

Noah Webster

ON THE NECESSITY OF FOSTERING *AMERICAN* IDENTITY

AFTER INDEPENDENCE

ESSAYS, 1783, 1787 _EXCERPTS

Widely recognized for his *American Dictionary* and *The American Speller*—icons of 18th-century American instruction—Noah Webster may appear to modern viewers as little more than a driven schoolmaster and language enthusiast. But Webster was a fiery-penned Patriot who wrote and lectured widely in the 1780s, urging Americans to create their own identity, character, and “manners,” and to revise British English into their own *American* language. “You have an empire to raise and support by your exertions,” he insisted, “and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtues.” Webster’s passion for his cause is evident in these selections from three works written in the first years of American independence.



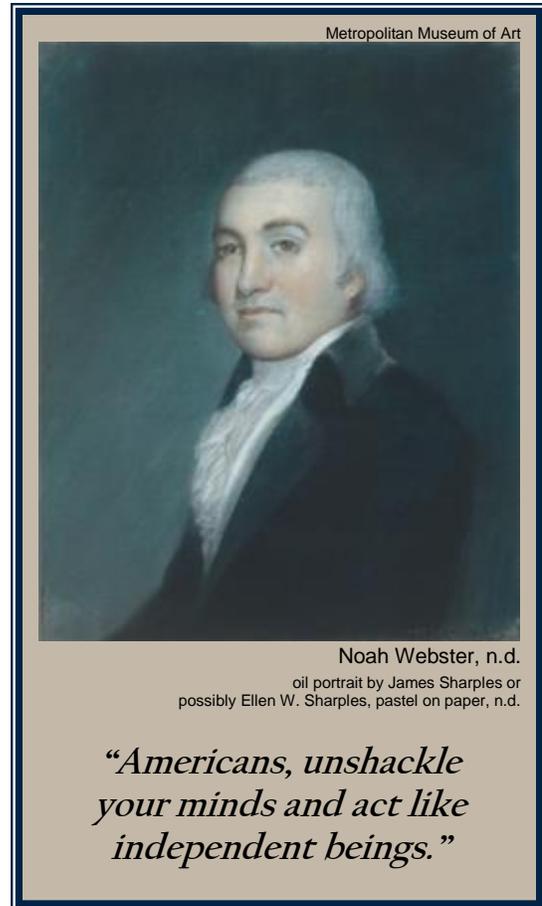
On *American* Education & Language

A Grammatical Institute of the English Language,
Pt. I, 1783, Introduction, excerpts.

[T]he present period is an era of wonders. Greater changes have been wrought in the minds of men in the short compass of eight years past than are commonly effected in a century. Previously to the late war, America preserved the most unshaken attachment to Great Britain. The king, the constitution, the laws, the commerce, the fashions, the books, and even the sentiments of Englishmen were implicitly supposed to be the *best* on earth. Not only their virtues and improvements, but their prejudices and their errors, their vices and their follies, were adopted by us with avidity. But by a concurrence of those powerful causes that effect almost instantaneous revolutions in states, the political views of America have suffered a total change. She now sees a mixture of profound wisdom and consummate folly in the British constitution, a ridiculous compound of freedom and tyranny in their laws, and a few struggles of patriotism overpowered by the corruptions of a wicked administration. She views the vices of that nation with abhorrence, their errors with pity, and their follies with contempt.

While the Americans stand astonished at their former delusion and enjoy the pleasure of a final separation from their insolent sovereigns, it becomes their duty to attend to the *arts of peace*, and particularly to the interests of *literature*, to see if there be not some errors to be corrected, some defects to be supplied [corrected], and some improvements to be introduced into our systems of education, as well as into those of civil policy. . . .¹

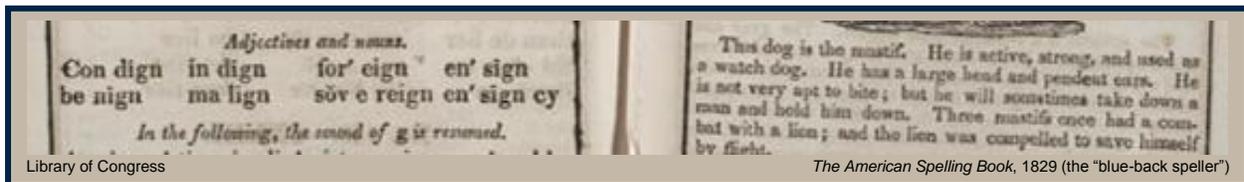
The author wishes to promote the honor and prosperity of the confederated republics of America, and cheerfully throws his mite [small bit] into the common treasure of patriotic exertions. This country must in some future time be distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements, as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions. Europe is growing old in folly, corruption, and



tyranny — in that country laws are perverted, manners [behavior] are licentious, literature is declining, and human nature debased. For America in her infancy to

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adopt the present maxims of the old world would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepit age upon the bloom of youth and to plant the seeds of decay in a vigorous constitution. American glory begins to dawn at a favorable period and under flattering circumstances. We have the experience of the whole world before our eyes; but to receive indiscriminately the maxims of government, the manners and literary taste of Europe, and make them the ground on which to build our systems in America must soon convince us that a durable and stately edifice can never be erected upon the moldering pillars of antiquity. It is the business of *Americans* to select the wisdom of all nations as the basis of her constitutions — to avoid their errors — to prevent the introduction of foreign vices and corruptions and check the career of her own — to promote virtue and patriotism — to embellish and improve the sciences — to diffuse an uniformity and purity of *language* — to add superior dignity to this infant Empire and to human nature.



Fostering *American* Character & Identity through Education

“On the Education of Youth in America,” *American Magazine*, New York, December 1787, excerpts.

The Education of youth is, in all governments, an object of the first consequence. The impressions received in early life usually form the character of individuals, a union of which forms the general character of a nation. . . .

. . . Our constitutions of civil government are not yet firmly established. Our national character is not yet formed, and it is an object of vast magnitude that systems of Education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences, but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty; and inspire them with just and liberal ideas² of government, and with an inviolable attachment to their own country. It now becomes every American to examine the modes of Education in Europe, to see how far they are applicable in this country, and whether it is not possible to make some valuable alterations adapted to our local and political circumstances. Let us examine the subject in two views. First, as it respects arts and sciences. Secondly, as it is connected with morals and government. . . .

The first error that I would mention, is, a too general attention to the dead languages, with a neglect of our own. . . .

. . . Life is short, and every hour should be employed to good purposes. If there are no studies of more consequence to boys than those of Latin and Greek,³ let these languages employ their time, for idleness is the bane of

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² Here referring to democracy, equality before the law, natural rights, and other Enlightenment principles of governance. The current connotations of *liberal* and *conservative* do not apply in eighteenth-century discourse.

³ Not only were Greek and Latin language, literature, and history the core of British and American university education, classes were conducted in Latin and written & oral work were produced in Latin. It was a sign of an educated gentleman [an elite independent man of means] that he could speak the “dead languages” and often allude to ancient writers and events in his discourse.

youth. But when we have an elegant and copious language of our own, with innumerable writers upon ethics, geography, history, commerce and government — subjects immediately interesting to every man — how can a parent be justified in keeping his son several years over rules of Syntax, which he forgets when he shuts his book, or which, if remembered, can be of little or no use in any branch of business? . . .

But my meaning is that the dead languages are not necessary for men of business, merchants, mechanics, planters, &c., nor of utility sufficient to indemnify them for the expense of time and money which is requisite to acquire a tolerable acquaintance with the Greek and Roman authors. Merchants often have occasion for a knowledge of some foreign living language, as the French, the Italian, the Spanish, or the German; but men whose business is wholly domestic have little or no use for any language but their own, much less for languages known only in books. . . .

. . . Education, in a great measure, forms the moral characters of men, and morals are the basis of government. Education should therefore be the first care of a Legislature, not merely the institution of schools but the furnishing of them with the best men for teachers. A good system of Education should be the first article in the code of political regulations, for it is much easier to introduce and establish an effectual system for preserving morals than to correct, by penal statutes,⁴ the ill effects of a bad system. I am so fully persuaded of this that I shall almost adore that great man who shall change our practice and opinions and make it respectable for the first and best men to superintend the Education of youth.

Another defect in our schools which, since the revolution, is become inexcusable is the want [lack] of proper books. The collections which are now used consist of essays that respect foreign and ancient nations. The minds of youth are perpetually led to the history of Greece and Rome or to Great Britain. Boys are constantly repeating the declamations of Demosthenes and Cicero, or debates upon some political question in the British Parliament. These are excellent specimens of good sense, polished style and perfect oratory, but they are not interesting to children. They cannot be very useful, except to young gentlemen who want them as models of reasoning and eloquence in the pulpit or at the bar.⁵

But every child in America should be acquainted with his own country. He should read books that furnish him with ideas that will be useful to him in life and practice. As soon as he opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country. He should lisp the praise of liberty and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in her favor. . . .

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In several States, we find laws passed establishing provision for colleges and academies where people of property may educate their sons, but no provision is made for instructing the poorer rank of people, even in reading and writing. Yet in these same States, every citizen who is worth a few shillings annually is entitled to vote for legislators. This appears to me a most glaring solecism [error] in government. The constitutions are *republican* and the laws of education are *monarchical*.⁶ The *former* extend civil rights to every honest industrious man; the *latter* deprive a large proportion of the citizens of a most valuable privilege.

In our American republics [states] where governments are in the hands of the people, knowledge should be universally diffused by means of public schools. Of such consequence is it to society that the people who make laws should be well informed that I conceive no Legislature can be justified in neglecting proper establishments for this purpose. . . .

Every small district should be furnished with a school at least four months in a year, when boys are not otherwise employed. This school should be kept by the most reputable and well informed man in the

⁴ Codes of legal punishment for crime.

⁵ I.e., as clergymen or as lawyers.

⁶ I.e., the state and federal constitutions are *republican*—they created representative democracies—but American schools are still *monarchical*, based on the British model, where they should be preparing citizens and voters for democracy.

district. Here children should be taught the usual branches of learning — submission to superiors and to laws, the moral or social duties, the history and transactions of their own country, the principles of liberty and government. Here the rough manners of the wilderness should be softened and the principles of virtue and good behavior inculcated. The *virtues* of men are of more consequence to society than their *abilities*, and for this reason the *heart* should be cultivated with more assiduity [diligence] than the *head*. . . .

The women in America (to their honor it is mentioned) are not generally above the care of educating their own children.⁷ Their own education should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our governments. Children should be treated as children, but as children that are in a future time to be men and women. By treating them as if they were always to remain children, we very often see their childishness adhere to them, even in middle life. The silly language called *baby talk*, in which most persons are initiated in infancy, often breaks out in discourse, at the age of forty, and makes a man appear very ridiculous. . . .

In America, female education should have for its object what is *useful*. Young ladies should be taught to speak and write their own language with purity and elegance, an article [area] in which they are often deficient. The French language is not necessary for ladies. In some cases it is convenient but in general it may be considered as an article of luxury. As an accomplishment, it may be studied by those whose attention is not employed about more important concerns.

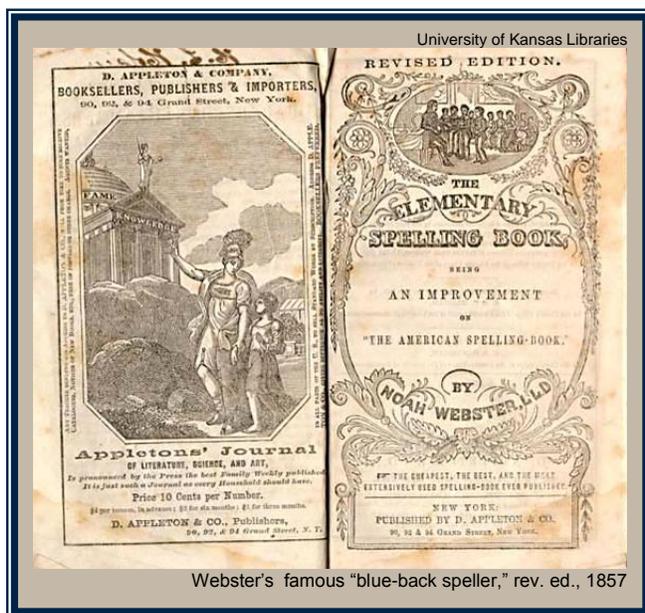
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Some knowledge of arithmetic is necessary for every lady. Geography should never be neglected. Belles Lettres⁸ learning seems to correspond with the dispositions of most females. A taste for Poetry and fine writing should be cultivated, for we expect the most delicate sentiments from the pens of that sex which is possessed of the finest feelings. . . .

In the large towns in America, music, drawing and dancing constitute a part of female education. They, however, hold a subordinate rank for, my fair friends will pardon me when I declare, that no man ever marries a woman for her performance on a harpsichord or her figure in a minuet. However ambitious a woman may be to command admiration abroad [outside home], her real merit is known only at *home*. Admiration is useless when it is not supported by domestic worth. But real honor and permanent esteem are always secured by those who preside over their own families with dignity.

Before I quit this subject, I beg leave to make some remarks on a practice which appears to be attended with important consequences — I mean that of sending boys to Europe for an education, or sending to Europe for teachers. This was right [appropriate] before the revolution, at least so far as national attachments were concerned, but the propriety of it ceased with [the end of] our political relation to Great Britain.

In the first place, our honor as an independent nation is concerned in the establishment of literary institutions [schools and colleges] adequate to all our own purposes, without sending our youth abroad or depending on other nations for books and instructors. It is very little to the reputation of America to have it said abroad that, after the



Webster's famous "blue-back speller," rev. ed., 1857

⁷ I.e., they are willing to educate their own children and leave it to tutors and nannies, as did elite British and American families.

⁸ *Belles lettres* [French]: fine literature.

heroic achievements of the late war, these independent people are obliged to send to Europe for men and books to teach their children A B C.

But in another point of view, a foreign education is directly opposite to our political interests and ought to be discountenanced [discouraged] if not prohibited. . . .

It is therefore of infinite importance that those who direct the councils of a nation should be educated in that nation. Not that they should restrict their personal acquaintance to their own country, but their first ideas, attachments, and habits should be acquired in the country which they are to govern and defend. When a knowledge of their own country is obtained, and an attachment to its laws and interests deeply fixed in their hearts, then young gentlemen may travel with infinite advantage and perfect safety. I wish not therefore to discourage travelling, but, if possible, to render it more useful to individuals and to the community. My meaning is that *men* should travel, and not *boys*.

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While these States were a part of the British Empire, our interest, our feelings, were those of Englishmen. Our dependence led us to respect and imitate their manners [codes of behavior] and to look up to them for our opinions. We little thought of any national interest in America; and while our commerce and governments were in the hands of our parent country, and we had no common interest, we little thought of improving our acquaintance with each other or of removing prejudices and reconciling the discordant feelings of the inhabitants of different Provinces [colonies]. But independence and union render it necessary that the citizens of different States should know each others' characters and circumstances, that all jealousies [suspicions/distrust] should be removed, that mutual respect and confidence should succeed, and a harmony of views and interests be cultivated by a friendly intercourse.

A tour through the United States ought now to be considered as a necessary part of a liberal education. Instead of sending young gentlemen to Europe to view curiosities and learn vices and follies, let them spend twelve or eighteen months in examining the local situation of the different States — the rivers, the soil, the population, the improvements and commercial advantages of the whole, with an attention to the spirit and manners of the inhabitants, their laws, local customs and institutions. Such a tour should at least precede a tour to Europe, for nothing can be more ridiculous than a man travelling in a foreign country for information when he can give no account of his own. When, therefore, young gentlemen have finished an academic education, let them travel through America and afterwards to Europe, if their time and fortunes will permit. . . .

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Americans, unshackle your minds and act like independent beings. You have been children long enough, subject to the control, and subservient to, the interest of a haughty parent. . . . You have an empire to raise . . . and a national character to establish . . .

haughty parent. You have now an interest of your own to augment and defend. You have an empire to raise and support by your exertions, and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtues. To effect these great objects, it is necessary to frame a liberal plan of policy and build it on a broad system of education. Before this system can be formed and embraced, the Americans must *believe* — and *act* from the belief — that it is dishonorable to waste life in mimicking the follies of other nations and basking in the sunshine of foreign glory.

On Fostering *American* Attitudes & “Manners”

essay from a lecture series delivered in 1787, published in 1790 as
Remarks on the Manners, Government, and Debt of the United States

SINCE the declaration and establishment of a general peace, and since this country has had an opportunity to experience the effects of her independence, events have taken place which were little expected by the friends of the revolution. It was expected that on the ratification of peace by the belligerent powers, America would enjoy perfect political tranquility. The statesman in his closet and the divine [clergyman] in his addresses to heaven predicted and anticipated the happy period when every man would rest, unmolested, under his own vine and his own fig tree. The merchant foresaw in vision the ports of all nations open to his ships and the returns of a favorable commerce pouring wealth into his coffers. The honest laborer in the shop and the field was told that independence and peace would forever remove the fears of oppression, would lighten his burden, and give him legal security for the uninterrupted possession of his rights. This flattering prospect inspired an irresistible enthusiasm in war. The contention for freedom was long and arduous, the prize was obtained, the delusion vanished, and America is surprised at the disappointment.

Instead of general tranquility, *one* State has been involved in a civil war,⁹ and most of them are torn with factions which weaken or destroy the energy of government. Instead of a free commerce with all the world, our trade is everywhere fettered with restraints and impositions dictated by foreign interest; and instead of pouring wealth into our country, its present tendency is to impoverish both the merchant and the public. . . . Instead of a union of States and measures essential to the welfare of a great nation, each State is jealous [distrustful] of its neighbor, and struggling for the superiority in wealth and importance at the hazard even of our federal existence.

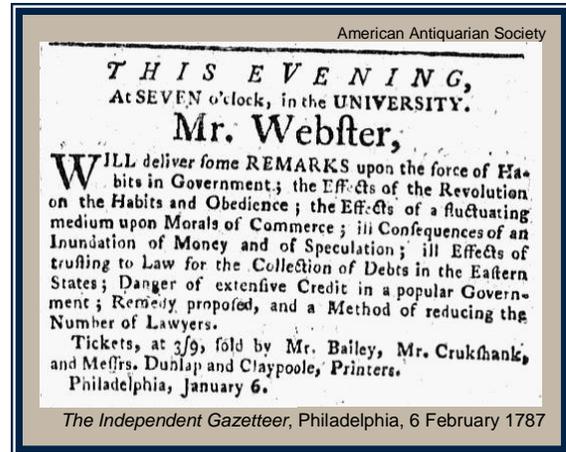
This is the dark side of our public affairs, but such are the facts. . . .

A fundamental mistake of the Americans has been that they considered the revolution as completed when it was but just begun. Having raised the pillars of the building, they ceased to exert themselves and seemed to forget that the whole superstructure was then to be erected. This country is independent in government but totally dependent in manners,¹⁰ which are the basis of government. Men seem not to attend to the difference between Europe and America in point of age and improvement, and are disposed to rush with heedless emulation into an imitation of manners for which we are not prepared. . . .

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The present ambition of Americans is to introduce as fast as possible the fashionable amusements of the European courts.¹¹ Considering the former dependence of America on England . . . this ambition cannot surprise us. But it must check this ambition to reflect on the consequences. . . .

A constant increase of wealth is ever followed by a multiplication of vices: This seems to be the destiny of human affairs. Wisdom, therefore, directs us to retard, if possible, and not to accelerate the progress of corruption. But an introduction of the fashionable diversions of Europe into America is an acceleration of the growth of vices which are yet in their infancy, and an introduction of new ones too



⁹ Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts.

¹⁰ *Manners*: a national culture, shared dictates of social behavior and duty, etc. By "dependent in manners" Webster means that the new nation still copies European culture, fashion, and ways of conducting themselves instead of honing a unique American mode of "manners."

¹¹ I.e., the lavish fashions, balls, and entertainments for the ruling classes in monarchical European nations.

infamous to be mentioned. . . .

By attaching ourselves to foreign manners, we counteract the good effects of the revolution, or rather render them incomplete. A revolution in the form of government is but a revolution in name unless attended with a change of principles and manners which are the springs of government.

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This leads me to treat more particularly of the influence of fashions on the interests of these States, an article [issue] in which the ladies are deeply interested. . . .¹²

Webster explains that the production of ever-changing luxury goods was necessitated in Europe by the feudal economic system, in which many families were dependent on rich landowners for employment and security. Without constant employment providing luxury goods for the few rich, the poor would starve. "Hence the good policy, the necessity of luxury in most European kingdoms."

. . . America is a young country with small inequalities of property and without manufactures. Few people are here dependent on the rich, for every man has an opportunity of becoming rich himself. Consequently few people are supported by the luxuries of the wealthy, and even these few are mostly foreigners.

But we have no body of manufacturers to support by dissipation [trade]. All our superfluities [non-necessities] are imported, and the consumption of them in this country enriches the merchants and supports the poor of Europe. We are generous indeed! generous to a fault. This is the pernicious, the fatal effect of our dependence on foreign nations for our manners. We labor day and night, we sacrifice our peace and reputation, we defraud our public creditors, involve ourselves in debts, impoverish our country. Nay, many are willing to become bankrupts and take lodgings in a prison for the sake of being as foolish as those nations which subsist their poor and grow rich and respectable by their follies.

No objection can be made to rich and elegant dresses among people of affluent circumstances. But perhaps we may safely calculate that one third of the expenses incurred by dress in this country add nothing either to convenience or elegance.

A new dress is invented in London or Paris, not for the sake of superior elegance, because it frequently happens that a new dress is less rich and elegant than an old one, but for the sake of giving food to manufacturers. That new fashion is sent across the Atlantic. Let it be ever so troublesome and uncouth, we admire its novelty; we adopt it because it is fashionable and merely for a change that may be made in half an hour by a tailor or a milliner. 20, 30, or 50,000 pounds are drawn from the capital stocks of property in America to enrich nations which command our commerce and smile at our folly. . . .

Let it not be thought that this is a trifling subject, a matter of no consequence. Mankind are governed by opinion, and while we flatter ourselves that we enjoy independence because no foreign power can impose laws upon us, we are groaning beneath the tyranny of opinion, a tyranny more severe than the laws of monarchs; a dominion voluntary indeed but for that reason more effectual, an authority of manners which commands our services and sweeps away the fruits of our labor.



¹² "Extravagance in the female figure is a lightning rod for paranoid fears in the early Republic. A vital simplicity, perceived to be everywhere on the wane in postrevolutionary America, suffers most from a spirit of luxury, and this vice frequently assumes female form in public discussion." Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994; paperback ed., Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 180.