE

Of all American institutions it is the schools—at every level from elementary to high and higher—that have most faithfully reflected the shifting desires, expectations, purposes, objectives, triumphs, and failures of the American character, and that have therefore most faithfully conformed to what might be considered the national norm. And this is true though no other major institution, except religion, owes more to inheritance than does the institution of education. For two centuries education was intellectually in thrall to the Old World. The philosophy that animated it was inherited, the substance of the curriculum was carried over, the methods of pedagogy were reproduced, from Britain and, to some extent, from the continent. The very names which we still apply to the various stages of education reflect this: kindergarten, from Germany; grammar school, from England; high school, from Scotland, where it referred to the school on the High; the normal school, an absurd adoption of a French term for German teachers' seminaries; the college and the university, both terms that trace their lineage to the late middle ages. As best

*Illustration opposite:* Thomas Jefferson

they could, American schools adapted themselves to these categories. As best they could they adopted, too, the curriculum thought suitable for a very different kind of education to a very different student body in the Old World—a curriculum which for over two centuries celebrated the primary importance of Latin and Greek, formal mathematics, history, chiefly ancient and English, and the elements of rhetoric and grammar—rather than those practical subjects which would have been of greatest use in the New World.

Yet differences emerged early and proved, in the end, decisive—differences imposed on the schools by circumstances and environment. For though the early settlers in America brought with them an inherited intellectual baggage, inherited ways of thought, conduct, morality, and inherited habits and institutions, the environment in which these were to operate was profoundly different. Coming to America was itself the most revolutionary of changes, and continued to be for generations of immigrants for another 300 years. In this strange new world nothing could be taken for granted, and almost everything had to be learned anew: climate, soil, flora, fauna, diseases and their remedies, new ways of farming, new tools, even a new arithmetic for, as Crèvecoeur was later to put it, here a hundred miles was what a mile was formerly. Within a short time almost everything was to be new socially and culturally, too: legal equality for all whites, slavery for blacks, social equality for most whites, and political equality for larger numbers than elsewhere on the globe; freedom from an Established Church and, eventually, complete religious freedom; almost limitless possibilities for the resolute, the industrious, and the clever, and at the same time the requirement of resourcefulness to stay alive.

All this was vastly educational, but what it meant was, at the same time, the removal or evaporation of most of those institutions which had, for centuries, carried on a major part of education in the Old World. It meant that Americans had no church which could impose its discipline upon the whole people; no powerful state which could enforce obedience to a wide range of laws, many of them ancient; no class system or social hierarchy which fixed the limits of social life and conduct and of expectations, too; no formal professions with their rules and their tradi-

tions, no guilds, no apprenticeship system; none of the remnants of a feudal order—remnants of little importance in Britain but still effective on the continent. Even the family could not play the role in education and discipline that it did in the Old World. It was customarily the young who emigrated, leaving the old behind; often it was single men who sought to better their fortunes in the New World. Families in the New World were large—after all more children survived than in the Old—but what with the lure of open land, they abandoned ancestral homesteads for ever-changing frontiers, and, except during the Colonial period, the family did not exercise that elaborate and prolonged educational and disciplinary function which was taken pretty much for granted in Europe.

Other differences between education in the Old World and the New were no less important. First among these was an astonishing enlargement of the scope of public education, largely but not exclusively in New England. The Puritans led the way. In part to outwit "ye old deluder Satan," in part to make sure that "learning may not be buried in the graves of our Fathers in the Church and the Commonwealth," they provided for the Bay Colony first a Latin School, then a College, then, in two pioneering laws, provision for the establishment of elementary schools in every town and of grammar schools that would prepare young men for the University in all towns of one hundred families. Other colonies lagged behind those of New England, but most of them functions—church, state, guilds, families, and so forth—schools education. Certainly by the time of independence most American males were literate—something that could not be said of Europeans outside of Scotland, Sweden, Holland, and one or two of the German states. And if there were as yet no universities in the United States when Washington was inaugurated President, there were no less than seventeen colleges.

A second difference, which emerged early, was what we might call the substitution of morality for religion in the schools. Religion was, to be sure, ever present, but it was a generalized religion, rather than that of a particular denomination. Where on the continent all schools inculcated the established religion—Catholicism in France and Spain, Lutheranism in Denmark and Sweden, the Anglican faith in England, and so forth—in the new



American States schools and colleges were open to all, of whatever denomination (or of none), and there were no religious tests or qualifications either in the elementary or secondary schools or in the colleges. What this meant was a divorce of formal religion from formal education, and a stimulus to religious toleration; what it meant, too, was that the very freedom from the obligations of formal religion contributed to create a special obligation on the schools to inculcate morals. These qualities were to persist: a separation of education from religion, and a concern by education for morality.

A third difference which emerged early and continued down to our own day, was that notwithstanding the formal traditionalism of most American schools, social pressures forced them to take on responsibilities which no Old World schools were expected to fulfill. Because—as we have observed—in the Old World there were a score of institutions that performed educational functions—church, state, guilds, families, and so forth—schools could restrict themselves to such formal education as was thought essential or desirable. America had none of these institutions; almost inevitably the burden of education for all situations and all circumstances was foisted on the schools. From almost the beginning of our history, schools were required to provide far more than schooling. They were expected to serve society, the economy, the government in all capacities, even to serve social morality. In short they were asked to perform those services which elsewhere were performed by many ancient institutions, which is another way of saying that they were asked to do more than they could do.

### **New World Responsibilities**

The first duty laid on them was to provide an enlightened citizenry in order that self-government might work. This was a basic tenet of Jeffersonian philosophy, and it has remained basic to American political as to American educational philosophy. Democracy to be effective, required an enlightened citizenry. To expect an ignorant or an indifferent electorate to govern themselves wisely was to expect the impossible. "To be long lived," as Jefferson's friend Benjamin Rush said, "republics must invest

*Illustration opposite* Benjamin Rush

in education." That was what the new republic did. By modern standards the investment was a modest one, but by the standards of the eighteenth century it was unprecedented. Not only did most state constitutions call for the establishment and support of public schools and some for the creation of state universities, but the national government, too, was committed to the support of education. The Ordinance of 1785 granted one section in every township for the support of public education. Three-quarters of a century later this principle was incorporated into the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 which furnished the foundation for a great system of state agricultural and engineering universities.

A second task imposed on the schools was that of creating and strengthening a sense of national unity. Politically the nation was "brought forth" between 1776 and 1789, but intellectually, imaginatively, and emotionally it had still to be created. For the new United States lacked, from the beginning, many of those denominators of national sentiment and unity taken for granted in the older nations of Europe. There was as yet no common history, no common sense of the past, no literature, no art, no heroes or villains, no legends or symbols, nothing to inspire what Lincoln was later to call "those mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone." These were to come, and with astonishing rapidity, for the American people created a usable past almost overnight. On the schools was placed the responsibility of making this past familiar to generations of children—a task which no other institution could have performed. To children of the most miscellaneous backgrounds they taught a common language, a common history, a common body of poetry and song, a common storehouse of allusion. Whether it was Noah Webster with his Blue Backed Spellers, his Readers and his Dictionaries, or Parson Weems with his myths and legends about Washington and other Founding Fathers, or Stuart and Trumbull and Peale with their romantic paintings of the heroes and the stirring events of the Revolutionary War, all worked consciously or unconsciously to the same end: to create a common sentiment of nationalism and of Americanism.

This was not just a task of the formative years; it was one which took on new dimensions with the passing of years. Each

decade after 1840 saw from two to eight million immigrants pour into the United States. How were these diverse racial stocks to be absorbed into American society and culture? You could not rely on the churches here, or on the fraternal societies, or even on journalism, for all of these had a vested interest in retaining, as long as possible, institutional and cultural connections with their Old World background. Labor unions were effective, but came late on the scene. The political party affected only adult men, and that only sporadically. The principal burden was laid upon the schools, and the chief agency of what we came to call Americanization was the children. It is a familiar story, told and retold in a hundred autobiographies and letters of immigrants, and never better than by the Russian Jew, Mary Antin, in her aptly named *The Promised Land*.

Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly, as comprising his chief hope for us children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, nor even misfortune or poverty. It was the one thing he was able to promise us when he sent for us: surer, safer, than bread or shelter. On our second school day I was thrilled with what this freedom of education meant. A little girl from across the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. My father was out, but we five (children) between us had a few words of English by this time. We knew the word school. We understood. This child, who had never seen us till yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was not much better dressed than we were, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston! No applications made, no questions asked, no examinations, exclusions, no machinations, no fees. The doors stood open for every one of us. The smallest child could show us the way.

There was, to be sure, a price for all this. The deliberate inculcation of Americanism contributed inevitably to the nourishing of a patriotism that was both self-conscious and chauvinist, and made the schools instruments of national policy, as it were, and of the creation of a culture which prized uniformity above diversity. But then, was this not true of nationalism everywhere?

None of this was outside "education," but much of it was outside the traditional scope of academic schooling, and this meant that even early in the history of the republic American schools took on a character that differentiated them from the schools of the past. That foreshadowed what was to happen with the schools

of the future—the schools of newly created nations like Germany and Italy, of newly self-conscious nations like Japan and China. In the United States it found its philosopher in Horace Mann of Massachusetts who eloquently advocated ever greater public support to schools, the emancipation of the schools from church and religious controls, the improvement of teacher training through the creation of “Normal” Schools and the development of professionalization in education. In a series of Annual Reports, which constitute a systematic exposition of an American philosophy of public education, he formulated a philosophy which deliberately placed upon the schools duties and responsibilities elsewhere borne by church, family, and community. Listen to the conclusion of his final Report:

Education, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery . . . It gives each man true independence and the means by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor. . . . The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society.

All later American educational philosophy—the philosophy of a Henry Barnard, a Lester Ward, a Jane Addams, a John Dewey, a Booker T. Washington—followed the lines marked out by Horace Mann.

In the course of the nineteenth century the availability of schooling to all children who were white (even free blacks were denied access to public schools in the North, and as late as 1834 infuriated citizens of Canterbury, Connecticut, forced Prudence Crandall to close her school for Negro girls, and eventually drove her from the state), together with the special circumstances of American life, combined to work a revolution in American society which had no parallel in the Old World—not even in Grundtvig's Denmark. In Britain and on most of the Continent education followed a pattern which persisted from generation to generation almost unbroken. It was an education by family, class, and church rather than by teachers or educators; it was not de-

*Illustration opposite* Noah Webster

signed to be revolutionary but to preserve intact the habits, relationships, and patterns of the past. But in America where class distinctions were temporary and intangible, where both geographical and social mobility broke the crust of custom, and where education was generally free, a new pattern emerged—one in which it could be assumed that each new generation was both better educated and more sophisticated than its parents. In the Old World children received pretty much the same education—or lack of education—as their parents and their grandparents; in the New it was taken for granted that each generation would be better educated—at least formally—than its predecessors. Nor was this wholly a matter of schooling. Immigrants often found it hard to adapt to the new circumstances of American life; their children found it easy, and themselves took on the task of Americanizing their parents and their grandparents. Where, in the Old World, parents and grandparents provided the standards and the guidance, in the New it was rather the other way around: it was the young who knew the language, who understood the habits, who could manage—and did. They refused to speak the parental language; they broke away from the parental religion; they had no desire to follow parental footsteps in work or profession; they married outside the clan. Often they changed their names, but they changed more than their names. What Horace said was profoundly true of their parents, but not of the children, that

*Caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt* (They change their sky but not their soul who flee across the seas).

All of this contributed to that American trait which has excited the interest of European visitors for almost two centuries—the readiness of Americans to concede to their children not only in practical matters but in matters of thought and taste as well.

### **The American Secondary School**

What we call “secondary” education in America antedated both elementary and higher: the Boston Latin School opened its doors in 1635 and, as we have seen, the Massachusetts law of 1647 required towns to provide an education which would fit young men—really boys—for college. “Latin” Schools flourished all through the Colonial period, not in New England alone, and dur-

ing the Revolutionary era they were forced to compete with academies which made concessions to the practical needs of the young for an education which would fit them for the office, the counter, or the deck of a ship. Publicly financed high schools did not come until the decade of the 1820s, and did not really flourish until the close of the century. As late as 1900 there were only some 2500 public high schools in the country, with approximately 500,000 students. Another million and a quarter or so attended parochial and private or semiprivate academies. Thereafter the growth of the high school was rapid, and on it was placed, equally with the elementary school, the miscellaneous and complex burden of training for work, for college, and "for life."

The attitudes and expectations which Americans had long nourished for their elementary schools were carried over—perhaps with added force—to the high schools. In the Old World, down almost to our own time, the average child finished schooling at the age of thirteen or fourteen; even today fifteen is the most nearly universal "school-leaving age." But in twentieth-century America school-leaving age was raised from fourteen to sixteen, and then, in many states—particularly those in the North and West—to eighteen. This requirement, plus effective child labor laws, accounts in large part for the spectacular upswing of the high school population in the United States from less than a million at the beginning of the century to some fifteen million in 1975.

Where in the Old World secondary education was long designed as preparation for the university, and limited therefore to a social, economic, or intellectual elite, in the United States the high school attached itself to the elementary school. It is illuminating that the term "grammar school" which in England and in the Colonial period described a school which taught Latin Grammar and prepared for the university, came in time to mean elementary school. Where, in the nineteenth century the elementary, or grammar school, was the most representative of American educational institutions, in the twentieth it was, increasingly, the high school which assumed that role. For though states set standards, requirements, and to some extent even dictated the curriculum, the schools themselves depended chiefly on local support. This meant that the schools—and par-

ticularly the high schools (for the task of the elementary schools was pretty much the same everywhere) reflected community standards, expectations, and prejudices. They did this not by rigorous insistence on high academic standards—something the majority of teachers would have been quite unable to provide—but by cultivating and catering to the non-academic interests of the community. They were called upon to educate the community, and even the parents, to the value of education; to adjust the requirements of the schools to the felt needs of parents for such demands as they might make for the work of their children at home or on the farms; to win support for the schools by providing an outlet for community social activities; to entertain the community with athletic festivals; and to prove their practicality through concentration on domestic science, carpentry, driver training, and similar activities of a quasi-educational character. Nor were there, for the most part, countervailing pressures to concentrate on high academic standards. Few high school students went on to college—the total college and university population in 1900 was less than 600,000 though state laws all but guaranteed admission to state institutions from any state high school.

Thus while the elementary schools of America and Britain or Germany or Denmark were much the same, the secondary schools were very different. The English public school, the French lycee, the German gymnasium, were institutions designed to train a ruling or an intellectual class. They were concerned, overwhelmingly and seriously, with academic education, and had little time—and less patience—with most of the things that distinguished the American high school—the mingling of the sexes, the emphasis on social activities, the obsession with football, basketball, and baseball, the preoccupation with student government, student newspapers, student social organizations, and the enlistment of parents in the affairs of the schools. On the whole the secondary schools of the Old World served and represented the needs of a privileged class; on the whole American high schools served and represented the miscellaneous interests of the rank and file of the American people. Nor did this situation change with the immense growth of “higher” education in America and the expectation

*Illustration opposite.* Horace Mann

that most high school graduates would go on to further education. What happened here is that just as the elementary school assimilated the high school, so the high school assimilated the community college and the college. Higher education attached itself to high education, the college-university to the high school, not—as in Europe—the other way around.

### **The American College**

Americans were innovative in the realm of secondary education; they were, of necessity, even more innovative in "higher" education. In the Old World higher education was represented by the university. Though those who founded Harvard College sometimes called it a university, it was not that by European standards. Indeed the first institution to approach the European university was Jefferson's University of Virginia, which opened its doors in 1825. The first true university came only in the decade of the 1860s with the opening of Cornell University and Eliot's revolution at Harvard, and in 1876 with the founding of the Johns Hopkins. What Americans invented instead of the university was the college—one of the more interesting inventions in the history of education. The American college retained for over two centuries the character stamped on it from the beginning. It was small and simple; it was located in some small town or rural retreat, far from the distractions of cities; it enrolled boys of thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, housed them in residential halls, and formulated a network of parietal rules to safeguard their morals and train their character; it taught Latin and Greek, mathematics, a smattering of Natural Philosophy (science) and of Moral Philosophy, history, and rhetoric, and sent them out at the age of eighteen or nineteen to take their place in a society which had more need for general than for specialized talents. The American colleges were—and long remained—far closer to the English public school, the French lycee, the German gymnasium, than to universities like Paris or Gottingen or Bologna.

Because the college antedated the university by over two centuries, it represented and for a long time dominated "higher" education in America. When universities did emerge, they were (with the temporary exception of Johns Hopkins) attached to the



colleges. To this day, with the exception of perhaps two score universities, it is the college tail that wags the university dog. To this day most colleges teach subjects taught elsewhere in secondary schools, retain a large part of the academic apparatus of the high school—courses, grades, attendance, counseling, parietal rules, enormous emphasis on competitive sports, fraternities, sororities, and other childish activities. In large things as in small they hold up a mirror to American society. Their very existence is a luxury possible only in a country which can afford to provide a "general" education for four crucially important years, and put off specialized professional education until young people are in their mid-twenties. In their emphasis on athletics and social life, they are part of the youth cult that has always distinguished America from Europe, and in their concept (more vivid in the years before the Great War than since) that college represents a kind of Golden Haze which should be devoted to happiness, they represent a characteristically American form of romanticism. Their policy of "open admission," which obtains in most states and which helps account for a college-university population of some ten million, reflects the American faith in both equality of opportunity and equality of talent. Their readiness to teach almost any subject represents a democratic faith that just as all minds are potentially equal so all subjects are potentially equal—mathematics and hotel management, Latin and advertising, anatomy and wrestling. Characteristically American, too, is the fact that underneath the seeming variety and diversity of colleges and universities is fundamental similarity. Just as Americans boast 300 religious denominations but very few religious differences, so they boast hundreds of public and hundreds of private institutions of learning, the public colleges representing the most varied constituencies and the private ones the most diverse denominations, but all offering much the same education and turning out products as much alike as the products of great automobile manufacturers. In all of this, as in almost the whole of public education, the forces of democratic uniformity triumph over those of diversity. In all of this, too, higher education which, because it concerns itself with universals in science and philosophy might be expected to be less responsive to democratic pressures, accommodates quite as readily to the vagaries

of popular pressures and expectations, as do elementary and secondary education.

### **Our Schools Have Taught Conformity**

As our most representative institutions, our schools have long been conformist institutions. How could it be otherwise? What they have conformed to are the needs, interests, aspirations, of whatever body politic was dominant, and in the United States the body politic that was dominant at any one time was substantially larger and more miscellaneous, than in the Old World. Thus the interests that were reflected and respected were more popular and more miscellaneous, than elsewhere. The conformity inculcated in the United States (mostly unconsciously) was conformity to the will or the instincts of the democratic majority—a majority which was, until quite recently, a white middle class majority. Through most of the history of the republic schools were expected to teach what people generally admired and took for granted: industry, sobriety, discipline, acquisitiveness, patriotism, and a popular morality. Just so, in Britain and on the continent, schools were expected to inculcate the virtues that the ruling classes thought proper for the middle and lower classes. Charles Dickens has reminded us that the children of the poor were taught to

- Love our occupations  
Bless the squire and his relations  
Live upon our daily rations  
And always know our proper stations.

And the children of the privileged classes were taught what they needed to know in order to rule the others. All this was true on the continent as well—though perhaps less so in Scandinavia and Holland than elsewhere.

Yet, there was in fact less conformity in American schools of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than in those of most other countries for the elementary reason that there was less to

*Illustration opposite:* Jane Addams

conform to—less, certainly, of an ostentatious nature. It was difficult to retain traditional patterns of conduct and belief in an environment that was constantly changing, and among a people determined to throw off a good many of those traditions and beliefs. What American schools were expected to conform to was—as Tocqueville made clear in his classic *Democracy in America*—public opinion. Pressure did not come from above, mostly because there was no above, nor from below either—for neither slaves nor freedmen nor newly arrived immigrants were in any position to exert pressure—but from the circumambient environment. It came from the masses of the people who were instinctively conformist in matters of morals, habits, and education and whose instinctive conformity was strengthened by their respect for the inherent validity of majority opinion.

The special circumstances of American life, too, imposed conformity. Much that could be taken for granted in England, France, Denmark, or Japan, could not be taken for granted in the United States: that all children spoke the same language, that all worshipped in the same church, that they played the same games and had the same standards of sportsmanship, that they knew the same songs and stories and fairy tales, and so forth. Thus the schools were called upon to "Americanize" in the most elementary matters. They were called upon to encourage or create a new conformity, one which would provide a sense of belonging to all children, and to their parents as well. It is difficult to inculcate conformity in elementary things, and encourage non-conformity in matters of the mind or the spirit. And there was, too, this added consideration, that the separation of church and state in America carried with it, increasingly, the exclusion of religion from the schools and imposed upon the schools, therefore, the special burden of teaching morals as a substitute for religion. This attitude carried from the kindergarten (when it finally arrived in the 1860s) to the college.

Internal pressures for conformity took on added significance as the circumstances of life in the New World put ever larger responsibilities on the schools. In the Old World a score of major institutions shared with the schools responsibility for training the young. It is worth repeating that the New World had no such institutional network. Thus America had no church that could im-

pose its discipline upon the people from infancy to old age, no class system (except to be sure in the Old South) to fix patterns of conduct, no apprenticeship to supervise the training of the children of the working classes, nor the tradition of sending out the young of both sexes to service in the great houses, no Army and Navy with their inflexible requirements. Even the family was much less of an educational institution than the family in France or Germany or Italy, for a classless society and the lure of open land or of the cities meant that the young would scatter to the wind.

At the same time this absence of formal discipline and training conjured up a new kind of discipline, imposed by independence itself. It meant that everyone was on his own—everyone who was white anyway, and male—free to make what he could out of life. It placed upon the American citizen responsibilities and choices unfamiliar in older societies: the choice of a church, the choice of a job or a profession, the choice of a wife or a husband, the choice of membership in a dozen organizations from political parties to unions, the choice, too—though this was largely in the hands of parents—of schools and education.

The great majority of Americans chose to conform as best they could to expectations, but large numbers chose instead to revolt or to run away. Much of American social and educational history is the record of the interaction between these choices.

### **The Impossible Task**

The two decades after 1890 constituted a watershed in American intellectual as well as economic and political history. On the one side of this watershed lay an America predominantly rural and agricultural, British and Northern European in ethnic makeup, though always with a steady proportion of Negroes, and Protestant in religion, isolationist not only politically but intellectually as well. On the other side lay an America predominantly urban and industrial, with an ever larger admixture of Eastern and Southern European population and of Catholics and Jews, economically expansionist and politically imperialistic. These decades were memorable for the passing of the frontier, and for large scale industrialization and the rise of the modern trusts and

corporations and modern labor unions, a tremendous upswing in immigration, the end of Reconstruction and the beginnings of the New South, the emergence of the welfare state, and the rapid growth of federal centralization. Behind and pervading these changes was a shift in philosophy as fundamental as that ushered in by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment: from the deductive to the inductive, the transcendental to the scientific, the romantic to the pragmatic, and the formal to the evolutionary.

Inevitably these far-reaching changes affected and involved education. Inevitably, too, education attempted to accommodate itself to their circumstances and demands. The decline of farming and the growth of cities meant an impoverishment of the informal education of the farm, the care of animals, the household chores, the extensive family, the requirements of neighborhood cooperation, which had played so large a part in the process of growing up, and the acceleration of the process which concentrated education in the school room. In another area the rise of modern industry and science, and the rapid expansion of governmental activities, required schools, especially at the higher levels, to specialize more and more, and thus discouraged the tradition of the amateur and encouraged that of the professional. It was this that accounted for the immense upswing in the high school population, and then an increase in college, university, and professional school population to no less than ten million by the mid-1970s. Finally, the new evolutionary philosophy found perhaps its most persuasive expression in a succession of educational statesmen and practitioners: the sociologist Lester Ward; the founder of the settlement-house movement, Jane Addams; and the fathers of American pragmatism, William James of Harvard and John Dewey of Chicago and Columbia Universities. These not only dominated the educational scene but profoundly influenced the sociological, the psychological, and the philosophical scenes during much of the twentieth century.

The leaders of the new "progressive" education were the successors of the educational reformers of the Romantic era—William Maclure who introduced Pestalozzianism into America, Horace Mann and Henry Barnard who championed the common

*Illustration opposite.* Booker T. Washington

school, Elizabeth Peabody who was chiefly responsible for the triumph of the kindergarten. Like these, the progressive educators were committed to the interdependence of school and society. They believed that schools should be the instruments for advancing democracy, equality, and morality, as well as learning. But in their approach to the relationship of school and society there was a subtle but profound difference from that of the romantic generation. Where a Jefferson and a Horace Mann had looked to the schools to carry out the ideals of a society that they thought morally and socially superior to all others, the generation of John Dewey and his colleagues and disciples found themselves maneuvered into a position where they called on the schools to impose their ideals on society. Where the educators of the past had had to persuade society to reform the schools, now a Dewey, a George Counts, a Harold Rugg (all part of that Columbia Teachers College which pioneered in progressive education) looked to the schools to reform society. Just at a time when the sheer quantitative task of the schools was enormously enlarged by large scale immigration and urbanization, and the qualitative task enormously intensified by the demands of a more sophisticated society and economy, the schools were required

- to face squarely and courageously every social issue;
- to come to grips with life in all its stark realities;
- to establish an organic relationship with the community;
- to develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare;
- and to fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny.

Thus where, in much of the nineteenth century, we expected our schools to do what in the Old World the family, the church, the apprenticeship system, and the guilds did, in the twentieth century we have increasingly asked them to do what the modern equivalents of these institutions, plus scores of voluntary organizations, fail or refuse to do. Our schools—and therefore our children—are the victims of the failure of our society to fulfill its obligation to the Athenian ideal of *Paideia*—the assumption that the major business of Society was the education and training of the young in all areas—intellectual, moral, and physical.

Not the least interesting function assigned by the new educators to the schools was that implicit in the final phrase: "to fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny." This, one might suppose, was something a society would itself fashion, and would impose upon the schools, rather than the other way around. For how, after all, can the part reconstruct the whole? How can the schools—all of whose teachers and administrators are drawn from the body of society, fashion a new vision for society? And how, after fashioning such a vision, can they "compel" its acceptance by society?

What all this meant was that, increasingly in the twentieth century, society placed upon the schools responsibilities greater than they could fulfill. Not only were they expected to perform all the traditional tasks of education; they were expected now to prepare the young to solve the problems of national and world affairs and, in addition to all this, to serve as the mentors, the guides, and the conscience of society.

Do we want good citizens, the reformers asked; the kind that Jefferson provided for, that Horace Mann extolled, that Theodore Roosevelt celebrated? Do not, then, follow the misguided examples of a Jefferson, a Mann, or a Roosevelt, but teach civics directly. That will surely give us a generation of citizens who faithfully perform their civic duties and are prepared to serve their commonwealth. Do we want an end to that racial intolerance and injustice which for so long stained the pages of our history? Teach tolerance and equality in the schools, and when our children grow up they will, regardless of the examples set by their elders, infallibly practice it in their own schools, in housing, in jobs, in medical and mental care. Do we want to banish chauvinism and encourage cosmopolitanism in the young so that when they are grown-up they will indeed be citizens of the world—free of those fears and hatreds and obsessions which had filled the minds of their forebears? Teach world literature, world history; introduce children to the culture of Russia and of China; make clear how much we owe to the contributions of small nations like Greece or Judea, and understanding will take the place of misunderstanding and tolerance spread from people to people and continent to continent. Do we want an end to war and to militarism? The proper study of history—and perhaps of moral-

ity—will solve that problem and usher in an era of peace among nations.

### **Who or What is Responsible?**

Rarely, we may say, have so many been exposed to so much with results so meager. To judge by the experience of the past forty years, reliance on the schools to reform society and usher in the millenium by teaching social problems, or world history, has been an almost unmitigated failure. After half a century of exposure to world culture, world history, and world politics—most of it contemporary, of course—Americans turned out to be culturally more alienated and politically more isolationist and chauvinistic than at any time in our history.

It is of course folly to blame this on the schools. The responsibility is on society itself for requiring the schools to do far more than they could do and deflecting them from doing those things they had done well in the past and were prepared to do well in the present.

But the explanation of this failure is both deeper and more complex than this: it lies rather in the American character. First is the illusion—characteristically but not exclusively American—that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points in the intellectual and moral realms as in the mathematical. The generation that created the American republic knew instinctively that this was an illusion, and so did the generation of Horace Mann. These assumed that students familiar with the classics of literature, history, and philosophy would be wise enough to understand whatever problems might arise, and resourceful enough to work out solutions. These assumptions were, to be sure, rooted not so much in confidence in the authority of the schools, as in the authority of the home and the church and the society. For—and this is a second explanation—that earlier society was culturally and philosophically harmonious. Except in the area of slavery and race relations, there was no such chasm between what was valued in formal education and what society practiced and exalted. Jefferson the educator and Jefferson the statesman were of a piece, as were John Adams and Benjamin Rush and, at a

*Illustration opposite* Theodore Roosevelt



later time statesmen-educators like De Witt Clinton and Horace Mann.

Our twentieth-century society displays no such harmony; perhaps no modern society does. A society that is uprooted, divided, disillusioned, and confused, and that has lost confidence in its own character, cannot expect to achieve unity through its schools. The very fact that we require our schools to do so much that society should itself do, is an indication that we do not know what our schools should do, and that we are not prepared to do what we ourselves should do. One advantage of asking schools to do everything is that you have a kind of social laboratory in which to try out your ideas; another is that the experiments are bound to fail and you then have a scapegoat for your own failures.

This dichotomy between what the schools are supposed to be and what society should be, is analogous to that juxtaposition of public and private sin that E. A. Ross described in his classic essay on *Sin and Society*, written just seventy years ago.

What Ross pointed out was that it was only "private sin" that society punishes with almost fanatical severity—drunkenness, embezzlement, seduction, purse-snatching, and so forth—but that society looks with amiable indifference on the far more widespread and more costly "social sins"—corrupting the political processes by buying elections or bribing legislators; selling adulterated goods or dangerous drugs; exploiting child labor, or the helplessness of the poor; evading corporate taxes; wasting the natural resources that belong to posterity; denying to minority groups their legal and constitutional rights, and so forth. Those who are guilty of these sins rarely go to prison; on the contrary, as Ross sardonically observed, they sit on boards of trustees, serve as vestrymen for churches, receive honorary degrees from universities. Had he lived today he could have added that they even get elected to the presidency and the vice presidency of the United States.

So it has come to be increasingly with the disjunction between what is taught in the schools and what is practiced in society, when the schools are required to be the surrogate conscience of society. Thus society applauds the principle of racial equality and even lays upon the schools chief responsibility for realizing it, but does not itself accept the principle or practice

it. Thus society requires the schools to pledge allegiance to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but elects to high office those who are quite prepared to ignore the Constitution when convenient, and to punish tiresome minority groups who invoke the Bill of Rights against atrocities and illegalities. Thus society rejoices when schools celebrate the virtues of a Washington, a Jefferson, an Adams, or a Madison who devoted their lives to service for the commonwealth, but itself applauds private, not public enterprise. Thus society expects schools to teach that justice is the end of government, but itself permits and practices injustice in almost every area of public life—including, for a long time, education itself. Thus—on a somewhat more familiar level—society looks to the schools to inculcate the virtues of sportsmanship, but rewards winning, not losing, teams, and fires losing, not winning coaches, thus making inescapably clear to the young that it is not in fact the way the game is played that is important, but only the score at the end of the game.

Much of public education today is a massive demonstration in hypocrisy, and it is folly to suppose that the young do not sense this.

### **The Task Ahead**

The Athenian ideal of Paideia rested on the assumption that the education of the young was not only the most important of social activities, but was the very purpose and function of society. The task that confronts us now is to return to that ideal, one which lays primary emphasis upon the fulfillment of our fiduciary obligation to posterity. Our immediate problem is two-fold: as citizens to bring about changes in the moral standards and habits of society, and as educators to see that our schools prepare the young for the obligations of citizenship in a just society. This requires that the schools themselves be just—just to each child in helping to bring out the whole of his or her potential; just to all who have been neglected and disparaged by a society that does not practice what it preaches; just to society itself—the society of the present and of the future; just to the community which is the community of mankind.

"If society has a technical need," said the historian Elie Halevy, "that helps science move forward more than ten universities." The observation is perhaps a more sophisticated—and doubtless a more exaggerated—version of Dr. Johnson's aphorism that "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Needs inspire science, crises concentrate the mind. It has been need that has brought about most of the innovations and improvements in education. It was need that founded Harvard College among those who "dreaded to leave an illiterate ministry to the Churches when our present ministers shall lie in the dust," and that brought the enactment of the first education laws in America. It was need that divorced education from church control for the first time in modern history, and that turned to schools to provide a citizenry enlightened enough for self-government. It was need at Neuhaus and Stans that fashioned Pestalozzi's epoch-making experiments in applying Rousseau to reality. It was the need of a nation torn asunder and bankrupt that inspired Bishop Grundtvig to create the Danish Folk High School which did so much to revive that desperate country. It was need that brought the kindergarten to the United States ("Only in the United States will the kindergarten flourish" said the disillusioned Friedrich Froebel) and the normal school, too. It was need that made it possible to do for agricultural and industrial education what the Ordinance of 1785 had done for elementary education, and thus launched the great system of state universities in the United States; need that created universities in Harvard, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins; need that dictated the *Kalamazoo* decision which validated the taxation of all for the support of public schools; need that eventually brought the federal government to take on a major responsibility for the financing of public education and of science and research in the universities. It was need that created Hull House and its far-reaching and as yet unexhausted experiments in education at every level, and it was need that brought into existence those community colleges which are now the most interesting enterprise in American education. It was the most importunate need—that of avoiding social revolution—that reversed *Plessy v. Fergu-*

*Illustration opposite* John Dewey

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son and gave us *Brown v. Topeka*, and it is need that will eventually modify or reverse the decision of the Supreme Court in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* and give us a more equitable school system in every state of the Union.

The need for reform which confronts us now is once again to bring our schools and our entire educational enterprise into harmony with the profound changes in American life, to make them once again serve the interests of a morality which seeks justice and harmony, not only in our own country but throughout the globe, not only for our own generation but for all future generations. The changes that are called for in our educational enterprise have the paradoxical character that they cannot be met by legislation but that they depend, nonetheless, upon legislation; they cannot be provided by money alone but that they cannot be achieved without money; they cannot be satisfied by professional educators but they cannot be satisfied without educational philosophers. We come back to our point of departure: that nothing fundamental and enduring can be achieved without a change in the standards, the values, the objectives, moral as well as social, of the whole of our society.

The most promising enterprise in the realm of education is to make education once more the business of the whole of society; to re-create old or create new educational networks of all those affluent organizations whose function is not profit making but society making, and whose role should not be limited to the current scene but fiduciary. For this is the meaning of Paideia, that the concern for the training of the young be the central concern of the whole of society, that it embrace every aspect of intellectual and practical and moral training, and that it be addressed to the commonwealth of the future.

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