"Dumb and Dumber: The Desperate Need for Covenantal and Classical Education"

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered June 19, 1999, in Austin, Texas, at the ACCS annual conference.

I was robbed. Maybe some of you were too. I was so poorly educated in the government schools that I didn't even know how dumb I was. I was so poorly educated in the government schools that I actually thought I was educated. I mean, after all, I was a fairly good student. I made it all the way through government schools through twelfth grade, scored well on my SATs and went off to college with a scholarship. I thought I was styling, as well as smart.

Hence, I made it all the way through college, despite all of my college shenanigans, with a fairly good grade point average. I was encouraged by my professor to go on to pursue a master's degree and went off to seminary after a master's program in political science and history. I also did well in seminary. I never made lower than a 95% on my Hebrew. I got straight A's all the way through seminary. Later on, I got two doctorates.

I was robbed. All along the way, I was robbed. I think some of you can sympathize with my shock and dismay as I began to read as an adult and realized that I didn't know anything. I had gone all the way through school and learned all of this stuff and had a string of letters after my name and I still couldn't answer basic questions like who was the first president of the United States? I always thought it was George Washington. Then I started to do the math. Let's see, 1776: First Continental Congress; 1774: George Washington becomes president; 1789—wait a minute, there is a gap there. Oh yes, the Articles of Confederation. I almost forgot those inept, foolish articles, that big mistake that had to be rectified as soon as possible by the Constitution. But the Articles of Confederation didn't come into existence until 1783 and were not fully ratified until 1787, so we've still got a gap.

I am not really sure, despite the inordinate amount of time we American Christians seem to spend on American history. We think, somehow or another, we are going to find "light in the glory" and despite that, I realized here I am, I've studied this stuff all my academic career, focused on the period of the founders, the American Revolution, and I don't even know what the Articles of Confederation are. I have never read them, I don't know what form of government existed prior to the Articles of Confederation, and I don't know who the first president of the United States was, but I do know that when I read that incredible passage in Henry Cabot Lodge's two-volume biography of George Washington[1], where George Washington comes in as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and he bends his knee and hands his sword to the president of the United States and resigns his commission, I do know that is one of the most powerful scenes I have ever read in American history and I don't know who he resigned to. I have been robbed. This is relatively recent history and I don't know p-diddly about it. How can I expect to know the full width and breadth and depth of my incredible legacy? How can I know the stories of Alfred the Great and William Wallace? (Aye!) How can I know the great stories that surround the conversion of Charles Martel and the marvels of Boniface facing down the idolaters of the Teutonic forest and chopping down the trees of the sacred groves? How can I be sure that I know anything if I don't even know who the first president of the United States was?

I began to do some quick research, digging, studying, and it was hard. I had to go to volume after volume. I found, through interlibrary loan, all kinds of books about the Articles of Confederation and the Continental Congress, and still never found a list, until I dug up this little volume called the "Poems of Religion and Society,"[2] written by John Quincy Adams, and realized that there was this long tradition of instructing students in their glorious inheritance so that they might be able, in the words of I Corinthians, chapter 10, ". . . to take heed less they stumble and fall."

Now I discovered the stories of men like Peyton Randolph, our first president of the United States, who was born in 1723 and died in 1775. You can visit his house if you go to Williamsburg. He was an amazing man. As a youngster he was quite a prodigy. In fact, by the time he was 15 years old he was an internationally acclaimed scholar in Senecan studies. He began a

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self-guided study of the classics at the age of 13, by the age of 16 was sent off to London to study in the Inner Temple, came back just a year later, having completed his studies, and was sent back, still a minor but now the King's attorney for Virginia. As soon as he was old enough, at the age of 18½, he became the attorney general for the House of Burgesses in Virginia. Later, on his 21st birthday, (the soonest that he could possibly join that esteemed body), he became a member of the House of Burgesses. He was a remarkable professor of rhetoric and law at William and Mary College.

It was there that he first began to train his young rhetorical disciple, Patrick Henry. He taught him how to use words and construct ideas and began to urge him toward a glorious career in stirring the hearts of men and nations. In 1774, when the First Continental Congress met, Peyton Randolph, this remarkable man, was unanimously elected by the delegates as the first president of these United States gathered in Congress. He was a man of great personal gifts, and besides his prodigious intellectual gifts, he was like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry in that he was a coalition builder, an essential quality of true political leadership.

He carried on a vast correspondence, averaging somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty personal letters every day. He read about five or six books a week. In order to carry out this busy schedule, he taught himself how to write with both hands, so that he wouldn't waste any time. And while that was not an unusual feat—many of the founding fathers wrote letters with both hands—he had this unusual ability to write two different letters to two different people in two different languages on two *different* subjects simultaneously. John Quincy Adams said that that was amazing because John Quincy Adams could only write two different letters to two different people in two different languages on the *same* subject.

Peyton Randolph was succeeded by Henry Middleton of South Carolina, who was born in 1717 and died in 1784. He was followed by John Hancock who was born in 1737 and died in 1793. They served in the Continental Congress under a charter that was called the Charter of Liberty, the first constitution of the United States. It was during John Hancock's term that the great resolution was made on June 7, 1776, by Richard Henry Lee that "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States ."[3] That "covenant lawsuit," of course, was framed as the Declaration of Independence.

During the administration of John Hancock, a new constitution was constructed, a loose letter that bound together thirteen of the twenty-one American colonies. Five Canadian colonies chose not to join the Americans in their rebellion. There were other colonies–for instance, the Republic of Vermont–which chose to go their own way. They were going to fight for independence, but they had Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys to fight for freedom for the Republic of Vermont under President Thomas Crittenden. They would not later join the United States as the fourteenth state until 1791.

We often think about the battle of Ticonderoga and the taking of that great fortress on Lake Champlain as a part of the American War of Independence. But, of course, it was not under the command of the Continental Congress; it was under the command of the Congress of Vermont and President Thomas Crittenden. Ethan Allen was not fighting for the Americans; he was fighting with the Green Mountain Boys for Vermont.

But it was during that time that thirteen of the colonies—excluding the Republic of West Florida with its capital at Red Stick (Baton Rouge) flying the Bonnie Blue flag as their symbol of independence or the Watauga territories which incorporated as the State of Franklin— excluding those, the thirteen colonies banded together and wrote a new Constitution called the "Solemn League and Covenant," designed to expressly mimic the great Solemn League and Covenant of the Scottish Covenanters, a full century prior. It was during the first year of the ratification of the Solemn League and Covenant that Henry Laurens became the fourth president of the United States: Peyton Randolph, Henry Middleton, John Hancock, and then Henry Laurens.

Laurens was from South Carolina, the only president in the United States ever to be held by a foreign power as a prisoner of war. He was a remarkable man. He was raised in South Carolina for a life of commerce. If you go to Columbia, South Carolina, and visit the state capital you'll see in the grand classical tradition, the colonnade across the front of the building, and the colonnade across the back of the building, and wide steps going down to the street level on each side with the statue at the center of the colonnade on both sides. On one side stands a statue of George Washington, and on

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the other side a statue of the man that George Washington called the father of our country, Henry Laurens. After he served his term as president from 1777–1778, Laurens volunteered to serve his nation in the most dangerous assignment available. He was to sail across the Atlantic, which was then a lake owned by the British, to serve as the first ambassador to the Dutch Republic from the fledgling nation. He boarded a little packet and made his way across the Atlantic, but midway he was intercepted by a man-of-war and he was captured. He was taken to the Tower of London. Three different times he was within moments of execution. Once, his head was on the block and the ax was literally in the air. The story of his startling spiritual renewal while he sat in the Tower of London and his account of thinking through the lives of others who had sat there like he—Sir Walter Raleigh and others—is one of the most fascinating documents in American history.

Ultimately, after the battle of Yorktown as the two sides began to untangle the snarl that would ultimately lead to a glorious peace between Britain and the new country, the United States, it was Henry Laurens who was exchanged in the prisoner exchange for Lord Cornwallis. When he arrived in the New York harbor, throngs greeted him. He was hailed as the hero of the revolution. And it was there on the docks that George Washington proclaimed him "the father of our country."

John Jay succeeded Henry Laurens, a great Supreme Court justice, author of the Federalist Papers, and a remarkable rhetorician for the revolution. John Jay of New York was born in 1745 and died in 1829. He was followed by Samuel Huntington, born in 1732, died in 1796; he was from Connecticut. He was followed by Thomas McKean of Delaware, born in 1734 and died in 1817. He was followed by John Hanson, who was the mastermind of the Articles of Confederation and it was under his tutelage that, ultimately, the Articles of Confederation were ratified by the thirteen states. He was born in 1715 and died in 1793.

John Hanson was a remarkable man in many ways. He was essentially next-door-neighbors with George Washington. He lived in Mulberry Grove, Maryland–if you can throw a silver dollar across the Potomac from the shores of Mt. Vernon you can almost hit the shores of Mulberry Grove. So they were friends all their lives. John Hanson was actually the heir of Swedish royalty and was a remarkable scholar in his own right. Like so many of these other founding fathers, he had a prodigious memory, he had a mastery over the classics that could hardly be rivaled by the scholars of Oxford or Cambridge, and it was under his tutelage that the decentralized vision of the Anti-federalists came to fruition in the Articles of Confederation.

Elias Boudinot of New Jersey succeeded John Hanson as the next president of the United States, serving from 1782–1783. Boudinot was born in 1741 and died in 1821. He was followed by Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania, who was born in 1744 and died in 1800. He was remarkable in that he was George Washington's first aide-de-camp, when George Washington become commander-in-chief of the Continental Armies, but later served as president of the United States when his former boss came to him, knelt before him, and yielded up his sword of command, turning back home to Mt. Vernon as a modern day Cincinnatus to till the soil.

Thomas Mifflin received that sword and his words were, "Having defended the standard of liberty in this new world; having taught a lesson useful to those who inflict, and to those who feel oppression, you retire from the great theatre of action, with the blessings of your fellow citizens; but the glory of your virtues will not terminate with your military command, it will continue to animate remotest ages . . . We join you in commending the interests of our dearest country to the protection of almighty God, beseeching him to dispose the hearts and minds of its citizens to improve the opportunity afforded them of becoming a happy and respectable nation: And for you we address to him our earnest prayers, that a life so beloved may be fostered with all his care; that your days may be happy as they have been illustrious; and that he will finally give you that reward which this world cannot give."[4]

Richard Henry Lee, the man who initiated the resolution that ultimately brought about the Declaration of Independence was born in 1732 and died in 1794. He served as president of the United States next. Richard Henry Lee, of the great Virginia Lee family, was the heir of a glorious tradition and was the ancestor of a still more glorious one. He was assigned the task of pulling together the team that would actually write the Declaration of Independence, but his wife took ill some days after the assignment was given. And so, he went to his young protégé, the man who he had been discipling for a number of years,

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who distressed his heart terribly with his heterodox beliefs, young Tommy Jefferson. John Hancock served a second term from 1785–1786. He was followed by his fellow delegate from Massachusetts, Nathaniel Gorham, who served from 1786–1787.

Nathaniel Gorham was followed by Arthur St. Clair of Pennsylvania, the only president of the United States to be born on foreign soil—a foreign citizen. He was born in Thurso, Caithness County, Scotland, just a few years prior to the calamity of the rising of '45. He was born in 1734. The rising of '45 was of course the great rising of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the heir of the Stewart crown, come to claim the throne for his father. He arrived on a little island, just off the Hebrides coast on July 24, 1745, with no army and no money and no hope, but as a very charismatic, dynamic, visionary 24-year-old man. He marched across Scotland toward Edinburgh, raising an army of wild, blue-faced Highlanders ready to claim their freedom. He got within 50 miles of London. King George was so frightened by the specter of Scots in the capital that he put on his little silk slippers and he began to make plans to sneak out of London. It was not until his robust brother, the Duke of Cumberland, at 345 pounds the slayer of many horses, determined to turn back the tide and through treachery and betrayal, the likes of which undid William Wallace and almost undid Robert the Bruce, Bonnie Prince Charlie was turned back. At the battle of Culloden in the winter of 1746 some 6,000 Scots fell on the field of battle after which came the great Scottish ban—where the tartans were banned, the clans were banned, the names were banned, the old songs were banned, bagpipes were banned. And over the course of the next eight years, more than three-fourths of the adult population between ages 18 and 45 left Scotland.

Then, of course, they came to America, right as the Great Awakening was catching flame, at the moment when so many young converts needed trained, catechized, equipped, stalwart Scots to pastor and lead their congregations. In the good providence of God suddenly there was a huge throng of Scots to lead churches and to lead universities. This is how we got Witherspoon, who spent 18 months in a British jail for standing with Bonnie Prince Charlie before he was shipped off to sign the Declaration of Independence and lead Princeton University Though most of his family and friends abandoned their devastated homeland in the years following the Battle of Culloden—after which nearly a third of the land was depopulated through emigration to America—he stayed behind to learn the ways of the hated Hanoverian English in the Royal Navy. His plan was to learn of the enemy's military might in order to fight another day. Arthur St. Clair lost four uncles on the battlefield of Culloden. He was a strident Antifederalist and had worse things to say about the Constitution than Patrick Henry ever thought about saying. He ultimately rejected his citizenship because he believed the Constitution, which finally was passed in his latter days, would be the undoing of the great experiment in liberty .

Cyrus Griffin succeeded him as president of the United States. He served from 1788–1789 and saw through the final phases of ratification of that new Constitution and thus was the last president of the United States prior to George Washington, the first president under our current Constitution.

Question: **Why don't we know this stuff?**

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Notes:

1. Henry Cabot Lodge, *George Washington*, Volume I (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 339.

2. John Quincy Adams, *Poems of Religion and Society* (Auburn and Buffalo: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1854)

3. Lee Resolution showing congressional vote, July 2, 1776; Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1783; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789, Record Group 360; National Archives.

4. National Archives, Washington, D.C., Papers of the Continental Congress, item 19, and is printed in Worthington C. Ford et al, eds., Journals of the Continental Congress, vol. 25:838-38. A docket on the manuscript reads: "A report of a Committee Decr 23d 1783 Answer of Congress to Genl Washington."