



George Washington: The Latest Casualty of Progressive Education

Most voters today no longer remember a time when the tenets of “progressive education” were not part of their everyday lives. It no longer seems strange to the average parent, for example, that what once gave America its cohesiveness, as well as its economic and cultural “edge” over other countries, is largely missing from the school environment and curriculum.

The parents of the Baby Boomers reacted too late once they started noticing the disappearance of “a common body of knowledge ... that common group of heroes and villains, images and values, of which [national spirit is born](#),” as the late historian Henry Steele Commager described it. In its place came a leftist mix of progressivism and psychology, eventually marketed as “functional literacy.” Today, this psychologized progressivism has impacted every facet of society. Having been institutionalized in classrooms, and passed along to society via newspapers and newscasts, popular magazines, entertainment, and the arts, it is taking on new life in the voting booth.



Progressivism’s latest casualty is paintings and depictions of George Washington, the staple of every schoolhouse since 1932, when Congress passed a mandate to commemorate the 200th anniversary of his birth. William Sanders [has been battling](#) the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Education Association (NEA) over the issue since 1998. Over 40 years, he says, paintings and pictures of our first President and Revolutionary War hero have been quietly removed from school walls and excised from history texts.

The Left’s effort to recast history in this manner mirrors totalitarian coups — the old Soviet Union being just one example — when posters, statues, and paintings of former national icons are razed, their writings expunged and replaced. By obliterating George Washington (and reviling other Founders), disgrace is cast on the values and ideals they championed. As youngsters pass along from grade to grade and into college and the workforce, the effect snowballs.

Dismantlement of George Washington’s likeness has little to do with politically correct concerns over racism or religion, although it’s usually presented that way. But it has everything to do with



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progressivism — a term mischaracterized as “liberalism,” “reform,” and “progress.”

This disastrous saga began with John Dewey’s Progressive Movement, which featured socialization of the child as the primary goal. “Socialization” in this context is not synonymous with etiquette, fair play, or camaraderie. It is one part amenability, one part resignation, and one part affability — creating an inclination to conform to group trends. Thus, today’s emphasis on “teamwork” over individual initiative.

Although Dewey, a socialist-turned-Marxist, didn’t coin the term “[progressive education](#),” he inspired the movement. His core philosophy dictated that children should be socialized — much like puppies — thrown willy-nilly into a yard with lots of activity, critters, and commotion. He considered this approach to schooling more advantageous to society than academics. In 1896, Dewey wrote that the centrality of reading and writing was “one of education’s great mistakes.”

The iconic constitutionalist scholar, historian, and author, [Cleon Skousen](#) explains what came of this strategy: “a planned pattern of anarchy in education,” where the new term “*self-realization* [self-absorption] became the focus of school” instead of Commager’s common body of knowledge. Dewey’s disciples — John Goodlad, TheodoreSizer, William Spady, Ralph Tyler, Francis C. Keppel, William Glasser and Benjamin Bloom — toiled behind the scenes in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s to facilitate his notions.

First came the consolidation of schools. Many students got “lost” in the stampede, precipitating what we now call “cliques,” if they’re relatively manageable, and “gangs” if they’re brazen. In either case, schools created *Lord of the Flies*-style subcultures, inhabited by overwhelmed youngsters-turned-bullies, having too little to occupy their minds and their time. There, they engaged in desperate attempts to break through a superimposed climate of depersonalization.

In earlier eras, pupils donned jackets or dresses and were addressed by strict school-masters and -mistresses using their last names: Master Smith, Miss Jones. Students, in turn, addressed their instructors as “Sir” and “Ma’am.” While this exercise seems pretentious and off-putting today, it not only conferred deference upon the teaching profession as a whole, but conveyed a certain respect for the pupil as an individual.

By the late 1950s, teachers were conditioned to treat their young charges as buddies. The elements of respect and individuality on both sides got trampled in the process. Today, this plays out as a familiar cycle of withdrawal, apathy, and alienation. Pupils, as well as grownups, engage in increasingly desperate efforts to “connect” — ironically, with virtual people — via social networks like Facebook. Youngsters who can’t read the classics, write a coherent paragraph, or figure a math problem are nevertheless adept at programming their “apps” and shouting slogans (providing it’s a group activity).

Dewey looked upon the schools as an opportunity to promote a worldview in which private property, free markets, competition, and profits are passé. What we got was an America in which integrity, morality, and self-discipline are passé — a situation remediable only with a ubiquitous government and vigorous enforcement of petty rules.

As time went on, less emphasis was placed on English grammar, ancient and U.S. history, geography, the classics of Western civilization, or even the basic sciences. A truly progressive school mimicked day care — “with each student doing his own thing in a climate of [permissive, unstructured confusion](#).”

At its core, Dewey’s progressivism was aimed at replacing the individual as the focus of good governance — including all its accompanying ideals, such as self-determination, personal responsibility, and risk-and-reward — with a *dependent collective*. In that vein, progressive education gained traction



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at Teachers College (Columbia University), the primary entity churning out teachers in the [1930s and '40s](#), when most Americans were preoccupied with World War II.

Consequently, it went more or less unnoticed when influential educators started picking up the banner of socialist rhetoric. Most American mothers didn't connect the radicalism with articles that appeared in childrearing magazines, penned by a new breed of "experts": child psychologists. Once parents realized that their Boomer offspring had nowhere near the grasp of basic subjects they had had at the same age, progressivism was all but institutionalized.

By the 1960s, bad parenting advice coupled to progressive education was molding public opinion in a new generation of voters. Sam Weaver expressed the outcome well [in a 2004 article](#):

Whenever you hear modern liberals proclaiming "American values," or "our values," you must understand that [they] are embracing the collectivist, secular, "progressive values" of John Dewey and his followers. After all, that is what they were taught American values have always been! When activist judges rule against the will of the American people, and discover new "rights" and "values" in the U.S. Constitution; those new "rights" and "values" represent — as far as *they* know — the secular, socialistic "values" which they have learned from the Ivy League schools [where] they received their law degrees.

So, one can't simply blame liberals. "Today, people who call themselves conservatives ... accept much of the Progressive view.... It has become the predominant view," wrote Thomas West and William Schambra [in a 2007 report](#) for the Heritage Foundation.

Moreover, whether it's former Presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, or Barack Obama, nearly all post-War kids — and candidates for 2012 — cut their teeth on progressivism, having spent more waking hours under the influence of their schools (and by extension the NEA and UNESCO) than under the tutelage of their forebears. If a mere portrait of George Washington can be expelled from schools without an outcry, what are the chances of today's candidates "connecting" with Gen-X-ers and Millennials on the necessity of constitutional ideals or the Founders' vision for our country? How does a knowledgeable, patriotic candidate communicate with a populace having no "common body of knowledge"?

[Segment 6 in this series will expose how progressivism got mainstreamed — a scheme "hidden in plain sight."]

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