

Thomas Jefferson on Educating the People

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George Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

"I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power."

--Thomas Jefferson to W. Jarvis, 1820.

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree."

--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Va., 1782.

The information of the people at large can alone make them the safe as they are the sole depositary of our political and religious freedom.

--Thomas Jefferson to William Duane, 1810.

The diffusion of information and the arraignment of all abuses at the bar of public reason, I deem [one of] the essential principles of our government, and consequently [one of] those which ought to shape its administration.

--Thomas Jefferson: 1st Inaugural Address, 1801.

Convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, and that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree.

--Thomas Jefferson to Littleton Waller Tazewell, 1805.

[The] provision [in the new constitution of Spain] which ... after a certain epoch, disfranchises every citizen who cannot read and write ... is the fruitful germ of the improvement of everything good and the correction of everything imperfect in the present constitution. This will give you an enlightened people and an energetic public opinion which will control and enchain the aristocratic spirit of the government.

--Thomas Jefferson to Chevalier de Ouis, 1814.

No Freedom Without Education

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

--Thomas Jefferson to C. Yancey, 1816.

I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the conditions, promoting the virtue and advancing the happiness of man.

--Thomas Jefferson to Cornelius Camden Blatchly, 1822.

I feel ... an ardent desire to see knowledge so disseminated through the mass of mankind that it may, at length, reach even the extremes of society: beggars and kings.

--Thomas Jefferson: Reply to American Philosophical Society, 1808.

And say, finally, whether peace is best preserved by giving energy to the government or information to the people. This last is the most certain and the most legitimate engine of government. Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. And it requires no very high degree of education to convince them of this. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.

--Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1787.

Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.

--Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Price, 1789.

Whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, the people, if well informed, may be relied on to set them to rights.

--Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Price, 1789.

It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction. This is the business of the state to effect, and on a general plan.

--Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 1786.

[I have] a conviction that science is important to the preservation of our republican government, and that it is also essential to its protection against foreign power.

--Thomas Jefferson to -----, 1821.

The value of science to a republican people, the security it gives to liberty by enlightening the minds of its citizens, the protection it affords against foreign power, the virtue it inculcates, the just emulation of the distinction it confers on nations foremost in it; in short, its identification with power, morals, order and happiness (which merits to it premiums of encouragement rather than repressive taxes), are considerations [that should] always [be] present and [bear] with their just weight.

--Thomas Jefferson: On the Book Duty, 1821.

Educate Every Citizen

A system of general instruction, which shall reach every description of our citizens from the richest to the poorest, as it was the earliest, so will it be the latest of all the public concerns in which I shall permit myself to take an interest.

--Thomas Jefferson to J. Cabell, 1818.

It is highly interesting to our country, and it is the duty of its functionaries, to provide that every citizen in it should receive an education proportioned to the condition and pursuits of his life.

--Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 1814.

By... [selecting] the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the State of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use if not sought for and cultivated.

--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia, 1782.

Instead of an aristocracy of wealth, of more harm and danger than benefit to society, to make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent, which nature has wisely provided for the direction of the interests of society and scattered with equal hand through all its conditions, was deemed essential to a well-ordered republic.

--Thomas Jefferson: Autobiography, 1821.

I do most anxiously wish to see the highest degrees of education given to the higher degrees of genius and to all degrees of it, so much as may enable them to read and understand what is going on in the world and to keep their part of it going on right; for nothing can keep it right but their own vigilant and distrustful superintendence.

--Thomas Jefferson to Mann Page, 1795.

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.

--Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1787.

If the children are untaught, their ignorance and vices will in future life cost us much dearer in their consequences than it would have done in their correction by a good education.

--Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 1818.

The boys of the rising generation are to be the men of the next, and the sole guardians of the principles we deliver over to them.

--Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Knox, 1810.

The reward of esteem, respect and gratitude [is] due to those who devote their time and efforts to render the youths of every successive age fit governors for the next.

--Thomas Jefferson to Hugh L. White, et al., 1810.

Training Republican Statesmen

Nor must we omit to mention among the benefits of education the incalculable advantage of training up able counselors to administer the affairs of our country in all its departments, legislative, executive and judiciary, and to bear their proper share in the councils of our national government: nothing more than education advancing the prosperity, the power, and the happiness of a nation.

--Thomas Jefferson: Report for University of Virginia, 1818.

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 public happiness that those persons whom nature has 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 expense those of their children whom nature has 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 expense of all, than that the happiness of all should be confined to the weak or wicked.

--Thomas Jefferson: Diffusion of Knowledge Bill, 1779. Papers, 2:527

Hope for the Improvement of Mankind

If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, education is to be the chief instrument in effecting it.

--Thomas Jefferson to M. A. Jullien, 1818.

What but education has advanced us beyond the condition of our indigenous neighbors? And what chains them to their present state of barbarism and wretchedness but a bigoted veneration for the supposed superlative wisdom of their fathers and the preposterous idea that they are to look backward for better things and not forward, longing, as it should seem, to return to the days of eating acorns and roots rather than indulge in the degeneracies of civilization?

--Thomas Jefferson: Report for University of Virginia, 1818.

[In a republic, according to Montesquieu in Spirit of the Laws, IV,ch.5,] 'virtue may be defined as the love of the laws and of our country. As such love requires a constant preference of public to private interest, it is the source of all private virtue; for they are nothing more than this very preference itself ... Now a government is like everything else: to preserve it we must love it ... Everything, therefore, depends on establishing this love in a republic; and to inspire it ought to be the principal business of education; but the surest way of instilling it into children is for parents to set them an example.'

--Thomas Jefferson: copied into his Commonplace Book.

Publicly Supported Education

I have indeed two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength:

1. That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.
2. To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it.

--Thomas Jefferson to John Tyler, 1810.

Of all the views of this law [for public education], none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people the safe as they are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty.

--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia, 1782. Q.XIV

Education is here placed among the articles of public care, not that it would be proposed to take its ordinary branches out of the hands of private enterprise, which manages so much better all the concerns to which it is equal; but a public institution can alone supply those sciences which, though rarely called for, are yet necessary to complete the circle, all the parts of which contribute to the improvement of the country, and some of them to its preservation.

--Thomas Jefferson: 6th Annual Message, 1806.

The present consideration of a national establishment for education, particularly, is rendered proper by this circumstance also, that if Congress, approving the proposition, shall yet think it more eligible to found it on a donation of lands, they have it now in their power to endow it with those which will be among the earliest to produce the necessary income. The foundation would have the advantage of being independent on war, which may suspend other improvements by requiring for its own purposes the resources destined for them.

--Thomas Jefferson: 6th Annual Message, 1806.

Education for the Masses

The object [of my education bill was] to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass of mind which in proportion to our population shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries.

--Thomas Jefferson to M. Correa de Serra, 1817.

The general objects [of a bill to diffuse knowledge more generally through the mass of the people] are to provide an education adapted to the years, to the capacity, and the condition of every one, and directed to their freedom and happiness.

--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia, 1782.

This [law] on education would [raise] the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety and to orderly government, and would [complete] the great object of qualifying them to select the veritable aristoi for the trusts of government.

--Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1813.

The less wealthy people,... by the bill for a general education, would be qualified to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government; and all this would be effected without the violation of a single natural right of any one individual citizen.
--Thomas Jefferson: Autobiography, 1821.

[The education bill I proposed would] divide every county into wards of five or six miles square;... establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic;... provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools who might receive at the public expense a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools ... select a certain number of the most promising subjects to be completed at a University where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus... [be] sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.
--Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1813. (*)

This bill on education would [raise] the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety and to orderly government, and would [complete] the great object of qualifying them to secure the veritable aristoi for the trusts of government to the exclusion of the pseudalists ... I have great hope that some patriotic spirit will ... call it up and make it the key stone of the arch of our government.
--Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1813. (*)

I ... [proposed] three distinct grades of education, reaching all classes.
1. Elementary schools for all children generally, rich and poor.
2. Colleges for a middle degree of instruction, calculated for the common purposes of life and such as should be desirable for all who were in easy circumstances.
And 3d. an ultimate grade for teaching the sciences generally and in their highest degree... The expenses of [the elementary] schools should be borne by the inhabitants of the county, every one in proportion to his general tax-rate. This would throw on wealth the education of the poor.
--Thomas Jefferson: Autobiography, 1821.

I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the country, under such regulations as would secure their safe return in due time.
--Thomas Jefferson to John Wyche, 1809.

The tax which will be paid for [the] purpose [of education] is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.
--Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, 1786.

The truth is that the want of common education with us is not from our poverty, but from the want of an orderly system. More money is now paid for the education of a part than would be paid for that of the whole if systematically arranged.
--Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 1820.

In the constitution of Spain as proposed by Cortes, there was a principle entirely new to me: ... that no person born after that day should ever acquire the rights of citizenship until he could read and write. It is impossible sufficiently to estimate the wisdom of this provision. Of all those which have been thought of for securing fidelity in the administration of the government, constant reliance to the principles of the constitution, and progressive amendments with the progressive advances of the human mind or changes in human affairs, it is the most effectual.

--Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, 1816.

The Content of Education

The objects of ... primary education [which] determine its character and limits [are]: 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.

--Thomas Jefferson: Report for University of Virginia, 1818.

The reading in the first stage, where [the people] will receive their whole education, is proposed ... to be chiefly historical. History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.

--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia, 1782.

Such a degree of learning [should be] given to every member of the society as will enable him to read, to judge and to vote understandingly on what is passing.

--Thomas Jefferson to Littleton Waller Tazewell, 1805.

Promote in every order of men the degree of instruction proportioned to their condition and to their views in life.

--Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Cabell, 1820.

What are the objects of an useful American [college] education? Classical knowledge, modern languages, chiefly French, Spanish, and Italian; Mathematics, Natural philosophy, Natural history, Civil history, and Ethics. In Natural philosophy, I mean to include Chemistry and Agriculture, and in Natural history, to include Botany, as well as the other branches of those departments.

--Thomas Jefferson to J. Bannister, Jr., 1785.

In a republican nation whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance.

--Thomas Jefferson to David Harding, 1824.

Freedom [is] the first-born daughter of science.
--Thomas Jefferson to Francois D'Ivernois, 1795.

Science is more important in a republican than in any other government.
--Thomas Jefferson to ----, 1821.

Light and liberty go together.
--Thomas Jefferson to Tench Coxe, 1795.

[We should] endeavor to keep [our] attention fixed on the main objects of all science: the freedom and happiness of man. [Thus] will [we] keep ever in view the sole objects of all legitimate government.
--Thomas Jefferson to Thaddeus Kosciusko, 1810.

The occasion [should be seized] of sowing useful truths among the people which might germinate and become rooted among their political tenets.
--Thomas Jefferson to Levi Lincoln, 1802. (*)

Man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do.
--Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia, 1782.

The article of discipline is the most difficult in American education. Premature ideas of independence, too little repressed by parents, beget a spirit of insubordination which is the great obstacle to science with us and a principal cause of its decay since the Revolution.
--Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, 1822.

The consequences of foreign education are alarming to me as an American ... Cast your eye over America. Who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their countrymen and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them and whose manners, morals and habits are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country.
--Thomas Jefferson to John Banister, Jr., Oct. 15, 1785. (*)

I do not count on any advantage to be derived ... from a familiar acquaintance with the principles of [a] government [which has been] rendered ... a tyrannical aristocracy, more likely to give ill than good ideas to an American.
--Thomas Jefferson to John Banister, Jr., 1785. (*)

[One of] the disadvantages of sending a youth to Europe [for an education is] ... he is fascinated with the privileges of the European aristocrats, and sees, with abhorrence, the lovely equality which the poor enjoy with the rich in his own country.

--Thomas Jefferson to John Banister, Jr., 1785.

Prospects for an Educated Citizenry

Although I do not, with some enthusiasts, believe that the human condition will ever advance to such a state of perfection as that there shall no longer be pain or vice in the world, yet I believe it susceptible of much improvement, and most of all in matters of government and religion; and that the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected.

--Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, 1816.

I do hope that in the present spirit of extending to the great mass of mankind the blessings of instruction, I see a prospect of great advancement in the happiness of the human race; and that this may proceed to an indefinite, although not to an infinite degree.

--Thomas Jefferson to Cornelius Camden Blatchly, 1822.

No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness ... Preach ... a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [of misgovernment].

--Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, 1786.