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## WHAT A NATION NEEDS IN ORDER TO SURVIVE

*Material things we can bequeath. "But we cannot bequeath an education to our children." . . . "Every child should be given all the education that he can reasonably absorb."*

HOW many of us have stopped to consider what would be the result if all the schools of America were to be closed tomorrow and kept closed for one full generation? One could not undertake to describe the conditions that would exist at the end of that comparatively short period, but there can be no doubt that the effect would be startling. We would have a country made up almost entirely of illiterates. Culture would have disappeared. Science would be merely a word of Latin origin. In the course of a generation we would have gone back literally hundreds of years as to all the essentials that distinguish this period from that of the dark ages.

It goes without saying that the higher the civilization of a country and the more complex its life, the broader and the higher and the more universal must be the education of the people in order to maintain that civilization. In a low stage of civilization education as we have developed it today was not necessary. All that the youth just emerging from savagery into barbarism needed to know to prepare him to be a good member of his tribe was a knowledge of how to hunt and fish. Later, in a higher state of civilization, it was essential for him to be trained to till the soil and to take care

of his flocks. Thence, on up through advancing stages more and more education was needed to fit him for the life that he was called upon to live.

You all remember the boast of proud Douglas in one of Sir Walter Scott's poems that none of his sons save the one who had entered the priesthood "could pen a line." There was here described a period post-dating by hundreds of years the emergence of man from the savage state. And if our anthropologists are to be believed, hundreds of thousands of years had elapsed before the distinctive form of man had developed in the animal kingdom. Scott was writing of the days of chivalry when men had acquired many of the arts and graces of living. Yet aside from the churchmen, the statesmen and those few who were gradually building up the other learned professions, men were still, generally speaking, illiterate. Every book was a closed book. Knights in armor who could not write their names rode full tilt at each other in tournaments to win the favor of a lady's smile, little caring that that same lady did not know her alphabet. The generality of the people lived dull and sodden lives, tending their flocks or eking a scanty harvest out of the soil with the aid of crude and clumsy instruments.

Gradually more and more people began to acquire the rudiments of learning, but they were indeed rudiments. The United States of America is a comparatively young country, and even as late as our pioneer days the people got along with little formal schooling. When finally the value of an education came to be realized by the people, schools were established to teach boys and girls to read and write. What scattered schools there were were kept open for only three or four months a year and few indeed

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were the children who studied more than the three R's. It was still considered that the most valuable part of the education of the youth of the land was to be gained through experience on the farm, in the apprentice shop, or on board ship, because we were a nation of farmers and artisans and sailors. The three R's were considered merely as finishing touches to the practical education received outside of the school. The masses of the people had to be content with this smattering of an education, although there was a college here and there to educate the few for the learned professions. It is probably safe to say that the college education of those early times was not the equal in depth and extent of the education that the modern child can receive in an up-to-date high school.

But life never stands still. It either goes backward or forward, and the course was an upward one following these early pioneer days. Life became more complex as commerce and industry developed rapidly and contested with agriculture for supremacy. As a result of our industrial and commercial development, social, political, and economic problems became more numerous and difficult of solution, so that in course of time it became manifest that all the children of all the people should receive at least a common school education. Our well being as a people and the relative position of our country in the family of nations required us to turn our attention more and more to education. So a noncompulsory school system gradually gave way to a compulsory one, until now school attendance for a certain number of years is required in every State in the Union. The mere statement of this fact is all that is necessary to demonstrate the universal belief in this country that we must educate our youths broadly and generally in order to assure the best possible citizenship and the well being and security of the state itself.

There never was a time in the history of

America when education was so vital to us as a nation and so essential to us as citizens. Yet strangely enough the friends of education are finding it necessary to go through the land in order to educate the people on the importance of education. Perhaps we have taken our education too much for granted. Like air and light and water, we have come to assume that it is a natural element; that it will always be with us; that it was ours when we were children for the taking, and that it will be theirs for our children in their turn for their taking.

It is unhappily true that friends of education and believers in democracy must be on the alert as they have never had to be in the past in order to preserve unimpaired this essential tool of democracy. There is an enemy within the gate. Apparently there are those in the land who are taking advantage of the economic strain and stress under which we have been suffering to dim the light that has guided our course since pioneer days. It is being urged that we have spent too much money on education; that we are over-educated; that the schools are full of frills and fads and fancies that do our youth more harm than good; that all the education that is necessary for our children is a grounding in the three R's.

Those who thus counsel us would turn back the clock for more than a hundred years. They do not seem to realize that civilization and education go hand in hand; that in fact education is the foundation rock upon which our civilization has been built. Weaken or destroy the foundation and the building erected thereon will totter or fall. It stands to reason that if the universal education that supports and justifies our civilization is undermined, our civilization itself will suffer to a corresponding degree.

In moments of reverie we may idealize the simple bucolic state in which our ancestors lived. With the edges of our imagination we may play with the idea of revert-

ing to a condition of society of a hundred or two hundred or three hundred years ago. We may longingly wonder how it would seem to substitute the kerosene lamp for the electric bulb or even the tallow dip or the rush light for the kerosene lamp. We may romanticize about dressing again in homespun, raising all our own food and producing all our own clothing on our own little farm. To give up the automobile for the plodding cart, to discard the tractor for the horse-drawn plow, to throw away our ice-making machines, our bath tubs, and all our modern comforts and conveniences may be an idea to play with in an idle moment, but I am certain that no man, woman, or child would in reality want to revert to the dull, drudging, unimaginative existence of our great-grandfathers.

Yet some such retrogression will follow if we allow our educational system to slip back to what some people apparently are willing it should revert to. Such a highly complex civilization as we have built up requires highly trained intelligences for its maintenance and further development. No one would thrust an intricate and highly sensitized machine into the hands of a man just emerging from the jungle and expect him to operate it. If anyone thinks that I am drawing a strained and out-of-focus picture, let him try this experiment: Take any finely built, well developed and strong youth from the jungle. Put him into a factory containing complicated and delicate machinery, turn on the power, lock the doors, and leave him free to run that machinery. Can anyone doubt that the result in a short time would be the utter ruin of that machinery because the savage hand with all the willingness in the world lacked a trained and educated mind to direct it as to which levers to pull, and which wheels to turn?

So intimately is the general education of the people related not only to their own happiness and well being but to the pros-

perity and security of the country that the importance of maintaining and developing our educational system ought not to require argument. It is by means of an educated people that material wealth is increased. The natural resources of our country are no greater today than they were a hundred years ago. As a matter of fact, they are much less. Quantities of the gold, silver, coal, and iron have been mined, and to a considerable extent our oil has been exploited and our forests cut down. Probably our native ability as a people is little, if any, greater than it was a hundred years ago. Yet none will deny that the value of the people to the Nation is vastly greater than it was a century ago. This increased value is due to the fact that they have become more universally intelligent as the result of education. Of the three factors in the production of material wealth, namely, natural resources, native ability of the people, and education, education is the only one that varies to any considerable extent. And it should be borne in mind that education can vary in either direction. If our production and accumulation of material wealth is greater in the degree that our education is more universal and of higher quality, it goes without saying that with a falling off in education our material prosperity would diminish correspondingly.

We accumulate wealth; we can pass on to each succeeding generation tangible property in any form. We can even to some extent transmit native ability. But we cannot bequeath an education to our children. The most we can do is to provide them with the means for an education. Every babe that is born into the world is as ignorant as its most remote ancestor. It can neither write nor read. It has only rudimentary mental processes. It merely has reactions and responses to external stimuli. If abandoned to its own fate on an uninhabited island, if it survived at all, it would grow up to be a totally illiterate man and an ignorant one,

except as it might learn certain facts of life from its environment and from its experience. Since it is necessary to recreate in each generation those processes of education which the preceding generation enjoyed, we must continue to provide schools and teachers and all the essential tools that go to furnish and equip the mind.

We have been made sadly aware during these last few years of the necessity of economy. With our private incomes sharply diminished, with our means of livelihood cut off, with less pay forthcoming for the same amount of work, we have had to pinch and scrimp to make both ends meet. If this condition has been true in our private affairs, it has also been true as to those common enterprises which we maintain by the taxes that we pay to government. Our schools have suffered along with everything else. Hundreds of thousands of children are either being denied educational opportunities entirely or they are able to attend school only on a part-time basis. Thousands of schools have been closed. Equipment has been deteriorating and replacements of essential tools for education have been lacking.

I do not deny that of necessity some economies must be made in our schools. But we are going too far in that direction. Our schools ought to be the last to feel the pinch of economy, just as they ought to be the first to experience the return of prosperity. Undoubtedly the educational tree needs some pruning. There may be some dead and decayed branches that ought to be cut off. But if such pruning is necessary it should be done scientifically, by experts. It serves no good purpose of economy and it is immensely damaging to our educational system to slash into a budget regardless of whether we are cutting into a vital spot or not.

Even in these days of tremendously pressing problems, to my mind the most important question of all is, what are we going

to do about our schools. That education should be universal goes without saying. By education I mean more than the three R's. I believe that every child should be given all the education that he can reasonably absorb. This does not mean that all children should spend an equal number of years in school or that all should take the same courses. It means that everyone in order to have the best chance possible for a happy and full life should have every bit of education that he is capable of receiving and of using to advantage.

He should have this not only for his own sake but for the good of the whole. The intelligence of a nation is the sum of the intelligences of all of its citizens. Intelligence is the product of education, and education is the greatest national asset that we have. No nation in these times can hope to survive, to say nothing of progressing in the arts and the sciences, in commerce, in trade, or in industry, unless it is composed of a well educated citizenry. Least of all can a democracy, depending, as it must depend, upon an informed public opinion for the selection of its leaders and the framing of its laws hope long to endure unless it consists of a highly and universally educated electorate. The individual American must be educated not only that he may be able to enjoy a happier and fuller life; he must be educated in order that, in co-operation with other educated Americans, he may do his part toward sustaining and upbuilding an intelligent and beneficent and capable government.

HAROLD L. ICKES

He who thinks the world is full of good things, good people, and kindly blessings, is much richer than he who thinks to the contrary. Each man's imagination largely peoples the world for himself. Some live in a world peopled with princes of the royal blood; some live in a world of paupers and privation. You have your choice.