

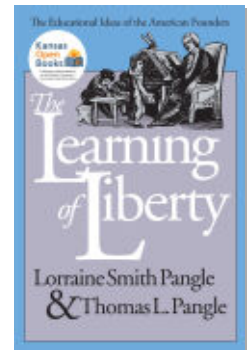


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6 Thomas Jefferson on the Education of Citizens and Leaders

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6 • Thomas Jefferson on the Education of Citizens and Leaders

If it was Benjamin Franklin who led the way in articulating the character and curriculum of the new American academy, it was Thomas Jefferson who conveyed most lucidly and compellingly the vision of a system of public schooling for the new republic. While perhaps the most eloquent proponent of the liberal principles on which the country was founded, Jefferson was nevertheless one of the Constitution's less ardent supporters, not only because he wanted a bill of rights, but because he placed relatively little faith in institutional structures to preserve freedom, and took more seriously than most the education and moral temper of the citizens. In a 1787 letter to Madison detailing his assessment of the Constitution, he concludes:

It is my principle that the will of the Majority should always prevail. If they approve the proposed Convention in all it's parts, I shall concur in it cheerfully, in hopes that they will amend it whenever they shall find it work wrong. I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural. . . . Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.¹

Earlier, when the struggle to separate from England was only beginning, Jefferson was leading the work of a committee appointed by the Virginia legislature to revise the state's laws and adapt them to the spirit and conditions of a republic; the keystone of his proposed revision was a plan for a comprehensive system of schools and academies for the state. Eventually reaching the floor as the 1779 Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, this paper is probably Jefferson's most important writing on education.² Although it was aimed at the immediate needs of Virginia, the bill, like all of Jefferson's educational efforts, was

also intended to serve as a model for the rest of the country. With its well-reasoned arguments and carefully structured plan, it stands as a permanent testimony to the clarity and subtlety of Jefferson's political theorizing, and as a text in political theory, it elicits and rewards the closest scrutiny.

Jefferson's Theory of Civic Education

In classic Jeffersonian fashion, the bill opens with a preamble that grounds the case for public schooling on fundamental political principles. In this way Jefferson sought to educate the legislature even as he called on it to champion education. If the bill had been passed, the preamble, taken together with the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Declaration of Rights (which are manifestly presupposed in the immediate background) would have stood as the introduction, for all citizens, to republican education and its place in authentic republican government. The preamble sums up clearly the political or civic educational goals that were uppermost in Jefferson's mind and, more nebulously, in the minds of most other Founders.

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes; And whereas it is generally true that the people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance; but the indigence of the greater number disabling them from so educating, at their own expence, those of their children whom nature hath fitly formed

and disposed to become useful instruments for the public, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or the wicked.

Jefferson speaks first and foremost of the enlightenment of the mass of the citizenry, so as to instill in them not only an awareness of their individual rights but also a shrewd vigilance against tyranny. It is assumed that legitimate government has its basis in the protection of individuals' natural rights, and this is by implication the primary lesson of civics. As Jefferson later wrote to Joseph Cabell, his friend and collaborator in the campaign for public education, "Equal right . . . is the polar star to be followed."³ But the threat to natural rights from government, or from "ambition" perverting government, is the second and most urgent lesson. Education in "forms of government," issuing in an appreciative understanding of those institutions that check and balance while yet enabling government, is necessary; but the stress is on the limited safety of even the "best forms," and hence the decisive importance of a spirit of informed watchfulness in the populace at large. In Jefferson's view, that spirit cannot be presumed—as the *Federalist Papers* seems to imply—but must be cultivated and its grounds carefully articulated.

Jefferson therefore delineates with great care the rather complex knowledge or awareness of political theory that is to be the goal of popular education. The end of government is the securing of natural rights that inhere in human beings as individuals, yet the final shield of these rights is the "natural powers" that characterize not individuals as such but individuals gathered in "the people at large." The enlightenment at which education aims is therefore an enlightenment of the people as a whole, or of the individuals gathered into a people. To quote the Declaration, "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of *the People* to alter or abolish it." Yet "the People," though it possesses "natural powers" once it is formed, is never said to be itself a "natural" entity or to possess natural rights above and beyond the rights of the individuals who constitute the people. Jefferson never suggests that the people have an organic unity, or that the people somehow possess one mind or spirit or "general will": to enlighten the people is to enlighten "their minds," not "its mind." As Jefferson sums up the major goal of his educational proposals in 1810, it is "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."⁴ "The people" is, then, created by unanimous contractual consent of naturally independent individuals, whose rights as individuals remain the only basic rights and whose consensual combination into a people governed by majority rule never transcends the moral primacy of their distinctive individuality. Taken one by one, the individuals are practically powerless in

the face of government and therefore lack the right to alter or overthrow government—for no one has a right to attempt what is impossible or mad. But once the individuals are made aware of the possibility of deliberately combining their powers, the united individuals can discover “natural powers”—the powers in collectivity governed by the principle of majority rule—that can alter or overthrow government and that therefore allow the emergence of the natural right to alter or to overthrow government.

Institutions are of great importance, but the natural powers of the people constitute the bedrock of healthy society. Yet paradoxically, to become truly effective, these natural powers require conventional law, devised by a superior and unusual individual, that establishes an educational system for the leader’s natural inferiors. Only in retrospect, as it were, and under proper guidance, do the people become aware of what they essentially seek and need and hence ought to claim. This first part of the preamble breathes the radical but paradoxically theoretical spirit of Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, with its famous teaching on the right to revolution inherent in the people—i.e., the majority—as a result of their natural rights as individuals, which are known to the people only through the teaching of the philosopher Locke.⁵

Locke never proposes a system of public education, however, and he seems to suppose that the written words of philosophy or of the followers and gentlemen-supporters of philosophy will suffice to awaken the mass of men to their natural condition and to the rational behavior in society dictated by that awareness. In addition, Locke has very little to say, even in his treatise on education, about the specific recruitment or training of political leaders who would promulgate his message. Jefferson not only sees government as having an essential role to play in educating the governed to guard against the misuse of government; he sees as the second vital purpose of public education the cultivation, in a spirit reminiscent of the classical tradition, of the “natural aristocracy.” As he writes later to John Adams:

The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?⁶

Locke’s teaching on the radically individualistic and disconnected, not to say antagonistic, state of nature implies that there is no natural political ordering of mankind and no person who is by nature intended to exercise civil rule over an-

other. Hence, it is necessary to maintain ceaseless vigilance as regards those in power, who will inevitably and naturally use the power for their own advantage, and will do so at the expense of others unless they are checked and channeled by the proper rewards and punishments. Jefferson in the preamble does not contradict any of this teaching, but he supplements it with the observation that a few are by “nature” endowed with politically relevant superior capacities for rule, and that these individuals must be recognized and drawn into service in a republic.

One might at first suppose that in the letter to Adams, Jefferson verges on suggesting that some men are by nature intended to rule others. But not only does Jefferson argue that “the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.” He also insists that all political rule, if legitimate, is a form of service—of dedication to guarding the “sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.” The unalienable natural right to liberty would be violated the moment anyone was said to be by nature intended for such servitude: “It were contrary to feeling, and indeed ridiculous to suppose that a man had less rights in himself than one of his neighbors, or indeed all of them put together. This would be slavery, and not that liberty which the [Virginia] bill of rights has made inviolable, and for the preservation of which our government has been charged. . . . [I] think public service and private misery inseparably bound together.” Accordingly, among his own relations and in his advice to aspiring young statesmen, he insists on the superiority of the pleasures of the private over the duties of the public life.⁷

Now the virtues of the natural *aristoi* would presumably include a deep patriotism or concern for one’s fellowmen, qualities to which the electorate naturally pays special attention in choosing its leaders. Jefferson does seem to trust that nature has endowed mankind as a whole with enough virtue—or, as he writes elsewhere, a strong enough moral sense—to meet the requirements of life in civil society. But as we shall see, it is not clear how far this moral sense may actually go in inducing individuals to sacrifice their own interests.⁸ Given Jefferson’s unappealing portrait of the political life, it remains a question whether decent men with the wisdom truly to understand what is good for themselves have sufficient motives to devote themselves to politics. Jefferson was always distrustful of the motives of those in power, convinced that any elite, even one based on personal merit, must be watched closely. Nor did he share the classical notion that a proper education, moral and religious, of the most gifted is the best armor against their corruption. After all, on Jefferson’s principles, are not the truly wise likely to avoid politics, and does not Jefferson come close to suggesting that those who are gifted and also devoted to politics are necessarily somehow unhealthy or misguided? It is the education of the masses, rather than the educa-

tion of the few, that is the only effective safeguard against the corruption, by temptations to exploitation, of the gifted minority who become political leaders. Not the fostering of the rare virtues of the few, but the instilling of restless vigilance and wariness in the many, even with all their mistaken judgments and lack of information or political experience, is the best guarantee of the morality of the few.

One of the principal aims of the education of the few, then, is to awaken in them a self-knowledge that will allow them to recognize their own dependence, for moral decency or dignity, and in the long run for liberty and security, on the checking and wary watchfulness of the less wise majority of their fellow citizens. The fate that awaits an elite that fails to grasp its own need to be watched by the people was brought home to Jefferson with special force during his service as minister to France (1784-1789), when he saw such an untrammelled ruling class firsthand. As he argues in a letter written from Paris during this period:

The people are the only censors of their governors; and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people, is to give them full information of their affairs through the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers, and be capable of reading them. I am convinced that those societies (as the Indians) which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under European governments. Among the former, public opinion is in the place of law, and restrains morals as powerfully as laws ever did any where. Among the latter, under pretence of governing, they have divided their nations into two classes, wolves and sheep. I do not exaggerate. This is a true picture of Europe. Cherish, therefore, the spirit of our people, and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress, and Assemblies, Judges, and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions; and experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind; for I can apply no milder term to the governments of Europe, and to the general prey of the rich on the poor.⁹

Jefferson brings to the fore and lays unqualified stress on a feature of republican theory that the classical philosophers keep in the background and hedge in with qualifications. In elaborating his theory of democracy at its best and worst, Aristotle observes that “with regard to equality and justice, though it is very difficult to discover the truth in these matters, it is nonetheless easier to hit upon it than it is to win over those who have the power to take advantage of others; for it is always the case that the weaker people seek equality and justice, while the stronger don’t give these things a thought.” From this Aristotle draws the conclusion that “to be hemmed in, and not to be able to do whatever one opines, is advantageous; for the capacity to do whatever one wishes does not adequately keep in check what is base in every human being.” Yet Aristotle does not for a moment fall into the delusion of supposing that just because the weak always seek justice, while the strong always ignore it, the weak are thereby more noble or disinterested in their attachment to justice than are the strong. The weak always seek justice because it is always in their interest to do so. The populace, or the mass of the weaker citizens, is characterized by its own sorts of oppressive lusts and vices, and needs in turn to be hemmed in by the officeholders and the laws. Aristotle therefore recommends a democracy in which access to office is restricted to the propertied but officeholders are selected and audited by the populace.¹⁰

This other dimension, neglected by Jefferson, of the problem of a judiciously tempered democracy was more evident to Jefferson’s critics among the Founders. They warned of the dangers in directing the core of public education toward the inculcation of a suspiciously vigilant stance toward authority; they argued that Jefferson, perhaps partly out of his misguided enthusiasm for the French Revolution, was insufficiently aware of these dangers. In the *Federalist Papers*, Madison criticizes Jefferson’s recommendation for new conventions to correct deficiencies in the Constitution: “Frequent appeals would, in a great measure, deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on everything, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability.” For the same reason, he opposes Jefferson’s radical proposal that, because “the earth belongs to the living,” no law should be in force for more than a generation unless expressly renewed.¹¹

But Alexander Hamilton provides the most clearly contrasting alternative to Jefferson’s position. Before and during the revolutionary war, Hamilton took a courageous stand in defense of the civil rights of unpopular minorities, which in his time were chiefly Tories. As a champion of the freedom of the press, he defended a Tory printer whose shop had become the target of mob fury in 1775. On that occasion he wrote:

In times of such commotion as the present, while the passions of men are worked up to an uncommon pitch, there is great danger of fatal extremes.

The same state of the passions which fits the multitude, who have not a sufficient stock of reason and knowledge to guide them, for opposition to tyranny and oppression, very naturally leads them to a contempt and disregard of all authority. The due medium is hardly to be found among the more intelligent; it is almost [im]possible among the unthinking populace. When the minds of these are loosened from their attachment to ancient establishments and courses, they seem to grow giddy and are apt more or less to run into anarchy.¹²

The remedy Hamilton calls for is firm adherence by the leaders to the rule of law, upholding rights when it is unpopular to do so and resisting the temptation to act without proper authority. Hamilton hated unchecked majority action precisely because he loved liberty and saw liberty's foundation in the rule of law. To minimize oppressive mob or moblike behavior and secure individual liberty, Hamilton sought to remove government from the close control of the people, while keeping it ultimately dependent on them.

Characteristically, it is George Washington who harmonizes the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian views on the proper place of public vigilance. In his First Annual Message to Congress, he gives an admirably brief and incisive summary of the civic goal of popular education in a republic, focusing on the problem of balancing vigilance with self-control and forbearance.

There is nothing which can better deserve your patronage, than the promotion of Science and Literature. Knowledge is, in every country, the surest basis of public happiness. In one in which the measures of Government receive their impression so immediately from the sense of the Community as in ours it is proportionably essential. To the security of a free Constitution it contributes in various ways: By convincing those who are entrusted with the public administration, that every valuable end of Government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people: and by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; between burthens proceeding from a disregard to their convenience and those resulting from the inevitable exigencies of Society; to discriminate the spirit of Liberty from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last; and uniting a speedy, but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect to the Laws.¹³

Washington's statement compels us to note with unease the absence, in Jefferson's preamble, of any reference to the virtues of obedience to and reverence for

law. It is a high level of political wisdom that Washington wants to instill in the nation's citizens. Such a moderate, discriminating spirit requires that the people understand well both human nature and the nature of politics. They must comprehend the basis of the rights they cherish, so that they can judge how far individual rights extend and where government can justly assert the rights of the community in limiting individual freedom. In calling for counterweights to popular vigilance, Washington has no disagreement with what we will see to be Jefferson's belief in the value of history in the curriculum; but Washington would use history to teach perhaps deeper lessons about the need for proud obedience, moderation, and sober expectations in politics, as well as the need for resistance to oppression.

Jefferson's System of Education: Elementary Schools

Because Jefferson relied mainly on the common people to preserve both the country's liberty and the integrity of its leaders, he placed special emphasis on the education of the masses through public elementary schools. This concern was accompanied by a lifelong interest in higher education. Jefferson's 1779 school bill, and a similar measure he introduced in 1817, both included plans for a state university to train the gifted for leadership in all fields. In the event, the only portion of his design that saw fruition in his lifetime was the University of Virginia, the apex of the system and therefore its most constricted element. Jefferson was delighted to succeed in establishing the university, and he welcomed the prospect of being remembered as its founder; but, given the importance of popular enlightenment in the preamble to his initial bill, it is not surprising to find that for Jefferson the most critical aspect of the system always remained not the highest but the lowest level of education. As he wrote late in life to Joseph Cabell, in the midst of the eventually successful struggle to establish the University of Virginia: "Were it necessary to give up either the Primaries or the University, I would rather abandon the last, because it is safer to have a whole people respectably enlightened, than a few in a high state of science, and the many in ignorance. This last is the most dangerous state in which a nation can be."¹⁴

Jefferson's Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge envisages primary schools in every village or ward of the state, where "all the free children, male and female, resident within the respective hundred, shall be entitled to receive tuition gratis, for the term of three years, and as much longer, at their private expense, as their parents, guardians, or friends shall think proper." The curriculum is to consist of reading, writing, arithmetic, and history. Literacy is important for individuals' economic independence, but it is crucial as a means

of participating in politics. It is indicative of Jefferson's seriousness in this regard that his 1817 proposal includes a provision that "no person unborn or under the age of twelve years at the passing of this act, and who is *compos mentis*, shall, after the age of fifteen years, be a citizen of this commonwealth until he or she can read readily in some tongue, native or acquired." Jefferson entertained the idea of making education compulsory, but he preferred this restriction on the franchise as less coercive and more suited to the spirit of the people.

A question of some doubt might be raised on the latter part of this section as to the rights and duties of society toward its members, infant and adult. Is it a right or a duty in society to take care of their infant members in opposition to the will of the parent? How far does this right and duty extend?—to guard the life of the infant, his property, his instruction, his morals? The Roman father was supreme in all these; we draw a line, but where?—public sentiment does not seem to have traced it precisely. Nor is it necessary in the present case. It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible transportation and education of the infant against the will of the father. What is proposed here is to remove the objection of expense, by offering education gratis, and to strengthen parental excitement by the disfranchisement of his child while uneducated. Society has certainly a right to disavow him whom they offer, and are not permitted to qualify for the duties of a citizen. If we do not force instruction, let us at least strengthen the motives to receive it when offered.¹⁵

It is not, however, a sufficient guarantee of liberty that children be taught to read. They must acquire habits of choosing useful and edifying books, and habits of attending thoughtfully to public affairs. Partly because he conceives the fundamental purpose of the schools to be laying "the principle foundation of future order," Jefferson rejects the time-honored practice of using the Bible to teach children to read "at an age when," as he puts it, "their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries." Most Christian parents, following the biblical injunction to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it," taught biblical readings and catechisms *before* the child was old enough to understand them fully, so that the habit of faith might take deep root and the child would not be left with only his fallible reason to guide him. Locke advocates teaching only as much of the Bible as is suited to a child's interest and capacity—such as the stories of Joseph and David—but Jefferson prefers to wait until the powers of judgment are developed before introducing the Bible at all. He recommends that a young person should first have some acquaintance with history and science before confronting the miraculous

claims of the Old and New Testaments. Jefferson maintains that the speeches of Jesus contain sublime moral truths, but argues that these teachings have been so mutilated and disfigured in transmission, so interlaced with the sophistical subtleties of his followers, that the whole is far beyond a child's capacity to evaluate fairly. Such an evaluation he does encourage in his seventeen-year-old nephew Peter Carr, whom he enjoins to "fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion." But in the schools, especially the primary schools, Jefferson's desire to minimize religious teaching extends (in his 1817 version of the school bill) to prohibiting ministers of the gospel from serving as "visitors" to the schools and forbidding teachers to give any religious instruction that is contrary to the beliefs of any sect—in effect limiting religious teaching to the most simple tenets of deism.¹⁶

What reading material, then, does Jefferson consider most suitable for children? Both to train the judgment and to impart the knowledge most essential for citizens, he proposes that the books used to teach reading "shall be such as will at the same time make them acquainted with Graecian, Roman, English, and American history." These volumes will give examples not only of republics in full flower but of republics being subverted, corrupted, and overthrown. They will acquaint students with the sources of their own political tradition and with the rights and liberties for which their revolutionary leaders fought. Above all, by availing the people of "the experience of other times and other nations," history "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."¹⁷

Yet Jefferson knew that there was always a cost in getting one's knowledge secondhand: specifically, the biases and distortions that are especially dangerous to unformed minds. To minimize these distortions, he recommended the study as much as possible of primary sources—and of authors of a liberal or republican outlook. Jefferson worried a great deal about what he saw as the unfairness of John Marshall's *Life of Washington*, and he sought to persuade Joel Barlow to write a Republican history of the period to answer it. He was likewise chary of David Hume's *History of England*, which he urged should be among the last histories of England to be read: "If first read, Hume makes an English Tory, from whence it is an easy step to American Toryism." Hence Jefferson advised that even the university use a bowdlerized version. At times he expressed despair at ever getting to the truth in history, when he saw how much falsehood was being written about his own country even by men close to the facts and how readily it was believed abroad. Yet he continued to recommend the study of history, under the guidance of soundly republican teachers, and in his 1817 school bill, he paired history with geography as a subject particularly appropriate for the children of a diverse and growing nation.¹⁸

Over time, however, there appeared a certain change in Jefferson's way of describing the proper aims and course of study for the elementary schools. Especially when one compares his 1779 school bill to Franklin's educational writings, one cannot help but be struck by how highly charged is its political tenor, and how correspondingly silent it is about vocational or professional education. In 1818, when Jefferson headed a commission that met at Rockfish Gap to lay the groundwork for the University of Virginia, he took the opportunity to restate his educational aims for primary and secondary education as well. In the report he drafted, Jefferson spoke more specifically about elementary schooling, in terms that brought to the fore its vocational aspects. The goals of elementary education as he conceived them were:

To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business;

To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing;

To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties;

To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either;

To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains, to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment;

And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.¹⁹

The fact that Jefferson dropped the original preamble in his revised education bill of 1817 and in this 1818 report substituted a less strictly political description of the aims of education, gives pause. Could Jefferson have regarded the first statement as too political, a product of the noble but extreme fervor of the Revolution? Or did he simply sense a practical need, two generations after the Revolution, to adjust his rhetoric to the temper of a Virginia grown less generous and less civic-spirited? It seems likely that, in the course of his unsuccessful struggle for public education, Jefferson was chastened by the discovery that stinginess, religious and regional parochialism, envy, and plain sloth in the vast majority were all but intractable obstacles to what he saw as the obvious need to create new republican educational institutions.

Nevertheless, Jefferson's 1818 summary of the aims of elementary education is more than an accommodation to grim political realities. In this carefully articulated statement, Jefferson's stated aims ascend from the minimally required economic knowledge, to a more capacious economic self-reliance (rooted in arithmetic and literacy), to a personal enrichment, and thence to civic duty,

culminating finally in the understanding of individual rights and the virtues needed for the proper exercise and defense of those rights; Jefferson then concludes with a summary stressing the social character of human existence. This progression of goals helps illuminate the connection between economic self-reliance and liberty that lies at the heart of Jeffersonian republicanism. Jefferson's observations of Europe and the United States convinced him that only independent-minded, self-reliant people could make good citizens in a liberal republic. Those who were poor and dependent, unaccustomed to thinking or acting for themselves, could only become the pawns of the rich and powerful, or else break loose as a destructive mob.²⁰ Jefferson wanted the majority of citizens to support themselves as competent managers of their own farms or businesses, because this was equally good for prosperity, for individual dignity, and for public liberty. Thus even the most apparently private aspects of education, such as the basic mathematics needed to keep one's accounts, have a political function also, in promoting the habits of prudence and forethought that successful democracy requires. Perhaps by 1818 Jefferson saw that there was more work to be done in laying the vocational and economic foundation for liberty, and in teaching citizens the connection between their own well-being and the political health of the country, than he had hitherto realized.

This same effort to encourage self-reliance is even more evident in the device Jefferson proposed for organizing elementary schools in Virginia: the establishment of "wards" or "hundreds" throughout the state. Jefferson's plan was to divide every county into smaller wards, each of which would have enough men for one company of the militia and enough children for one school. Each section would be in effect "a little republic within the republic of the county." It would first be called together to build a schoolhouse and appoint a school board. Jefferson hoped that eventually each ward might also establish its own police, provide juries and a judge for the county court, and take responsibility for warrants, roads, and provisions for the poor. "Divide the counties into wards," he wrote. "Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments." These wards or hundreds were clearly modeled in part after the New England townships that Jefferson admired (but also found alarmingly effective in opposing his policies as president). By using the old English term *hundred*, Jefferson also harks back to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of local self-government, later appealed to by Whigs as the source of English liberties in their struggle against what they regarded as the encroachments of the monarchy after the Norman Conquest. Jefferson found, in this rural model of self-government, an inspiration more congenial to American conditions than that offered by the urban, martial, and largely aristocratic republics of Greece and Rome. He never succeeded in implementing this part of his plan, but his defense of it was unflagging. In 1814 he wrote that ward government and educa-

tion were two subjects he would try to further as long as he lived: "I consider the continuance of representative government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks."²¹

Why was this project of political subdivision so necessary when all of these functions were or could be performed adequately at the county level? Jefferson contends, first of all, that decentralization is the key to safe government.

What has destroyed liberty and the rights of man in every government which has ever existed under the sun? The generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body. . . . Where every man is a sharer in the direction of his ward-republic, or of some of the higher ones, and feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day; when there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some one of its councils, great or small, he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his powers be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte.²²

But Jefferson does not even concede that this arrangement means sacrificing wise and efficient management for the sake of security against oppression, so great is his confidence in the abilities of ordinary people to handle serious matters. "My partiality for that division" into wards, he writes to Governor Nicholas in 1816, "is not founded in views of education solely, but *infinitely more as the means of a better administration of our government*, and the eternal preservation of its republican principles" (italics added). Or as he writes to Cabell, "If it is believed that these elementary schools will be better managed by the governor and council . . . than by the parents within each ward, it is a belief against all experience. Try the principle one step further, and . . . commit to the governor and council the management of all our farms, our mills, and merchants' stores."²³ The safest and most effective government comes from dividing responsibility, giving to each body the functions it is competent to perform and delegating as little as possible to the central authorities, who must be elected and held responsible.

But Jefferson believed in the decentralization of power for yet another reason, which includes safety and competence but goes beyond them. The autonomy that he strove to promote was, for him, utterly essential to human freedom and dignity. Although Jefferson described political service as drudgery and was always suspicious of men who had an ambition to rule, he had nothing but respect for the public-spiritedness that shows itself in local initiative and collective self-reliance. His goal in allocating maximum powers to the smallest local bodies is not merely to frustrate schemes for tyranny but to change the lives of individuals, involving all citizens in public affairs and so expand their lives and visions. Thus Jefferson's

school bills are designed to serve a double purpose: teaching literacy and history to the children through the schools and teaching civic-mindedness and collective self-reliance to the adults through the wards. This same desire to maximize free and rational self-direction lies behind Jefferson's defense of state sovereignty and of a sharply limited federal government with only expressly delegated powers, as articulated in his Kentucky Resolutions of 1798. It is likewise the philosophy that prompted him, when asked to give some practical rules for daily life to a young namesake, to emphasize self-discipline and self-reliance and to put high on the list the maxim, "Never trouble another for what you can do yourself."²⁴ That advice he might just as easily have given to a fellow planter, a town, or a state government. Such independence at every level was good not only because it brought safety but because it would give the new nation and its citizens a greater dignity, a fuller happiness, and the capacity for unfettered advancement.

The Academies

In the same commission report in which Jefferson spells out his more practical goals for elementary education, he elaborates the aims that should govern the training of the few destined for positions of leadership in society.

To form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend;

To expound the principles and structure of government, the laws which regulate the intercourse of nations, those formed municipally for our own government, and a sound spirit of legislation, which, banishing all arbitrary and unnecessary restraint on individual action, shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another;

To harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufactures and commerce, and by well informed views of political economy to give a free scope to the public industry;

To develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order;

To enlighten them with mathematical and physical sciences, which advance the arts, and administer to the health, the subsistence, and comforts of human life;

And, generally, to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.

These objectives were to be fully attained only at the university, but the groundwork for them must be laid at the intermediate level of education—the regional

grammar schools or colleges, whose curriculum was to be primarily classical. Some such academies were already scattered throughout Virginia; they were woefully uneven in quality and served almost exclusively the sons of well-to-do planters. Jefferson's plan was to establish better ones under state auspices, "one within a day's ride of every man's door," and to open them to all who could afford to pay as well as to a small number of promising students who could not.²⁵

This project of winnowing out talent was dear to Jefferson's heart and a key part of his plan to disestablish what he called the "artificial aristocracy" that rested only on wealth and birth. Through revised laws of inheritance and broader access to education, Jefferson hoped to bring more power to the "natural aristocracy" of virtues and talents, so that it might be able to "defeat the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts." Jefferson's rather exaggerated expectations for a fluid class structure are seen in a letter to Cabell in which he explains why the rich should be willing to bear a major part of the cost of maintaining ward schools: when their own descendants become poor, which in the absence of a law of primogeniture "they generally do within three generations," they too will benefit from free public education.²⁶

In order to help society's most worthy members rise to the top as the fortunes of their unenterprising cousins sink, Jefferson's proposals stipulate that two or more boys from the primary schools in each collegiate district should be chosen for their "promising genius and disposition" and sent on to the grammar school at public expense, with a smaller number of these to be continued at the university. "By this means," he explains in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually." Accommodating to the parsimony he had discovered in the Virginia public, his later plans provide for considerably fewer students to be schooled at public expense. But surely Jefferson also counted on these scholarships to excite emulation and interest in education that would spread their benefit beyond their immediate recipients. Looking for ways to reward merit at minimal cost, he added to his 1817 Bill for the Establishment of District Colleges and a University a clause calling on the academies' visitors to examine the students and award honors that might "encourage or excite to industry and emulation." And Jefferson was always hopeful that as the ideas of free schools and scholarships for advanced study gained ground, others would build upon any slender beginnings that he could make.²⁷

Despite his love of progress and his constant concern with utility in education, Jefferson expected the core of the curriculum at the academies to remain Latin and Greek. To this extent he was consciously more conservative than Franklin. As he argues in *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

The learning Greek and Latin, I am told, is going into disuse in Europe. I know not what their manners and occupations may call for: but it would

be very ill-judged in us to follow their example in this instance. There is a certain period of life, say from eight to fifteen or sixteen years of age, when the mind, like the body, is not yet firm enough for laborious and close operations. If applied to such, it falls an early victim to premature exertion; exhibiting indeed at first, in these young and tender subjects, the flattering appearance of their being men while they are yet children, but ending in reducing them to be children when they should be men. The memory is then most susceptible and tenacious of impressions; and the learning of languages being chiefly a work of memory, it seems precisely fitted to the powers of this period, which is long enough too for acquiring the most useful languages antient and modern. I do not pretend that language is science. It is only an instrument for the attainment of science. But that time is not lost which is employed in providing tools for future operation: more especially as in this case the books put into the hands of the youth for this purpose may be such as will at the same time impress their minds with useful facts and good principles.

Elsewhere, Jefferson defends the study of classical languages for their contribution to a clear and pure English style, for the “elegant luxury” of “reading the Greek and Roman Authors in all the beauties of their originals”—an especially charming and comforting recreation for one’s declining years, he observes—and for “the stores of real science deposited and transmitted us in these languages.” When he describes classical reading as a luxury, he does not mean to suggest that there is anything frivolous in it but, rather, that it is one of the pleasures that make a private and leisured life sublimely enjoyable. At the threshold of old age, Jefferson was to write, “I thank on my knees him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight, and would not exchange it for anything I could then have acquired, and have not since acquired.”²⁸

Nevertheless, on one occasion Jefferson seems to have shown great impatience with the classical grammar-school education, scoffing at

the petty *academies*, as they call themselves, which are starting up in every neighborhood, and where one or two men, possessing Latin, and sometimes Greek, a knolege of the globes, and the first six books of Euclid, imagine and communicate this as the sum of science. They commit their pupils to the theatre of the world with just taste enough of learning to be alienated from industrious pursuits, and not enough to do service in the ranks of science.²⁹

Did Jefferson at some point change his mind and determine that the traditional curriculum was useless or even dangerous? While he always conceded that a classical education was not for everyone, his quarrel here seems to have been with the spirit of snobbery without excellence, which regards a modicum of knowledge as an end in itself rather than as a foundation for proficiency in the sciences that will be truly useful. Jefferson unapologetically defended what he called luxury in learning, yet he always believed that this luxury should take its place in a life that strove to be of service to others, and in which the learned languages would also create a foundation for other, more practical studies, preferably at the university.

In order to insure that students would learn some of what is useful as well as beautiful and, just as importantly, would learn to seek applications for their knowledge, Jefferson added several modern subjects to the traditional academy fare of Latin, Greek, and mathematics. His 1779 bill added only English grammar, but his proposals of 1817 and 1818 included other modern languages, as well as geography, surveying, and navigation. Indeed, in an 1814 letter to Peter Carr, Jefferson described a “college” curriculum that would begin where the primary schools left off and encompass ancient and modern languages and history, grammar, belles-lettres, rhetoric and oratory, higher mathematics, several branches of modern science, philosophy, government, and political economy. But as Roy Honeywell has persuasively argued, this plan was specifically intended for “our institution,” Central College, of which Carr and Jefferson were both trustees and which they hoped to set on the way to becoming the state university.³⁰ Jefferson thus outlined in this letter the first four professorships that he thought most appropriate for an expanded grammar school that might attract statewide attention and patronage. When the Virginia legislature eventually approved funds to transform Central College into the University of Virginia, Jefferson reverted to his three-tiered plan of primary schools, grammar schools focusing on language instruction, and a full-fledged university.

It is striking, however, given the prominence of political concerns in both Jefferson’s 1779 preamble and his 1818 statement of aims for the education of the elite, that politics and history receive almost no mention in his simpler plans for the academies.³¹ Jefferson of course expected that many of the Greek and Latin works studied would be histories and would be taught so as to support republican principles. But since a major justification for state-supported academies and universities was that they would train leaders, it is odd that Jefferson had nothing to say about how the grammar-school students might be encouraged to revere political heroes and to aspire to lives in public service. Apparently he simply assumed that there would be no lack of ambition for high office among talented youths or that the moral sense would suffice to draw good people into

the nation's service, and that consequently, no special cultivation of future leaders was necessary.

Jefferson's discussions of the academy always remained sketchy, and he gave few specific suggestions of any kind as to how the hearts and minds of the students were to be cultivated. Of the three levels of education in his system, this was the one that engaged him the least. In contrast to the primary schools and the university, he did not see the academies as offering instruction that was immediately essential for the country's happiness. While classical studies were personally delightful to Jefferson, they never fired his imagination in quite the way that securing liberty or the progress of the sciences did. And he was aware that the academies, supported as they would be by wealthy parents, were the part of his system least in need of public funding.³² Nevertheless, he always valued them as an integral part of his carefully structured framework. By drawing talented youths out of the local schools, sending the best on to higher education, and preparing some of their own less talented graduates to become teachers themselves, the academies could help fill what all acknowledged to be a serious shortage of worthy instructors for the young, and thereby help to produce a population more literate and learned than that of which any other nation could boast.