

THOUGHTS UPON THE MODE OF EDUCATION PROPER IN A REPUBLIC

by Dr. Benjamin Rush
Philadelphia, 1786

The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and in laying the foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government.

The first remark that I shall make upon this subject is that an education in **our own is to be preferred to an education in a foreign country.** The principle of patriotism stands in need of the reinforcement of prejudice, and it is well known that our strongest prejudices in favor of our country are formed in the first one and twenty years of our lives. The policy of the Lacedamonians is well worthy of our imitation. When Antipater demanded fifty of their children as hostages for the fulfillment of a distant engagement, those wise republicans refused to comply with his demand but readily offered him double the number of their adult citizens, *whose habits and prejudices could not be shaken by residing in a foreign country.* Passing by, in this place, the advantages to the community from **the early attachment of youth to the laws and constitution of their country,** I shall only remark that young men who have trodden the paths of science together, or have joined in the same sports, whether of swimming, skating, fishing, or hunting, generally feel, through life, such ties to each other as add greatly to the obligations of mutual benevolence.

I conceive the education of our youth in this country to be peculiarly necessary in Pennsylvania while our citizens are composed of the natives of so many different kingdoms in Europe. Our schools of learning, by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government.

I proceed, in the next place, to inquire what mode of education we shall adopt so as to secure to the state all the advantages that are to be derived from the proper instruction of youth; and here I beg leave to remark **that the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in RELIGION.** *Without this, there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.*

Such is my veneration for every religion that reveals the attributes of the Deity, or a future state of rewards and punishments, that I had rather see the opinions of Confucius or Mohammed inculcated upon our youth than see them grow up wholly devoid of a system of religious principles. *But the religion I mean to recommend in this place is the religion of JESUS CHRIST.*

It is foreign to my purpose to hint at the arguments which establish the truth of the Christian revelation. **My only business is to declare that all its doctrines and precepts are calculated to promote the happiness of society and the safety and well-being of civil government. *A Christian cannot fail of being a republican.*** The history of the creation of man and of the relation of our species to each other by birth, which is recorded in the Old Testament, is the best refutation that can be given to the divine right of kings and the strongest argument that can be used in favor of the original and natural equality of all mankind. *A Christian, I say again, cannot fail of being a republican, for every precept of the Gospel inculcates those degrees of humility, self-denial, and brotherly kindness which are directly opposed to the pride of monarchy and the pageantry of a court. A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teacheth him that no man "liveth to him self."* And lastly, a Christian cannot fail of being wholly inoffensive, for his religion teacheth him in all things to do to others what he would wish, in like circumstances, they should do to him.

I am aware that I dissent from one of those paradoxical opinions with which modern times abound: that it is improper to fill the minds of youth with religious prejudices of any kind and that they should be left to choose their own principles after they have arrived at an age in which they are capable of judging for themselves. Could we preserve the mind in childhood and youth a perfect blank, this plan of education would have more to recommend it, but this we know to be impossible. *The human mind runs as naturally into principles as it does after facts.* It submits with difficulty to those restraints or partial discoveries which are imposed upon it in the infancy of reason. Hence the impatience of children to be informed upon all subjects that relate to the invisible world. But I beg leave to ask, Why should we pursue a different plan of education with respect to religion from that which we pursue in teaching the arts and sciences? Do we leave our youth to acquire systems of geography, philosophy, or politics till they have arrived at an age in which they are capable of judging for themselves? We do not. I claim no more, then, for religion than for the other sciences, and I add further that if our youth are disposed after they are of age to think for themselves, a knowledge of one system will be the best means of conducting them in a free inquiry into other systems of religion, just as an acquaintance with one system of philosophy is the best introduction to the study of all the other systems in the world.

I must beg leave upon this subject to go one step further. In order more effectually to secure to our youth the advantages of a religious education, it is necessary to impose upon them the doctrines and discipline of a particular church. Man is naturally an ungovernable animal, and observations on particular societies and countries will teach us that when we add the restraints of ecclesiastical to those of domestic and civil government, we produce in him the highest degrees of order and virtue. That fashionable liberality which refuses to associate with any one sect of Christians is seldom useful to itself or to society and may fitly be compared to the unprofitable bravery of a soldier who wastes his valor in solitary enterprises without the aid or effect of military associations. Far be it from me to recommend the doctrines or modes of worship of any one denomination of Christians. *I only recommend to the persons entrusted with the education of youth to inculcate upon them a strict conformity to that mode of worship which is most agreeable to their consciences or the inclinations of their parents.*

Under this head, I must be excused in not agreeing with those modern writers who have opposed the use of the Bible as a schoolbook. The only objection I know to it is its division into chapters and verses and its improper punctuation which render it a more difficult book to read well than many others, but these defects may easily be corrected, and the disadvantages of them are not to be mentioned with the immense advantages of making children early and intimately acquainted with the means of acquiring happiness both here and hereafter. How great is the difference between making young people acquainted with the interesting and entertaining truths contained in the Bible, and the fables of Moore and Croxall, or the doubtful histories of antiquity! *I maintain that there is no book of its size in the whole world that contains half so much useful knowledge for the government of states or the direction of the affairs of individuals as the Bible.* To object to the practice of having it read in schools because it tends to destroy our veneration for it is an argument that applies with equal force against the frequency of public worship and all other religious exercises.

The first impressions upon the mind are the most durable. They survive the wreck of the memory and exist in old age after the ideas acquired in middle life have been obliterated. Of how much consequence then must it be to the human mind in the evening of life to be able to recall those ideas which are most essential to its happiness, and these are to be found chiefly in the Bible. The great delight which old people take in reading the Bible, I am persuaded, is derived chiefly from its histories and precepts being associated with the events of child hood and youth, the recollection of which forms a material part of their pleasures.

I do not mean to exclude books of history, poetry, or even fables from our schools. They may and should be read frequently by our young people, *but if the Bible is made to give way to them altogether, I foresee that it will be read in a short time only in churches and in a few years will probably be found only in the offices of magistrates and in courts of justice.**

Next to the duty which young men owe to their Creator, I wish to see a SUPREME REGARD TO THEIR COUNTRY inculcated upon them. When the Duke of Sully became prime minister to Henry the IVth of France, the first thing he did, he tells us, was to subdue and forget his own heart.¹⁰⁰ The same duty is incumbent upon every citizen of a republic. Our country includes family, friends, and property, and should be preferred to them all. Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it.

He must watch for the state as if its liberties depended upon his vigilance alone, but he must do this in such a manner as not to defraud his creditors or neglect his family. He must love private life, but he must decline no station, however public or responsible it may be, when called to it by the suffrages of his fellow citizens. He must love popularity, but he must despise it when set in competition with the dictates of his judgment or the real interest of his country. He must love character and have a due sense of injuries, but he must be taught to appeal only to the laws of the state, to defend the one and punish the other. He must love family honor, but he must be taught that neither the rank nor antiquity of his

ancestors can command respect without personal merit. He must avoid neutrality in all questions that divide the state, but he must shun the rage and acrimony of party spirit. *He must be taught to love his fellow creatures in every part of the world, but he must cherish with a more intense and peculiar affection the citizens of Pennsylvania and of the United States.*

I do not wish to see our youth educated with a single prejudice against any nation or country, *but we impose a task upon human nature repugnant alike to reason, revelation, and the ordinary dimensions of the human heart when we require him to embrace with equal affection the whole family of mankind.* He must be taught to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the state. He must be indulged occasionally in amusements, *but he must be taught that study and business should be his principal pursuits in life.* Above all he must love life and endeavor to acquire as many of its conveniences as possible by industry and economy, but he must be taught that this life "is not his own" when the safety of his country requires it. **These are practicable lessons, and the history of the commonwealths of Greece and Rome show that human nature, without the aids of Christianity, has attained these degrees of perfection.**

While we inculcate these republican duties upon our pupil, we must not neglect at the same time to inspire him with re publican principles. He must be taught that there can be no durable liberty but in a republic and that government, like all other sciences, is of a progressive nature. The chains which have bound this science in Europe are happily unloosed in America. Here it is open to investigation and improvement. *While philosophy has protected us by its discoveries from a thousand natural evils, government has unhappily followed with an unequal pace. It would be to dishonor human genius only to name the many defects which still exist in the best systems of legislation.* We daily see matter of a perishable nature rendered durable by certain chemical operations. In like manner, I conceive that it is possible to analyze and combine power in such a manner as not only to increase the happiness but to promote the duration of republican forms of government far beyond the terms limited for them by history or the common opinions of mankind.

To assist in rendering religious, moral, and political instruction more effectual upon the minds of our youth, it will be necessary to subject their bodies to physical discipline. To obviate the inconveniences of their studious and sedentary mode of life, they should live upon a temperate diet, consisting chiefly of broths, milk, and vegetables. The black broth of Sparta and the barley broth of Scotland have been alike celebrated for their beneficial effects upon the minds of young people. They should avoid tasting spirituous liquors. *They should also be accustomed occasionally to work with their hands in the intervals of study and in the busy seasons of the year in the country. Moderate sleep, silence, occasional solitude, and cleanliness should be inculcated upon them, and the utmost advantage should be taken of a proper direction of those great principles in human conduct – sensibility, habit, imitation, and association.*

The influence [of] these physical causes will be powerful upon the intellects as well as upon the principles and morals of young people.

To those who have studied human nature, it will not appear paradoxical to recommend in this essay a particular attention to vocal music. *Its mechanical effects in civilizing the mind and thereby preparing it for the influence of religion and government have been so often felt and recorded that it will be unnecessary to mention facts in favor of its usefulness in order to excite a proper attention to it.*

In the education of youth, let the authority of our masters be as absolute as possible. The government of schools like the government of private families should be arbitrary, that it may not be severe. *By this mode of education, we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. ***I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age,*** and I have often thought that society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to the deficiencies of parental government being supplied by those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools.*

I cannot help bearing a testimony, in this place, against the custom which prevails in some parts of America (but which is daily falling into disuse in Europe) of crowding boys together under one roof for the purpose of education. The practice is the gloomy remains of monkish ignorance and is as unfavorable to the improvements of the mind in useful learning as monasteries are to the spirit of religion. I grant this mode of secluding boys from the intercourse of private families has a tendency to make them scholars, *but our business is to make them men, citizens, and Christians.* The vices of young people are generally learned from each other. The vices of adults seldom infect them. By separating them from each other, therefore, in their hours of relaxation from study, we secure their morals from a principal source of corruption, while we improve their manners by subjecting them to those restraints which the difference of age and sex naturally produce in private families.

I have hitherto said nothing of the AMUSEMENTS that are proper for young people in a republic. Those which promote health and good humor will have a happy effect upon morals and government. To increase this influence, let the persons who direct these amusements be admitted into good company and subjected by that means to restraints in behavior and moral conduct. Taverns, which in most countries are exposed to riot and vice, in Connecticut are places of business and innocent pleasure because the tavernkeepers in that country are generally men of sober and respectable characters.

The theater will never be perfectly reformed till players are treated with the same respect as persons of other ornamental professions. It is to no purpose to attempt to write or preach down an amusement which seizes so forcibly upon all the powers of the mind. *Let ministers preach to players instead of against them; let them open their churches and the ordinances of religion to them and their families, and, I am persuaded, we shall soon see such a reformation in the theater as can never be effected by all the means that have hitherto been employed for that purpose.* It is possible to render the stage, by these means, subservient to the purposes of virtue and even religion. Why should the minister of the gospel exclude the player from his visits or from his public or private instructions? The Author of Christianity knew no difference in the occupations of men. He ate and drank daily with the publicans and sinners.

From the observations that have been made it is plain that I consider it as possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the government of the state. That republic is sophisticated with monarchy or aristocracy that does not revolve upon the wills of the people, and these must be fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unison in government.

Having pointed out those general principles which should be inculcated alike in all the schools of the state, I proceed now to make a few remarks upon the method of conducting what is commonly called a liberal or learned education in a republic.

I shall begin this part of my subject by bearing a testimony against the common practice of attempting to teach boys the learned languages and the arts and sciences too early in life. The first twelve years of life are barely sufficient to instruct a boy in reading, writing, and arithmetic. With these, he may be taught those modern languages which are necessary for him to speak. The state of the memory, in early life, is favorable to the acquisition of languages, especially when they are conveyed to the mind through the ear. *It is, moreover, in early life only that the organs of speech yield in such a manner as to favor the just pronunciation of foreign languages.*

I do not wish the LEARNED OR DEAD LANGUAGES, as they are commonly called, to be reduced below their present just rank in the universities of Europe, especially as I consider an acquaintance with them as the best foundation for a correct and extensive knowledge of the language of our country. Too much pains cannot be taken to teach our youth to read and write our American language with propriety and elegance. The study of the Greek language constituted a material part of the literature of the Athenians, hence the sublimity, purity, and immortality of so many of their writings. *The advantages of a perfect knowledge of our language to young men intended for the professions of law, physic, or divinity are too obvious to be mentioned,* but in a state which boasts of the first commercial city in America, I wish to see it cultivated by young men who are intended for the counting house, for many such, I hope, will be educated in our colleges. The time is past when an academical education was thought to be unnecessary to qualify a young man for merchandise. I conceive no profession is capable of receiving more embellishments from it.

Connected with the study of our own language is the study of ELOQUENCE. It is well known how great a part it constituted of the Roman education. It is the first accomplishment in a republic and often sets the whole machine of government in motion. Let our youth, therefore, be instructed in this art. *We do not extol it too highly when we attribute as much to the power of eloquence as to the sword in bringing about the American Revolution.*

With the usual arts and sciences that are taught in our American colleges, I wish to see a regular course of lectures given upon HISTORY and CHRONOLOGY. *The science of government, whether it relates to constitutions or laws, can only be advanced by a careful selection of facts, and these are to be found chiefly in history. Above all, let our youth be instructed in the history of the ancient republics and the progress of liberty and tyranny in the different states of Europe.*

I wish likewise to see the numerous facts that relate to the origin and present state of COMMERCE, together with the nature and principles of MONEY, reduced to such a system as to be intelligible and agreeable to a young man. If we consider the commerce of our metropolis only as the avenue of the wealth of the state, the study of it merits a place in a young man's education, but, *I consider commerce in a much higher light when I recommend the study of it in republican seminaries. I view it as the best security against the influence of hereditary monopolies of land, and, therefore, the surest protection against aristocracy. I consider its effects as next to those of religion in humanizing mankind, and lastly, I view it as the means of uniting the different nations of the world together by the ties of mutual wants and obligations.*

CHEMISTRY by unfolding to us the effects of heat and mixture, enlarges our acquaintance with the wonders of nature and the mysteries of art; hence it has become in most of the universities of Europe a necessary branch of a gentleman's education. In a young country, where improvements in agriculture and manufactures are so much to be desired, the cultivation of this science, which explains the principles of both of them, should be considered as an object of the utmost importance.

In a state where every citizen is liable to be a soldier and a legislator, it will be necessary to have some regular instruction given upon the ART OF WAR and upon PRACTICAL LEGISLATION. These branches of knowledge are of too much importance in a republic to be trusted to solitary study or to a fortuitous acquaintance with books. *Let mathematical learning, therefore, be carefully applied in our colleges to gunnery and fortification, and let philosophy be applied to the history of those compositions which have been made use of for the terrible purposes of destroying human life.* These branches of knowledge will be indispensably necessary in our republic, if unfortunately war should continue hereafter to be the unchristian mode of arbitrating disputes between Christian nations.

Again, let our youth be instructed in all the means of promoting national prosperity and independence, whether they relate to improvements in agriculture, manufactures, or inland navigation. Let him be instructed further in the general principles of legislation, whether they relate to revenue or to the preservation of life, liberty, or property. Let him be directed frequently to attend the courts of justice, where he will have the best opportunities of acquiring habits of arranging and comparing his ideas by observing the secretion of truth in the examination of witnesses and where he will hear the laws of the state explained, with all the advantages of that species of eloquence which belongs to the bar. Of so much importance do I conceive it to be to a young man to attend occasionally to the decisions of our courts of law that I wish to see our colleges and academies established only in county towns.

But further, considering the nature of our connection with the United States, it will be necessary to make our pupil acquainted with all the prerogatives of the federal government.

He must be instructed in the nature and variety of treaties. He must know the difference in the powers and duties of the several species of ambassadors. He must be taught wherein the obligations of individuals and of states are the same and wherein they differ. In short, he must acquire a general knowledge of all those laws and forms which unite the sovereigns of the earth or separate them from each other.

I have only to add that it will be to no purpose to adopt this or any other mode of education unless we make choice of suit able masters to carry our plans into execution. *Let our teachers be distinguished for their abilities and knowledge. Let them be grave in their manners, gentle in their tempers, exemplary in their morals, and of sound principles in religion and government.* Let us not leave their support to the precarious resources to be derived from their pupils, but let such funds be provided for our schools and colleges as will enable us to allow them liberal salaries.

By these means we shall render the chairs—the professorships and rectorships of our colleges and academies—objects of competition among learned men. By conferring upon our masters that independence which is the companion of competency, we shall, moreover, strengthen their authority over the youth committed to their care. Let us remember that a great part of the divines, lawyers, physicians, legislators, soldiers, generals, delegates, counselors, and governors of the state will probably hereafter pass through their hands. How great then should be the wisdom, how honorable the rank, and how generous the reward of those men who are to form these necessary and leading members of the republic!

I beg pardon for having delayed so long, to say anything of the separate and peculiar mode of education proper for WOMEN in a republic. I am sensible that they must concur in all our plans of education for young men, or no laws will ever render them effectual. To qualify our women for this purpose, they should not only be instructed in the usual branches of female education but they should be instructed in the principles of liberty and government, and the obligations of patriotism should be inculcated upon them. The opinions and conduct of men are often regulated by the women in the most arduous enterprises of life, and their approbation is frequently the principal reward of the hero's dangers and the patriot's toils. Be sides, the first impressions upon the minds of children are generally derived from the women. *Of how much consequence, therefore, is it in a republic that they should think justly upon the great subjects of liberty and government!*

The complaints that have been made against religion, liberty, and learning have been made against each of them in a separate state. Perhaps like certain liquors they should only be used in a state of mixture. They mutually assist in correcting the abuses and in improving the good effects of each other. *From the combined and reciprocal influence of religion, liberty, and learning upon the morals, manners, and knowledge of individuals, of these upon government, and of government upon individuals, it is impossible to measure the degrees of happiness and perfection to which mankind may be raised.* For my part, I can form no ideas of the golden age, so much celebrated by the poets, more delightful than the contemplation of that happiness which it is now in the power of the legislature of Pennsylvania to confer upon her citizens by establishing proper modes and places of education in every part of the state.

The present time is peculiarly favorable to the establishment of these benevolent and necessary institutions in Pennsylvania. *The minds of our people have not as yet lost the yielding texture they acquired by the heat of the late Revolution.* They will now receive more readily than five or even three years hence

new impressions and habits of all kinds. The spirit of liberty now pervades every part of the state. The influence of error and deception are now of short duration. Seven years hence the affairs of our state may assume a new complexion. We may be riveted to a criminal indifference for the safety and happiness of ourselves and our posterity. An aristocratic or democratic junto may arise that shall find its despotic views connected with the prevalence of ignorance and vice in the state, or a few artful pedagogues who consider learning as useful only in proportion as it favors their pride or avarice may prevent all new literary establishments from taking place by raising a hue and cry against them, as the offspring of improper rivalry or the nurseries of party spirit.

But in vain shall we lavish pains and expense in establishing nurseries of virtue and knowledge in every part of the state, in vain shall we attempt to give the minds of our citizens a virtuous and uniform bias in early life, while the arms of our state are opened alike to receive into its bosom and to confer equal privileges upon the virtuous emigrant and the annual refuse of the jails of Britain, Ireland, and our sister states. Of the many criminals that have been executed within these seven years, four out of five of them have been foreigners who have arrived here during the war and since the peace. We are yet, perhaps, to see and deplore the tracks of the enormous vices and crimes these men have left behind them. Legislators of Pennsylvania!—Stewards of the justice and virtue of heaven!—Fathers of children who may be corrupted and disgraced by bad examples, say—can nothing be done to preserve our morals, manners, and government from the infection of European vices?

* In a republic where all votes for public officers are given by ballot, should not a knowledge of reading and writing be considered as essential qualifications for an elector? And when a man who is of a doubtful character offers his Vote, would it not be more consistent with sound policy and wise government to oblige him to read a few verses in the Bible to prove his qualifications than simply to Compel him to kiss the outside of it?

"Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," by Dr. Benjamin Rush, From A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania; to Which Are Added, Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic. Addressed to the Legislature and Citizens of the State. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1786). Reproduced without objection of the publisher from Essays on Education in the Early Republic, Frederick Rudolph editor (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 9-23.

Early Puritan immigrants who settled in the Bay Colonies established public schools which educated boys for up to 24 hours a day/7 days a week. The Puritans valued study both for religious knowledge and for economic success. As a result of these early public school efforts, 70% of men in New England compared to 40% in England and 29% in France.

<https://www1.umassd.edu/ir/resources/laboreducation/literacy.pdf>. 1642. One of the first attempts at compulsory education was the General School Law of 1642, enacted in Massachusetts in 1642 and soon after in the Mid-Atlantic Colonies. Similar efforts passed in the Southern Colonies up to 100 years later. The law compelled parents and masters to provide education in reading and writing for their children and their apprentices. Some Thoughts Concerning Education. here propos'd has had no ordinary effects upon a gentleman's son it was not design'd for. I will not say the good temper of the child did not very much contribute to it; but this I think you and the parents are satisfy'd of, that a contrary usage, according to the ordinary disciplining of children, would not have mended that temper, nor have brought him to be in love with his book, to take a pleasure in learning. Section I. A sound mind in a sound body, is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world. He that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for any thing else. Men's happiness or misery is most part of their own making. Benjamin Rush, Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic. That republic is sophisticated with monarchy or aristocracy that does not revolve upon the wills of the people, and these must be fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unison in government. . . With the usual arts and sciences that are taught in our American colleges, I wish to see a regular course of lectures given upon History and Chronology. The science of government, whether it relates to constitutions or laws, can only be advanced by a careful selection of facts, and these are to be found chiefly in history. Above all, let our yo Hence Rush wrote the monumental essay entitled "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic." This essay consisted of 20 main points, each of which will be briefly summarized here. *Education must take place in the United States. A general, uniform system of education needs to be established that would be adequate for all of the essential purposes of citizenship. He believed that the United States should establish a system that would make education in the United States preferred to an education in any other country. Rush believed that when this was accomplished, "O 5. My education, I decided then, had been positively disabling. So much of the content of what I had learned was irrelevant, while the process of learning it had cultivated a set of attitudes and behaviours which were directly opposed to what seemed to be needed in real life. Although I had studied philosophy I hadn't applied it to myself. I had assumed that the point of life was obvious: to get on, get rich, get a wife and get a family. It was beginning to be clear that life wasn't as simple as that. What I believed in, what I thought was worth working for, and with whom, these things were be