

## CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVES

by THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

No. 05

# Make Classical Education Roman Again

*Ryan Hammill and Pavlos Papadopoulos*

*Conservative Perspectives by The Heritage Foundation is a series reflecting thought leadership from across the conservative movement on emerging policy topics and debates. This series provides a forum for diverse perspectives to be articulated and discussed. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation.*

Schools and the administrative state have worked in tandem since the Progressive Era to remake America. Progressive educational reformers followed the playbook put together by their forerunner, John Dewey, who hoped to detach education from the past to form subjects suited for bureaucratic rule. Americans are now awakening to the radicalism of both projects and are pushing back against the administrative conquest in politics while reviving non-Progressive classical education in schools.

Classical schooling has expanded dramatically in recent years, serving families, local communities, and the country well. Graduates of classical schools are poised to renew the American order—if the movement stays true to itself. Rebirth brings a host of complications. No one has a living

memory of an authentic classical education from before the Progressive Revolution, so classical education enthusiasts must build and recover at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Further, the growth of classical education brings temptations to compromise. Getting education right is a matter of the utmost consequence for America and must begin with a proper understanding of the stakes involved.

Both the Founders and the Progressives recognized the political and civilizational stakes of education. They agreed that certain kinds of schooling prepare students to be citizens of a republic while others incline them to be members of a centralized state ruled by expert administrators; they disagreed on which goal was desirable and, thus, which educational scheme should be preferred.<sup>2</sup>

The local, classical education that characterized early America, that formed most of the American Founders, and that many of them prescribed for the new nation reinforced the principles of a free federal republic. Classical colleges taught Americans that human nature was fixed and purposive; that human beings perfect their nature in and owe profound obligations to their familial, political, and religious societies; that the masterworks of classical Greece and Rome, the teachings of the Christian religion, and the heritage of European civilization are part of our birthright and are indispensable aids in cultivating the moral, intellectual, and theological virtues as well as securing the safety and happiness of our nation. In part because they acknowledged that men are not merely parts of the state, but members of communities that precede and transcend the political community, such classical colleges prepared their graduates to be citizens of a limited republic.

The Progressives' education, by denying each of these classical contentions, sought to supersede classical education while paving the way for the growth of the administrative state. Modern research universities claimed to fulfill rather than subvert our civilizational inheritance but understood that inheritance along strictly modern lines. Education would be dedicated to the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate via the progressive advancement and technological application of the natural and social sciences. Politics would be replaced by the administrative rule of credentialed experts. Importing the German educational model would aid Progressives in repudiating America's outdated, limited, and decentralized constitutional order and replacing it with a centralized, rational, Prussian-style state.

Today, the divergence of our political and educational regimes from those of the Founding Fathers is even more pronounced. Our post-Progressive research universities still seek to serve a technological society managed by credentialed experts but have largely lost confidence in their own claims to progress. They have increasingly surrendered to postmodernity's deconstruction of Western civilization and dedicated themselves to the identity politics of the cultural Left, which simultaneously seeks to repudiate the modern West and wield the powers of the bureaucratic state that grew up in the past hundred years. In Joshua Mitchell's terms, our colleges and universities originally educated for "citizen competence," then educated for "expert competence," and now are discarding both in favor of the rule of "innocent victims" to the detriment of their irredeemable oppressors: "The left today is not progressive; it is identitarian. It does not want experts to rule; it wants innocent victims to rule. It does not wish to strengthen America; it wishes to destroy it."<sup>3</sup>

In short, for these post-Progressives, a classical education in Western civilization is not merely outmoded; it is an enemy, a stain of the past that, just like the cultural products and political structures—including the U.S. Constitution—produced by its graduates, must be wiped clean.

Many Americans, ranging from liberal college professors disgusted by "woke" to state legislators seeking to rein in the excesses of public universities to Christian homeschoolers going their own way to the pioneers of the classical education renewal movement creating parallel institutions, sense the need for an educational alternative to the post-Progressives' contempt for the West. Yet few fully strip away all the progressive accretions. Some embrace Western

civilization but neuter it by denying its formative character and the civilizational stakes. Slogans like “education, not indoctrination,” teaching “how to think, not what to think,” “open inquiry,” and “institutional neutrality” offer partial relief in the form of carve-outs. Other responses to our educational crisis, like homeschooling, provide much-needed pressure-release valves for those who rightly worry about the corruption of schools, but emphasizing such private options risks ignoring the political-civilizational stakes of a nation’s common form of schooling. Even the classical movement often retreats: Christian variants emphasize cultivating “saints, not citizens”; secular ones embrace neutrality amid crisis.

This paper is intended to contribute to the recovery of our classical tradition. It establishes the relation between education and politics, reveals the uniquely Roman heart of Western civilization, and clarifies for both citizens and policymakers the renewal that this revival promises.

### **The Contemporary Challenge: How Classical Educators Unwittingly Promote Progressivism**

Launching countercultural schools is a fraught enterprise. Today’s classical educators themselves are often graduates of progressive colleges and universities. The movement emerged only after generations were steeped in technical training, egalitarianism, and multicultural ideology.

Historian Henri-Irénée Marrou identifies the pressures that countercultural educational movements face: “Education is a collective technique which a society employs to instruct its youth in the values and accomplishments of the civilization within which it exists. It is therefore a secondary activity, subordinate to the life of the

civilization of which it forms a part, and normally appearing as its epitome.”<sup>4</sup> Launching an alternative to rectify mainstream failures always risks reproducing the same problems.

Too often, the “classical” response to the rolling Progressive Revolution in education has consisted of replacing bad values with confused and selective appeals to value neutrality, fighting the Left’s fire with the mist of critical thinking instead of with civilizational substance. When seeking substance, classical reformers have helpfully turned to the Trivium, the Great Books, and various conceptions of “Western civilization” to orient the movement. None fully capture a sufficiently robust civilizational vision.

Leaders and classical visionaries disavow the shortsightedness of the technical modern research university as well as contemporary educational ideology infused with identity politics. Instead of “college and career readiness”—watchwords of the technical—students in classical schools seek the true, the good, and the beautiful. Instead of egalitarianism, classical schools stand for excellence and reject multiculturalism while standing for the Great Tradition.

This bold stance against current fads, however, is often tainted with progressive practices. Many classical schools have grades and bells just as progressive schools do. Classical schools must cater to families that are interested in sending their children to modern universities—and those universities must recognize their transcripts. Some classical schools apologize for the study of Latin by claiming that it can boost SAT scores.<sup>5</sup> They adopt promiscuous conceptions of “classical” that range all the way from Enheduanna to Khaled Hosseini, motivated too often by a sense of guilt for not including enough “diversity.”<sup>6</sup> Grade inflation and social promotion belie claims to excellence.

Classical enthusiasts have sought proper lodestars for the movement. Those who helped to revive classical education displayed so prophetic foresight that no task can be less pleasing than to point out how their remedies have not fully cured the disease. In fact, the benefit of hindsight allows us to remark that Dorothy L. Sayers and Mortimer Adler, exemplary 20th-century figures who sought to renew liberal education, accurately identified many of the symptoms of technocracy but failed to prescribe the medicine that would banish the disease and in certain unforeseen ways accidentally exacerbated the infection.

Sayers's 1947 lecture "The Lost Tools of Learning" became the unofficial founding document of the movement after National Review republished it in 1979.<sup>7</sup> Continued reliance on her framework, however, hampers educators from developing a sufficiently robust vision. Despite its medieval verbiage, her lecture is neither deeply rooted enough in the Western tradition nor particular enough about what students should learn and what kinds of persons students should become.

In "Lost Tools," Sayers sees the Trivium as pedagogical stages corresponding to juvenile psychological development rather than as particular areas of study. As she makes clear, her educational recommendations arise from her concern about pervasive governmental and commercial propaganda.<sup>8</sup> She laments how in the age of film, radio, and universal literacy "we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armour was never so necessary." Her program in "Lost Tools" thus steers away from the content of education while insisting that students learn to think critically to avoid being hoodwinked by advertisers and government propagandists: "Is it not the great defect of our education to-day... that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole

in teaching them how to think? They learn everything, except the art of learning."<sup>9</sup>

Her reborn Trivium was meant to foster critical thinking but was not as concerned with stamping Western character onto students. Examples of this problem abound in Sayers's lecture. Her approach to the subject of history in the "grammar stage" is concerned less with initiating students into a meaningful and connected narrative about the civilization's origins and more with ritual recitation of discrete facts which may or may not be important in and of themselves:

The grammar of History should consist, I think, of dates, anecdotes, and personalities. A set of dates to which one can peg all later historical knowledge is of enormous help later on in establishing the perspective of history. It does not greatly matter which dates: those of the Kings of England will do very nicely, provided they are accompanied by pictures of costume, architecture, and all "every-day things," so that the mere mention of a date calls up a strong visual presentment of the whole period.

Students could learn the dates "of the Kings of England," but as she says, "it does not greatly matter." Students should memorize things, Sayers argues, because facts are fodder "for use in the next part of the Trivium." This "poll-parrot" age, as she calls it, is concerned with collecting material useful to exercise the mind so that the student can develop the skill of learning and thus learn to resist pervasive propaganda.

In "Lost Tools," content is secondary. Graduates are to be critical thinkers. Even her advocacy of Latin grammar treats it primarily as a mental whetstone rather than as a language in which one can encounter Roman civilization.<sup>10</sup> History becomes lists of dates and facts for memorization,

not connected narrative or moral-political formation. The dialectic stage characteristic, she says, of adolescence emphasizes foraging and critique: “Once again: the contents of the syllabus at this stage may be anything you like. The ‘subjects’ supply material; but they are all to be regarded as mere grist for the mental mill to work upon.” The rhetoric stage allows specialization with little prescription: “[I]t is difficult to map out any general syllabus for the study of Rhetoric: a certain freedom is demanded.” For Sayers in “Lost Tools,” grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric are largely methods or tools.

Into this gap, left by the largely empty frame of “Lost Tools,” many classical educators have inserted Mortimer Adler’s *Great Books of the Western World*, a massive anthology of texts as well as his methodology for Socratic seminar discussion of those books. “The Great Books approach,” writes classicist Alex Petkas, “could be fairly characterized as a disinterested romp through a series of dehistoricized texts, predominantly philosophical in nature.”<sup>11</sup> Like Sayers’s lecture, the Great Books movement was also born from discontent with the progressive educational establishment.

Today, many classical schools adopt and adapt Adler’s anthology and his Socratic discussion methodology.<sup>12</sup> The book list is a useful resource. His bedrock assumption—that the books matter because they contain timeless “Great Ideas”—is a modern innovation much like Sayers’s own innovative recasting of the Trivium. Building education upon the foundation of ideas as opposed to one composed of “people, events, or discrete historical institutions” is, according to Petkas, “an accident of some transient historical circumstance.”<sup>13</sup>

Adler’s anthology prioritizes abstract ideas over people, events, and institutions, tilting

toward Greece and metaphysics over Rome and political formation. His project is ultimately meant to serve a mid-20th-century vision of “democratic culture” through neutral inquiry, steering away from extremes of nationalism and vulgarity by promoting a cosmopolitan marketplace of ideas.<sup>14</sup> In *The Paideia Proposal*, Adler rejects “stuffing minds” as indoctrination.<sup>15</sup> His warning against “brainwashing” rightly counsels the teacher against crude force, but it risks limiting schools from confidently transmitting specific truths and pursuing defined civic-moral outcomes rooted in the tradition.

A successful classical education movement must recognize how curriculum shapes the character and affections of students. An education in Western civilization—understood as Latin civilization—provides the lodestar.

The classicism of the Founding Fathers differs from later Great Books approaches. The Founders gave greater attention to political history, biography, rhetoric, and the Roman Republic than did the 20th-century programs that emphasized philosophy, literature, and the Greeks. This illuminates the intimate link between civic education and liberal education. The cultivation of virtue through the liberal arts benefits the person both as individual and as member of family, nation, and church.

The curricular priorities and aims flowing from this restoration challenge the status quo but offer an opportunity to reclaim the education for citizen competence that the Founders received and promoted—an essential ingredient for the health of the federal constitutional republic they created. The following sections develop this Roman core and chart the way forward.

## The Centrality of Rome to Western Civilization

The phrase “Western civilization” is simply a new name for something very old: the Roman Empire and its legacy in Europe, called “Christendom” in its medieval and early modern incarnation.<sup>16</sup> Without Rome, “Europe” as we know it would not exist. Before Rome’s conquest, “Europe” was thought of in the writings of the Greeks as free but barbaric peoples and “Asia” as home to civilized, despotic empires. Only the Hellenes were free and civilized, and then only for fleeting moments.<sup>17</sup> Through a complex process of native development and cultural borrowing, Rome developed much republican public-spirited conflict, freedom, stable government, and law, while its civil conflicts framed the West’s collective understanding of political possibilities. Without the subsequent Latinization of Europe, the character of the New World would manifestly be different.

At the margins, things get fuzzy. Over time, borders have shifted and changed. The southern shore of the Mediterranean was part of the Roman Empire and produced great Latin authors in antiquity but was lost to Christendom in the Arab invasion. The Christianization of the Germanic and Celtic peoples who had never been conquered by Rome added these lands to the West, as did the early modern colonization of the New World.

The Roman state referred to itself as S.P.Q.R.: *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (the Senate and People of Rome). Thus, Rome is first a geographic and political reality: the city that conquered first Italy and then the Mediterranean and possessed a distinctively energetic and resilient political and legal regime, at the center of which sat the Senate. The rise of the Roman people from obscure hill-dwellers to the organizers of

a long-lasting pan-Mediterranean empire is the object of continued fascination and has received appropriately epic homage in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, and many other historical and literary works. The modern political order itself bears the indelible fingerprints of the Roman Senate: Countries ranging from America to North Korea call themselves republics in emulation of the Roman *res publica*. Capitol buildings mimic Rome’s architecture throughout the West.

As the initials S.P.Q.R. show, Rome is, besides a *senatus*, a *populus* with a culture and language: Latin. Education in Latin civilization is not anti-quarianism. For a variety of reasons—including its power and durability, the heroism of its great men, the beauty of its literature and architecture, and its formative historical role—Rome is also a perpetual source of renewal. Down through the centuries, Rome has provided to men of action as well as to men of contemplation a sense of destiny and purpose. Western civilization is a political, linguistic, and cultural organism whose heart is the city of Rome and whose blood is the Latin language.

Classical educators rightly aim to restore “Western civilization.” Getting precise about what, exactly, Western civilization is (and what it is not) is their first challenge. Both Sayers’s neo-Trivium and Adler’s Great Books movement gesture, each in its own way, toward the need for Rome as the animating spirit and organizing principle for our education in the West, but their approaches are not sufficient to understand the specifically Roman character of Western civilization and, thus, of the educational regime needed to sustain and enrich it.

Western civilization is neither abstract nor hard to define. The inner reality of Western civilization has been taken for granted for centuries.<sup>18</sup> The enduring political and cultural achievement

of Rome created Europe and therefore the West. All the later achievements of the West—from the chivalric splendor of the Middle Ages to the intellectual and artistic fecundity of the Renaissance, the heroic discovery and colonization of the New World, the magnificence of the American Founding, and all the way to the scientific and technological revolution of modernity—have taken place in the shadow of the great, hulking edifice of Rome. Rome absorbed and assimilated a vast array of peoples and cultures (most notably the Greeks, Jews, and Germans) and then propagated those appropriated ideas, achievements, and spirits.

The image of the stern and unyielding Roman soldier, whose religious sense of duty to the Roman state is personified in figures like Scaevola and Horatius Cocles, is indispensable, but Rome cannot be understood without Greece, its elder and in many ways its superior. From alphabet to architecture, oratory, and poetry, Rome owes Greece an incalculable debt. Greece provided Rome with so much of its cultural code that we now speak of “Greco-Roman culture,” as indeed the Roman poet Horace might have if he had spoken English: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* (Captive Greece took captive her savage conqueror). Yet it was through Rome that Greece was mediated to the West. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the hero’s father, Anchises, prophesies:

Others will fashion breathing flesh from bronze,  
so I believe, and draw out living glances from  
marble,  
will plead their cases better, heaven’s motions  
trace with a staff, and the rising of stars predict.  
Remember, Roman, you will rule the nations  
with power,  
and these will be your arts: to impose the norms  
for peace,

show mercy to the conquered, and cast the  
mighty down.<sup>19</sup>

Paradoxically, in a poem meant to surpass the Greek Homer, in which a single hero, Aeneas, combines the virtues of both Achilles and Odysseus while also succeeding where they failed, Virgil admits the inferiority of Rome to Greece in fields like art, oratory, and natural philosophy.<sup>20</sup> But, Virgil says, Romans excel in ruling because of their mastery of the arts of legislating, showing mercy, and putting down the mighty. The political, legal, and military achievement of the Roman Empire gave the ancient world peace so that Greco-Roman civilization endured.

The same genius enabled Western civilization to take a definitively Christian form. Christianity, the flowering of Hebrew civilization, was mediated to Rome by Greece but carried to the ends of the earth by Roman heirs. Pope Benedict XVI argued that Christianity took its historically decisive character in Europe through Greek philosophy and Roman political acumen.<sup>21</sup>

In the West, Jerusalem and Athens were transmitted and transformed by Latin and Rome’s *res publica*. In some non-Western places, the Jews and Greeks exercised their influence differently: the settlement of diaspora Jews in the Sasanian Empire; the conversion of Armenia, Ethiopia, and Kerala to Christianity; the Great Schism and the Byzantine claim to be a “New Rome”; the reception of Greek philosophy in medieval Islam. But in the West, Jerusalem and Athens transformed and were transformed by Latin and the Roman *res publica*.

The composition of Western civilization later expanded (and was changed) by the inclusion of the Celtic and Germanic peoples. In the wake of their Christianization, by which they were brought into the cultural complex of Western

civilization by Roman evangelistic missions, the Celts and Germans developed national literatures and cultural identities in intensive dialogue with the Latin language and the heritage of Roman civilization.

Monks in Ireland, England, and Visigothic Spain kept Latin literacy alive in the so-called Dark Ages, the time between the gradual decline and collapse of Roman power in Western Europe during the 4th and 5th centuries and the Carolingian Renaissance that began in the 8th century. The emerging European vernacular languages had essentially no literature at all, so literacy simply meant Latin. Thus, during a period when Latin was dying, literacy itself was disappearing. It was only in those remotest strongholds of Latin learning, especially Ireland and England, that writing in the vernacular first started to appear in Europe at the same time that polished Latin writing began to reemerge over the course of what the German philologist Jürgen Leonhardt calls “Europe’s Latin Millennium”:

The oldest vernacular texts in Europe are in Old Irish, and the Venerable Bede wrote texts in English as well.... Latin culture and vernacular culture were not engaged in a zero-sum game but appeared together. Wherever Latin culture flourished, which presumed experience in writing, there were also people who set about scriptualizing the still-unregulated vernaculars. Frequently, one and the same person was doing both.<sup>22</sup>

Leonhardt shows that the symbiotic relationship between Latin and the European vernaculars held not only in the case of monastic early adopters like Ireland and England. Nor did it hold just in Latin’s genetic offspring like French and Italian. It held also in Germany, the Netherlands, and even

in farther-flung and seemingly unlikely European countries like Poland and Hungary. Long after the disappearance of the Roman Empire and the extinction of a native Latin-speaking community, the language of Rome remained the indispensable engine of cultural growth and refinement in the West. Generations of Westerners thus took for granted that their civilization was Latin civilization.

Precisely what formation toward Latin civilization looked like is apparent from the experience of the American Founders. They were formed by schools, colleges, and a broad intellectual culture rooted in the Roman and Greek classics and the Christian Bible.<sup>23</sup> The Founders gave greater emphasis to Rome than to Greece; among Greek cities, greater emphasis to Spartan aristocracy than to Athenian democracy; and among the ancient philosophical schools, greater emphasis to Stoic virtue than to Epicurean hedonism.<sup>24</sup>

Leading Founders, such as George Washington and John Adams, self-consciously emulated such Roman political heroes as Cato the Younger, Cincinnatus, and Cicero. James Madison, perhaps the most “modern” of the Founders, improved upon classical political science through his intensive study of classical political history.

As Aristotle observed, cultivating “the political art” requires not just sound first principles, but also experience in “the actions pertaining to life.”<sup>25</sup> The young lack direct experience, but reading history and biography provides vicarious experience. History, wrote Thomas Hobbes, aims “to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future” and thereby aids its students in acquiring “the art by which the affairs both of armies and cities be conducted to their ends.”<sup>26</sup>

The American Founders saw that studying the classics—particularly the Latin language and the Roman historians and orators—is the means to perfect oneself both as a person and as a member of a political community. John Adams summed up this view in a letter to John Quincy Adams: “All the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.” Adams exhorted his son to continue his “Latin exercises” so that he might join the “Company” of “Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus and Livy.” These great Roman authors—three historians and the orator, statesman, and public-spirited philosopher Cicero—show their readers that “Wisdom and Virtue...represented, with all the Charms which language and Imagination can exhibit, and Vice and Folly painted in all their Deformity and Horror.”<sup>27</sup> Adams understood the classical view of historical study as an inherently moral enterprise that equips its students with the judgment and character needed for happiness in personal, familial, professional, and civic life.

John Jay agreed that a moral and civic education required close attention to political biography. In a letter to his son, he wrote:

You have read the ancient History—now therefore is the Time for you to read more in Detail the Histories of the Great Men that have figured in it—read Plutarch’s *Lives*—and read them with attention—they will then teach you much of human Nature; and so far as this World is concerned, believe me there is not one Science so important, so essentially useful, as that of human Nature.<sup>28</sup>

Jay assumes a basic familiarity with ancient history as the basis for a more advanced study in the biographies of “Great Men” with Plutarch taking pride of place. The “Science” of “human

Nature” is gained through great humanistic authors. Such science is emphatically “useful” for “this World” in general—both private and public.<sup>29</sup> As he says elsewhere, classical biographies offer key lessons for happiness in both “worlds” of life:

Few Books (if properly read) afford more useful Lessons than the Lives of great Men; and among Biographers Plutarch is certainly entitled to the first Place. To enjoy the Experience of others without paying the Price which it often cost them, is pleasant as well as profitable—mankind is the same in all Ages, however diversified by colour manners or customs. To regulate our Conduct wisely relative to men, is the most difficult Task we have to perform in the Course of our Lives—To know them, is necessary but not easy—History will teach us much, but unremitted observation more—both assist each other—Habituate yourself to trace actions up to their Motives—let me again repeat that we have two worlds to exist in—and that you may be happy in both, is not only the wish but the Prayer of Your aff[ectiona]te Father.<sup>30</sup>

For Jay, reading “the Lives of the great Men,” especially Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, “properly” and “with attention” was good in itself (“pleasant”) as well as beneficial in aiding the wise conduct of one’s moral and political life (“profitable”). Vicarious experience enables the reader to “enjoy the Experience of others without paying the Price which it often cost them.”

Such study complements careful reflection on one’s own experiences. The point of reading such ancient works is not to confirm that “mankind is the same in all Ages,” as if the alteration of human nature itself were a question. Rather, the enduring nature of mankind is what enables the carefully wrought observations of a wise author

of the past to augment the student's own capacity for discerning and reflecting upon the moral and political realities that he is himself experiencing. The reader of Plutarch's biographies (as distinct from the reader of a treatise on moral philosophy) can practice "trac[ing] actions up to their Motives," gaining the "Science" of knowing his fellow man as well as himself through manifold particular examples. We are thereby prepared "to regulate our Conduct wisely relative to men" not through a notional assent to an abstract conception of justice but by the habits of the moral virtues and, above all, the virtue of prudence, which supervises and enables their performance. Such prudence is necessary to wise conduct as both a "good Man" and a "useful Citizen."

In a letter to Benjamin Rush, Adams defended the study of Greek and Roman classics against Hobbesian calumnies that they filled young men's heads with ideas of liberty. He sarcastically imagined the consequences of substituting Arabic and Oriental studies, which would encourage despotism through the examples of Asiatic emperors, Muhammad, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane. While acknowledging flaws in Alexander and Caesar, Adams noted that Greek and Roman orators and historians branded their tyrannical tendencies with infamy.<sup>31</sup> The great men of the European tradition, as portrayed by its own great authors, were threats to the Leviathan state and, thus, ideal models for liberty-minded citizens of a free republic.

The Founders' orientation—favoring Roman political history, biography, and rhetoric—reveals their view of education as inherently formative toward a particular political community. They did not sharply distinguish between liberal education and civic education. The classics cultivated virtue for the person and the polity. Roman examples

supplied models of republican virtue, duty to the *res publica*, and resistance to tyranny. Cato, Cincinnatus, and Cicero embodied the selfless statesman; Livy and Sallust offered cautionary tales of corruption and the need for vigilance. Such formation equipped citizens for self-government in a free republic far more than abstract philosophy or Greek democratic experiments ever could. The curricular priorities flowing from this Roman-centered classicism challenge modern classical education while reclaiming the Founders' vision of citizen competence, which is essential to the republic's health.

Many do not see Rome as the center. The Byzantines claimed Constantinople as the "New Rome," and eastern Slavs christened Moscow the "Third Rome." Students of medieval Islamic philosophy insist they are the true custodians of the West. Thinkers like Niall Ferguson, Kenneth Clark, and Oswald Spengler limit "the West" to their favored periods of the past five hundred or thousand years. Ferguson begins the history of "the West" in 1500, framing it as triumphantly progressive and technological. Clark considers only the second millennium A.D. as the "first great age of civilisation." Spengler's "Faustian" culture of Northern Europe also begins ca. 1000. Whatever their merits, these approaches neglect the preceding centuries.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Western civilization is too abstract to exist.<sup>33</sup>

The greatest intellectual challenge to this view of Rome as the heart of Western civilization arises from the 18th and 19th centuries: the conjoined phenomena of German Hellenism and the related but distinct flowering of romanticism and European nationalism. By the mid-20th century, according to W.H. Auden, Rome had been completely eclipsed by the Hellenophiles:

Until near the end of the eighteenth century, Europe thought of itself less as Europe than as Western Christendom, the heir to the Roman Empire, and its educational system was based on the study of Latin. The rise of Hellenic studies to an equal and then a superior position was a nineteenth century phenomenon and coincided with the development of European nations and nationalist feeling. It is significant, surely, that when, today, an after-dinner speaker refers to the sources of our civilization, he always names Jerusalem and Athens, but rarely Rome, for the last is the symbol of a religious and political unity which has ceased to exist and the revival of which few believe in or desire.<sup>34</sup>

Without recognizing and reappropriating for ourselves the centrality of the Roman heritage, our educational efforts—and ultimately, by consequence, our civilizational efforts—will be in vain. “The grace stored in Jerusalem, and the gifts which radiate from Athens,” John Henry Newman wrote, “are made over and concentrated in Rome.... To separate those distinct teachings, human and divine, which meet in Rome, is to retrograde; it is to rebuild the Jewish Temple and to plant anew the groves of Academus.”<sup>35</sup>

Yet the primacy of “Athens and Jerusalem” over Rome remains popular among classical educators, thanks in part to the influence of Leo Strauss. Strauss was a strident critic of historicism and an eloquent champion of “studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind.”<sup>36</sup> Despite his piety toward the great minds of the past, there are some strikingly untraditional features of Strauss’s teaching, above all his understanding of “the West.” On the one hand, he argues that “Western man became what he is and is what he is through the coming together of biblical

faith and Greek thought.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Strauss says that these “two roots” are “in radical disagreement with each other.”<sup>38</sup> Although he acknowledged the common ground between the two, especially over-against late modern thought, Strauss insisted on their fundamental contradiction.

“Philosophy and the Bible,” Strauss proclaimed, “are the alternatives or the antagonists in the drama of the human soul.”<sup>39</sup> They have or ought to have the mutual respect of Homeric heroes fighting on the battlefield. Moreover, we ought not try to resolve this conflict because “the core, the nerve of Western intellectual history, Western spiritual history, one could almost say, is the conflict between the biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life,” and “this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization.”<sup>40</sup> Any attempt to “harmonize” or “synthesize” these two “roots” is a fool’s errand, and subordinating one to the other is a tragedy. Strauss recommends that we “live that conflict” between philosophy and theology, open-ended inquiry and pious obedience, Athens and Jerusalem.

Strauss implies that the crucial phenomena are comprehended by the Athens/Jerusalem alternative. Strauss’s understanding of “Western civilization” deliberately sidelines the Incarnation of Christ, Christian theology more broadly, and the Empire in which Christ himself was born.<sup>41</sup> Any fair interpretation of Western civilization must somehow deal with these historical themes that have been central to the self-understanding of Europe and America. Doing so may even reveal a more questioning Abraham and a more pious Socrates than Strauss would allow.<sup>42</sup>

Strauss himself seems to possess “a ‘Muslim’ understanding of Greek philosophy.”<sup>43</sup> Whatever the virtues of this approach, it cannot be said to

be a particularly Western understanding of Western civilization, much less one akin to the early American tradition that formed our Founders and sustained our Republic. Strange philosophers lying to the many while “living the conflict” between reason and revelation is no basis for a civilization, at least not ours.

The Founders’ orientation toward the Romans over the Greeks, Sparta over Athens, history and biography over metaphysics, and classical languages over works in translation contrasts sharply with the institutions and writers aspiring toward classicism today. It also points the way to a formative project with education at its heart.

## Teaching Western Civilization

If classical education is to equip its graduates to meet the constitutional and civilizational crises of our time, it must become more like the education of the Founding generation that established our Republic. In so doing, it would become more Roman, more civic, and perhaps more authentically Christian as well.

To be worthy of the name, a classical education ought to form its students in accord with a classical understanding of the human person: naturally rational and free, naturally social and political, naturally embodied and religious. Classical education must be conducted with a sense of public responsibility, a sense that is manifested in its very curriculum. Classical education must prioritize Latin, the study of political history and the biographies of great statesmen, moral philosophy and the principles of government, and rhetoric, the ultimate skill or art of the classical, educated, republican citizen. A few graduates might discern a special interest in liberal arts like philosophy. Pursuing this might be good for them and in some way beneficial to society, but the curriculum common to all classical school

students ought to focus on the education of citizens and statesmen.

Classical educators today sometimes accept a strict bifurcation between the private and the public, corresponding to a “liberal education” that would benefit their students as individuals, understood to be in tension with a “civic education” that is tantamount to ideological indoctrination or partisan activism. The Western tradition, including the American Founders and the Roman authorities to whom they looked, did not accept such a bifurcation.

On the classical view, we are social and political creatures by nature rather than isolated individuals who choose to construct our social and political relations. The isolated individual, incapable of sharing in a community, is “either a beast or a god,” not a proper human.<sup>44</sup> A man who attends to his private concerns to the neglect of the public is an “idiot” (from the Greek *idiōtēs*). In the words of Ryan T. Anderson, “Education is formation—intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and political.... All education is moral education and civic education.”<sup>45</sup> Any classical education that fails to cultivate “citizen competence” in its students is unworthy of the name: It is instead an emphatically modern education, assuming modern premises about the ultimately individual essence of the person and the merely artificial character of social relations, and will only perpetuate dysfunction in the personal and public lives of its graduates.

**Really Centering Latin.** The departure from the civic and Roman education of the Founders opened us to the worship of the technical, the multicultural, and the egalitarian. So far, efforts to topple those modern idols in the classical education movement have been half-measures. Yet, in a certain way, the classical education movement, sometimes even despite itself, has hewed

quite close to the ancient models. Even if merely from a vague sense of piety and out of obligation to Sayers, classical schools have gone to immense trouble to run Latin classes for their students. If the results have been more disappointing than not, they nevertheless demonstrate an understanding that the substance of a true education is one in Western civilization and, thus, one vinted from the grapes growing in the hills of Latium.

The Latin language is not obviously useful for the technicians of a global economy, as Mandarin Chinese would be. Putting Latin at the center of school instruction requires even more daring transgression of the expectations of parents and the educational establishment than simply starting a classical school would require. Uniforms and cursive and memory work and a weekly Latin class can be explained. More Latin will be truly transgressive. But would you prefer to return to the fleshpots of Egypt?

In fact, it will not all be as bad as that: Latin classes aren't Sinai. Very little of what is done at any school, anywhere, prepares students in a direct way for a profession until you get into trade school or professional training like law school or medical school. An education, however—even an average one in a fine public school—in the proper sense is both broader and more specific than job training. On the one hand, it lays the foundation of literacy and numeracy and responsibility upon which future job training will rely; on the other, it is inducting students into the particular civilization to which this particular Western outpost in the New World is heir by rights. If we fail to pass it on to America's children, so much will be lost—including GDP.

Do not, therefore, give the Roman tongue short shrift by jumping prematurely to other languages. Aim to give students real reading and writing proficiency in the language. After all, “the best translation

can give no more than the dry bones,” as the great humanist educator W.H.D. Rouse wrote. “If a translation is more than that, it is so by virtue of something that is not in the original.”<sup>46</sup> Your students cannot fully imbibe the Roman spirit without reading the actual words the Romans wrote.

**The Liberal Arts.** The study of Latin leads to an authentic encounter with the seven liberal arts of the Middle Ages: the Trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). The Trivium and Quadrivium ought to be studied both as occasions to perfect the minds of their students and, where appropriate, as adjuncts to the study of history and moral philosophy. Grammar and logic ought to culminate in rhetoric, not only in proving abstract theses, but also in the practice of deliberating on proper courses of action.

**Heroes Before Philosophers.** Classical education requires the study of the heroes of our civilization and the key moments in our civilization's ascendancy. Classical schools should adopt the American Founders' unembarrassed emphasis on “the Lives of great Men” in studying the full sweep of Western civilization—including not only the heroes of classical antiquity, but those of American history as well. When it comes to classical authors, students should be more familiar with Plutarch,<sup>47</sup> Livy, and Cicero than they are with Plato and Aristotle.

This is what Plato and Aristotle themselves would have wanted, given what they prescribed for citizens in a well-ordered republic. The classical philosophers warned against exposing students to dialectical philosophy at too young an age; rather, good moral formation, including through story and song, as well as concrete service to one's community (as soldiers or in some other way—in a school, perhaps as athletes) must precede the study of dialectic.<sup>48</sup>

In the upper years, moral philosophy might be studied in tandem with biography and history, as both deal with human character, its virtues and vices, and their relevance to personal and public happiness or misery. This was the practice of American classical colleges, whose curriculum normally culminated in a course on moral philosophy taught by the college president well into the 19th century. The study of biography went out of fashion at the hands of progressives, and today's classical reformers responded by teaching philosophy to children as the progressives prescribed.<sup>49</sup> Instead classical educators ought to recover the original meaning of a liberal education as civic education.

### Cultivating Rightly Ordered Ambition as a Goal for Graduates

Most needful to guide curriculum and culture is a clear picture of what a school expects from its graduates. Leaders of schools should make the spirit of the Romans their own. First and foremost, classical education cultivates a deep appreciation of the importance of both deeds and words. To introduce his account of Catiline's attempted coup against the Roman Senate, Sallust compares the life of action with the life of study: "It is a beautiful thing to serve one's country with deeds, and to do so with words is more than nothing. One can become famous in peace or in war. Both men of action as well as men who record the actions of others receive praise."<sup>50</sup>

The ancient and enduring rivalry of those who serve their country with words (*dicere*) and those who serve their country with deeds (*facere*) endures. For Sallust, the hero is the greater man, but his highest aim—everlasting glory—is impossible without a poet to sing about him. The poet is indispensable to the hero.

The dynamic of the great man and the supporting poet echoes through Roman history.

In his *Oratio Pro Archia Poeta*, Cicero says that Alexander the Great was aware of this dynamic himself:

How great a host of writers it is said that Alexander the Great took with him to record his own deeds. And yet, standing before the tomb of Achilles at Sigeum, he said: "Oh blessed youth, who found your valor's herald in Homer!" Rightly so, for had the Iliad never existed, that same mound of earth covering Achilles' body would have buried his name also.<sup>51</sup>

Cicero devoted himself to public life, pleading in the law courts and serving in the Senate—a career that ended up leading to his own execution and the desecration of his corpse—all to achieve everlasting glory. In Sallust's history, Catiline is the (evil) protagonist, Cicero the (noble) antagonist. Cicero put down the rebellion but acted with such decisiveness that he made enough enemies to face disgrace and exile. His oratory eventually provoked his execution. It was poetry—construed in the broadest sense as the artful use of language in general—that prodded Cicero on to that noble service. Without literary study, Cicero says, he never would have risked so much:

Now had I not been persuaded in my youth by many lessons and many books, that nothing in life is to be desired more than glory and honor, and that in their pursuit, the excruciating torture of the body, the danger of death and the danger of exile, are all to be taken lightly, then I would never have for your sake subjected myself to so many battles and to so many attacks of corrupt men.<sup>52</sup>

The study of their noblest predecessors motivated the Romans and honed their exercise of political power. They erected statues of heroes

and recorded their deeds in poems and chronicles. Emulation drove Romans to serve the *res publica* and outdo their compatriots in glorious deeds. Such heroic emulation is central to the task of classical education.

Americans are connected directly to Roman heroes and poets through our Founders. The smattering of multicultural study that promises to make the students of our day “well-rounded” and “empathetic” is not capable of inspiring the desire for glory that will lead a secure man to risk the safety of his body for his country. The worshippers of the multicultural idol defang the young of the West in order to preempt genuinely heroic action, which the study of classics has inspired in the breasts of countless generations of young men down through the centuries. Liberal study is the lifeblood of a heroic body politic.

“Liberal education consists in reminding oneself of human excellence, of human greatness.”<sup>53</sup> An education that foregrounds heroism, celebrates virtue, and challenges its students must aim to produce ambitious and excellent graduates. Such an education will necessarily be aristocratic in character, as C.S. Lewis argues: “A truly democratic education—one which will preserve democracy—must be, in its own field, ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly ‘highbrow’.... Only thus can it be a nursery of those first-class intellects without which neither a democracy nor any other State can thrive.”<sup>54</sup>

The project of classical education is in tension with the presuppositions of mass liberal democracy. Some adapt classical education to democracy while squirming at charges of elitism. Many emphasize virtuous private life while downplaying the importance of inspiring public-spirited statesmen. As the American Founders knew and practiced, a classical education is concerned first with forming an elite, not with careers, job training, and other servile arts, although institutions concerned with such

matters would certainly contribute to the cause of republican government as well.

The liberal arts are not “liberating arts,” as some within the classical movement believe.<sup>55</sup> A liberal education is not called “liberal” (from *liber*, Latin for “free”) because it makes a man free. A liberal education is an education that is proper to a man who is already free. Liberal education in this respect is aristocratic and by nature in tension with democratic mass society.<sup>56</sup>

In his famous Renaissance treatise on education, *The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth*, Pier Paolo Vergerio says that while all parents should wish to educate their children, the study of the “principal arts” is particularly fitting for “those of lofty rank.”<sup>57</sup> These principal arts (that is, the liberal arts) are the preeminent tool for training future rulers to make them fit for their offices and thus, critically for their legitimacy, to “be judged by all to be the worthiest to rule.”<sup>58</sup> Vergerio, like the other Renaissance humanists, was a great admirer of Rome, and we should not be surprised that he echoes Cicero and Sallust. Vergerio’s foremost criteria to determine whether a youth has a “liberal spirit” are whether he possesses “eagerness for praise” and is “inflamed by love of glory.”<sup>59</sup> For Vergerio, then, the preconditions for successful study of the liberal arts are both circumstantial and natural. A youth must have the leisure to set aside “illiberal affairs”<sup>60</sup> so that he can spend the time required to prepare for ruling, and he must have a good character that will receive a liberal education in the right way—good soil that will receive the seed and return one hundredfold.

Vergerio’s presupposition of hierarchy—both social hierarchy and a certain natural hierarchy of excellences in the human soul—is miles away from the progressive desire to level all children into equal subjects of a centralized bureaucracy.

Where education becomes a program of egalitarian crusading, it corrupts itself. In its classical form, however, what emerges from a liberal education joined to a good character “is something indescribably splendid and without peer,” which is how Cicero described Rome’s great statesmen who possessed both virtuous natures and liberal educations—men like Scipio Africanus and Marcus Cato.<sup>61</sup> When we look back to our forebears who are nearest to fitting such a description, the Founding Fathers, we find that they were looking back to their Roman ancestors. So should classical educators.

### Civilizational Suicide and Its Alternative

America is deeply indebted to Western civilization for its tradition of republican self-government. The establishment and perpetuation of our constitutional order would have been unimaginable without the classical education received by the Founders. What was truly an elite education nevertheless served the national common good even when it was unavailable to the overwhelming majority. It was through the classically informed statesmanship of our Founders, the ingenious constitutional order that they established, and the free economy they nurtured that generations of ordinary Americans—many with little formal education, most of them prepared for a life of productive labor through work on a family farm, apprenticeship at a trade, a course of technical studies, or the trials of settling the frontier—could enjoy the security and satisfaction of a free and prosperous way of life for themselves and their posterity.

Unsurprisingly, the Founders were anxious to ensure that the now self-governing citizens of the new American Republic should receive an education that resembled their own, and states pursued a variety of avenues to deliver just that. In the words of Benjamin Rush:

The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and in laying the foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government.<sup>62</sup>

The progressive repudiation of the Founding coincided with the progressive repudiation of classical education in the nation’s schools and universities: A new education was required to make new subjects for the new regime. The eclipse of a classical education for citizens of a republic was the logical concomitant to the replacement of our republican constitution by a political order supporting the central administrative state. Progressive education sought to make compliant and dependent subjects, not self-governing and independent citizens.

Since the Progressive Era, classical education has been countercultural; it poses a threat to the new regime of progressive ideals ensured by expert management. Though early proponents of the restoration of classical education may not have acknowledged it at the time, by rebelling against the reductive and scientistic progressive spirit of modern education, they were also rebelling against their age’s political paradigm.

Today’s post-Progressive repudiation not just of the Founding but of Western civilization itself unabashedly forms students in the image of Leftist ideologies—Critical Race Theory, Gender Ideology, Postcolonial Theory, etc.—to ensure that future generations will be reliably post-Western and post-American in their habits and self-understanding. Where the Founders established an education for self-governing citizens and the Progressives instituted an education for the

expert management of a mass society, today's post-Progressives seek to dissolve the student's confidence in his faith, his civilization, his nation, his family, and his very body so that the whole edifice of the West might crumble and be replaced by an alternative that is more righteous because it is more historically disadvantaged.

Not liberty, not progress, but resentment toward, expropriation from, and the ultimate destruction of America, the irredeemable "settler colonial state" par excellence, are the mode and goal of the contemporary Left. To capitulate to the educational paradigm of the Left is to cooperate in one's own civilizational suicide—an act of personal cowardice and generational betrayal.

## Conclusion

Classical education as described in this paper is both a throwback to an earlier paradigm and the timeliest response to the dead end of anti-American, anti-Western identity politics. There will always be a great need for technical and preprofessional education, to say nothing of the unschooling that serves a few savants well in enabling them to pioneer new fields of inquiry, invention, and entrepreneurship.

But neither technical training nor unschooling will suffice to make citizens and statesmen. They cannot by themselves ensure the social, economic, and political conditions within which all Americans may enjoy the fruits of their own labor, live quiet and peaceful lives, and pass along this inheritance to their children. As for schools that deny the political stakes involved in the enterprise of education, they cannot succeed as an alternative

to Leftist ideological instruction. The human heart desires to know truth, to admire heroism, and to act with justice. If it is deprived of a genuine education, it will be tempted all too easily by the Left's counterfeits. A truly classical education, by contrast, fosters civilizational health.

Much ink has been spilled and many pixels have been set ablaze in recent years by conservatives debating whether our task is primarily one of preservation or restoration. Regardless of how we resolve this debate, a recovery of a more fully classical education—and, thus, one more like that of our Founders—is desirable. A truly classical education will prepare the next generation of Americans to live both more happily in their personal and private lives and more responsibly as citizens. It will infuse them, better than any other form of education can, with the courage required to restore what needs to be restored, the fortitude to preserve what can be preserved, and the prudence to discern how to do so. It will set them at the feet of the great figures of history who created the institutions that we cherish and faced crises even more daunting than our own.

Above all, a truly classical education will remind Americans that Western civilization, as it formed America and as it was realized in America, belongs to them as their birthright to receive, to preserve, and to hand on to their children.

**Ryan Hammill** is Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Ancient Language Institute. **Pavlos Papadopoulos** is a Visiting Fellow in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

## Endnotes

1. On the revival of classical education, see Ian Lindquist, "Classical Schools in Modern America," *National Affairs*, Fall 2019, <https://eppc.org/publication/classical-schools-in-modern-america/> (accessed August 4, 2026), and Micah Meadowcroft, "Classical Education's Aristocracy of Anyone," *National Affairs*, October 25, 2023, [https://www.realcleareducation.com/2023/10/25/classical\\_educations\\_aristocracy\\_of\\_anyone\\_988515.html](https://www.realcleareducation.com/2023/10/25/classical_educations_aristocracy_of_anyone_988515.html) (accessed August 4, 2026).
2. On the new universities, see *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*, ed. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). On the new regime, see Joseph Postell, *Bureaucracy in America: The Administrative State's Challenge to Constitutional Government* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017); John Marini, *Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019); and Philip Hamburger, *Is Administrative Law Unlawful?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
3. Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020); Joshua Mitchell, "The Age of Incomplete Religions," *First Things*, August 28, 2024, <https://firstthings.com/the-age-of-incomplete-religions/> (accessed August 4, 2026). See also "Charlie Kirk, Scapegoat," *The American Mind*, October 28, 2025, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/charlie-kirk-scapegoat/> (accessed August 4, 2026), and Glenn Ellmers, *The Narrow Passage: Plato, Foucault, and the Possibility of Political Philosophy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2023), which describes the intra-left tension between the "scientific-bureaucratic-rational state" indebted to Hegel and represented by "Fauci-ism" and the "post-modern rejection of all objective standards" indebted to Nietzsche and represented by "Floyd-ism." For "cultural left," see especially Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
4. H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. xiii.
5. Jonathan Roberts, "Classical Schools Aren't Really Classical," Ancient Language Institute, <https://ancientlanguage.com/classical-schools-not-classical/> (accessed August 4, 2026). On the classical profession's attempts to justify itself with skills-based rationales in the 19th century, see Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
6. Jessica Hooten Wilson, "Is White Supremacy a Bug or a Feature of Classical Christian Education?" *Current*, January 12, 2023, <https://currentpub.com/2023/01/12/is-white-supremacy-a-bug-or-a-feature-of-classical-christian-education/> (accessed August 4, 2026).
7. Jessica Richardi, "'Neither Orthodox Nor Enlightened': Dorothy Sayers and Classical Education in America," *New England Classical Journal*, Vol. 50, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 9–28, <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1423&context=necj> (accessed August 4, 2026); Meadowcroft, "Classical Education's Aristocracy of Anyone."
8. As a copywriter at the S.H. Benson advertising agency, Sayers knew of which she spoke. According to Guinness, Sayers is responsible for the choice of the toucan in Guinness advertisements as well as the corresponding motto "If he can say as you can, Guinness is good for you, How grand to be a Toucan, Just think what Toucan do." Guinness Storehouse, "Gilroy Advertising: The Toucan," <https://www.guinness-storehouse.com/en/discover/guinness-galleries/gilroy-advertising> (accessed August 4, 2026).
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning: Paper Read at a Vacation Course in Education, Oxford, 1947," <https://www.pccs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/LostToolsOfLearning-DorothySayers.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2026).
10. Sayers herself had more nuanced views on education in general and Latin learning in particular, as she elaborated in "The Greatest Single Defect of My Own Latin Education," Memoria Press, posted April 1, 2010, <https://www.memoriapress.com/articles/greatest-single-defect-my-own-latin-education/> (accessed August 4, 2026). But it was, for better or for worse, "The Lost Tools of Learning" that served as the canonical text at the founding of the present classical education renewal movement, and its continuing use as a blueprint for school and curricular design means that that lecture must be scrutinized on its own, apart from considerations of Sayers's other work.
11. Alex Petkas, "Great Books Are Not Good for Everyone," *First Things*, July 7, 2026, <https://firstthings.com/great-books-are-not-good-for-everyone/> (accessed August 4, 2026).
12. Edited and expanded in its second edition, most notably to include a wide variety of 20th-century authors including (this is a very small sampling) John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, John Maynard Keynes, James Frazer, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.
13. Alex Petkas, "'Great Books' Is for Losers," *The American Mind*, November 18, 2024, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/great-books-is-for-losers/> (accessed August 4, 2026).
14. Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 6.
15. Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), pp. 50–51. Adler dedicated *The Paideia Proposal* "[t]o Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins, who would have been our leaders were they alive today." Mann, the 19th-century educational reformer, in many respects prefigured Dewey, perhaps the arch-progressive educational theorist of the early 20th century. As for Hutchins, it is interesting to note that his 1952 introductory essay to the Great Books of the Western World concludes by suggesting that the Great Books project would help to midwife "a world republic of law and justice" and would "set up the devices of learning by which everybody can, perhaps for the first time, become a citizen of the world." Such political commitments convey some sense of just how far the 20th-century Great Books movement's founders were from any kind of "orthodox" classical or conservative orientation.
16. See, for example, Stanley Kurtz, *The Lost History of Western Civilization*, National Association of Scholars, 2020, p. 38, <https://www.nas.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/The-Lost-History-of-Western-Civilization.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2026).

17. Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.7.
18. James Kurth, "Western Civilization, Our Tradition," *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2003/Spring 2004, pp. 5–13, <https://www.scribd.com/document/99551094/Kurth> (accessed August 5, 2026).
19. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.847–853.
20. According to the ancient commentator Servius the Grammarian, Virgil is alluding "to the Corinthians by mentioning 'bronze,' to the Parians by mentioning 'marble,' to the Athenians by mentioning 'the pleading of cases,' and to the Egyptians and Chaldeans by mentioning 'astronomy.'"
21. Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," September 12, 2006, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html) (accessed August 5, 2026).
22. Jürgen Leonhardt, *Latin: Story of a World Language* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 168–169.
23. Cf. Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Jeffrey Rosen, *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classic Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024); and James J. Walsh, *Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges: Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2025).
24. Cf. Thomas E. Ricks, *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).
25. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.3, 1095a.
26. Thomas Hobbes, "To the Readers," in Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation*, notes and intro. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. xxi and xxiii; cf. Thucydides 1.22.4.
27. "John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 18 May 1781," National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-04-02-0082> (accessed August 5, 2026).
28. "John Jay to Peter Augustus Jay, 12 November 1791," National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jay/01-05-02-0183> (accessed August 5, 2026). Emphasis in original.
29. Ibid.
30. "John Jay to Peter Augustus Jay, 29 November 1791," National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jay/01-05-02-0186> (accessed August 5, 2026). Emphasis in original.
31. "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 13 October 1810," National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5570> (accessed August 5, 2026). For Hobbes's calumny against the classics, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), II.xxix.14.
32. Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin, 2012); Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 31 and 33 (based on the popular BBC series); Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (Budapest: Arktos, 2021 [1918]). As we will see below, the approach of Leo Strauss, initially promising insofar as it identifies the roots of the West in Athens and Jerusalem, is itself reductive and highly untraditional.
33. Even the conservative writer and editor James Diddams celebrates "Western civilization" as something of a noble lie, a useful piece of rhetorical ammunition but too vague to have definite substance. James Diddams, "What Do Conservatives Mean by Western Civilization?" *Providence*, March 31, 2026, <https://providencemag.com/2026/03/what-do-conservatives-mean-by-western-civilization/> (accessed August 5, 2026).
34. Introduction, *The Portable Greek Reader*, ed. W.H. Auden (New York: Viking Press, 1966), pp. 1–2.
35. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, intro. and notes Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 199.
36. "What Is Liberal Education?" Chapter 1 in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 3.
37. Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 147.
38. Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 272.
39. Ibid., p. 298.
40. Ibid., p. 289.
41. "For a philosopher or philosophy there can never be an absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent event." Strauss, "Progress or Return," p. 280.
42. Yoram Hazony has criticized Strauss's dichotomy and defended a "more questioning Abraham" while distinguishing his premises from those typical of "the Christian West." Yoram Hazony, "Jerusalem and Carthage," *Hebraic Political Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 261–289, [https://www.yoramhazony.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/jerusalem\\_and\\_carthage.pdf](https://www.yoramhazony.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/jerusalem_and_carthage.pdf) (accessed August 5, 2026). As for "a more pious Socrates," virtually every school of interpretation besides that established by Strauss will portray Socrates as more pious than will the Straussians.

43. Rémi Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss's 'Muslim' Understanding of Greek Philosophy," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1998), pp. 235–259, <https://www.scribd.com/document/338603946/Athens-Jerusalem-Mecca-Remi-Brague-pdf> (accessed August 5, 2026). For Strauss's own account of his journey to the classics, see especially "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 224–257, and "A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss," *The College*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (April 1970), pp. 1–5, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/sjcdigitalarchives/original/851c685d75958aa5f7dec341738382f9.pdf> (accessed August 5, 2026).
44. *Aristotle's Politics*, 2nd ed., trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1.2.14 (1253a28).
45. Ryan T. Anderson, "The Conservative Vision of Education," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 1344, April 2, 2025, delivered February 17, 2025, pp. 5 and 6, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/HL1344.pdf>.
46. W.H.D. Rouse, "Machines or Mind? The Essay that Launched the Loeb's," *Antigone*, <https://antigonejournal.com/2024/11/machines-or-mind-loeb-s-rouse/> (accessed August 5, 2026).
47. Though Plutarch was Greek and wrote in Greek, it is worth noting in the context of this report's argument that he lived under Roman dominion and received Roman citizenship as an adult.
48. Plato, *Republic*, VII, 537e ff.; Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.9.
49. Colin Redemer, "Revisiting Platonic Education: The Ever Sharable Feast," *Ad Fontes*, <https://adfontesjournal.com/web-exclusives/revisiting-platonic-education-the-ever-sharable-feast/> (accessed August 5, 2026).
50. Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, III.1.
51. Cicero, *Oratio Pro Archia Poeta*, X.24.
52. *Ibid.*, VI.14.
53. Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?" p. 6.
54. C.S. Lewis, "Democratic Education," April 29, 1944, [https://www.tlchrist.info/cs\\_lewis.htm](https://www.tlchrist.info/cs_lewis.htm) (accessed August 5, 2026).
55. Cf. *The Liberating Arts: Why We Need Liberal Arts Education*, ed. Jeffrey Billbro, Jessica Hooten Wilson, and David Henreckson (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2023). Cf. also David Goodwin, "Wokeness Is Coming for Classical Christian Education," *The Federalist*, January 20, 2023, <https://thefederalist.com/2023/01/20/woke-ness-is-coming-for-classical-christian-education/> (accessed August 5, 2026).
56. Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?" p. 8.
57. Pier Paolo Vergerio, "The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth Dedicated to Ubertino da Carrara," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, ed. and trans. Craig W. Kallendorf, The I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 5.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Cicero, *Oratio Pro Archia Poeta*, VII.16.
62. Benjamin Rush, *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Printed for Thomas Dobson, 1786), p. 13, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N15652.0001.001/?view=toc> (accessed August 4, 2026).