

In Defense of a Classical Education

By Vice-President Calvin Coolidge, 1921

We come here today in defense of some of the great realities of life. We come to continue the guarantee of progress in the future by continuing a knowledge of progress in the past. We come to proclaim our allegiance to those ideals which have made the predominant civilization of the earth. We come because we believe that thought is the master of things. We come because we realize that the only road to freedom lies through a knowledge of the truth.

Mankind have always had classics. They always will. That is only another way of saying they have always set up ideals and always will. Always the question has been, always the question will be, what are those ideals to be, what are to be the classics? For many centuries, in education, the classics have meant Greek and Latin literature. It does not need much argument to demonstrate that in the western world society can have little liberal culture which is not based on these. Without them there could be no interpretation of language and literature, no adequate comprehension of history, no understanding of the foundations of philosophy and law. In fact, the natural sciences are so much the product of those trained in the classics that, with-out such training, their very

terminology cannot be fully understood.

Education is undertaken to give a larger comprehension of life. In the last fifty years its scope has been very much broadened. It is scarcely possible to consider it in the light of the individual. It is easy to see that it must be discussed in the light of society. The question for consideration is not what shall be taught to a few individuals. Nor can it be determined by the example of the accomplishments of a few individuals. There have been great men with little of what we call education. There have been small men with a great deal of learning. There has never been a great people who did not possess great learning. The whole question at issue is, what does the public welfare require for the purpose of education. What are the fundamental things that young Americans should be taught? What is necessary for society to come to a larger comprehension of life?

The present age has been marked by science and commercialism. In its primary purpose it reveals mankind undertaking to overcome their physical limitations. This is being accomplished by wonderful discoveries which have given the race dominion over new powers. The chief demand of all the world has seemed to be for new increases in these directions. There has been a great impatience with everything

which did not appear to minister to this requirement.

This has resulted in the establishment of technical schools and in general provisions for vocational education. There has been a theory that all learning ought to be at once translated into scientific and commercial activities. Of course the world today is absolutely dependent on science and on commerce. Without them great areas would be depopulated by famine and pestilence almost in a day. With them there is a general diffusion of comfort and prosperity, not only unexcelled, but continually increasing. These advantages, these very necessities, are not only not to be denied, but acknowledged and given the highest commendation. All this is not absolute but relative. It is neither self-sufficient nor self-existing. It represents the physical side of life. It is the product of centuries of an earlier culture, a culture which was none the less real because it supposed the earth was flat, a culture which was preeminent in the de-development of the moral and spiritual forces of life.

The age of science and commercialism is here. There is no sound reason for wishing it otherwise. The wise desire is not to destroy it, but to use it and direct it rather than to be used and directed by it, that it may be as it should be, not the master but the servant, that the physical forces may not prevail over the moral

forces and that the rule of life may not be expediency but righteousness.

No question can be adequately comprehended without knowing its historical background. Modern civilization dates from Greece and Rome. The world was not new in their day. They were the inheritors of a civilization which had gone before, but what they had inherited they recast, enlarged and intensified and made their own, so that their culture took on a distinctive form, embracing all that the past held best in the Roman world of the Caesars. That great Empire fell a prey, first to itself and then to the barbarians. After this seeming catastrophe scholarship and culture almost disappeared for nearly a thousand years, finally to emerge again in the revival of learning. This came almost entirely out of the influence of the Christian church. The revival of learning was the revival of the learning of Greece and Rome plus the teachings of revealed religion. Out of that revival has grown the culture of Western Europe and America. It is important to keep foundations clearly in mind. The superstructure is entirely dependent upon them for support whatever may be its excellence. However worthy a place it may fill, it cannot stand except on a sound foundation. In the revival of learning the philosophy of Greece played an important part. It was under its stimulus that the two methods of induction and deduction, experiment and

reason by which the human mind gains knowledge were firmly established. This swept away the vain imaginings of the schoolmen, gave a new freedom to thought and laid the beginnings of modern scientific re-search. It has brought about the modern era of learning which is reflected in every avenue of human life. It is in business. It is in education. It is in religion. No one questions its power. No one questions its desirability, but is not all sufficient.

It is impossible for society to break with its past. It is the product of all which has gone before. We could not cut ourselves off from all influences which existed prior to the Declaration of Independence and expect any success by undertaking to ignore all that happened before that date. The development of society is a gradual accomplishment. Culture is the product of a continuing effort. The education of the race is never accomplished. It must be gone over with each individual and it must continue from the beginning to the ending of life. Society cannot say it has attained culture and can therefore rest from its labors. All that it can say is that it has learned the method and process by which culture is secured and go on applying such method and process.

Biology teaches us that the individual goes through the various stages of evolution which has brought him to his present state of perfection. All

theories of education teach us that the mind develops in the same way, rising through the various stages that have marked the ascent of mankind from the lowest savagery to the highest Civilization. This principle is a compelling reason for the continuance of classics as the foundation of our educational system. It was by the use of this method that we reached our present state of development.

This does not mean that every person must be a classical scholar. It is not necessary for everyone who crosses the ocean to be an experienced mariner, nor for everyone who works on a building to be a learned architect, but if the foreign shore is to be reached in safety, if the building is to take on a form of utility and beauty, it will be because of direction and instruction given according to established principles and ideals. The principles and ideals on which we must depend not only for a continuance of modern culture, but, I believe, for a continuance of the development of science itself come to us from the classics. All this is the reason that the sciences and the professions reach their highest development as the supplement of a classical education.

Perhaps the chief criticism of education and its resulting effect upon the community today is superficiality. A generation ago the business-man who had made a success without the advantages of a

liberal education, sent his son to the university where he took a course in Greek and Latin. On his return home, because he could not immediately take his father's place in the conduct of the business, the conclusion was drawn that his education had been a failure. In order to judge the correctness of this conclusion it would be necessary to know whether the young man had really been educated or whether he had gone through certain prescribed courses in the first place, and in the second place whether he finally developed executive ability. It cannot be denied that a superficial knowledge of the classics is only a superficial knowledge. There can not be expected to be derived from it the ability to think correctly which is the characteristic of a disciplined mind. Without doubt a superficial study of the classics is of less value than a superficial acquaintance with some of the sciences or a superficial business course. One of the advantages of the classics as a course of training is that in modern institutions there is little chance of going through them in a superficial way. Another of their advantages is that the master of them lives in something more than the present and thinks of something more than the external problems of the hour, and after all it was the study of the classics that produced the glories of the Elizabethan age with its poets, its philosophers, its artists, its explorers, its soldiers, its states-men, and its churchmen.

Education is primarily a means of establishing ideals. Its first great duty is the formation of character, which is the result of heredity and training. This by no means excludes the desirability of an education in the utilities, but is a statement of what education must include if it meet with any success. It is not only because the classical method has been followed in our evolution of culture, but because the study of Greek and Latin is unsurpassed as a method of discipline. Their mastery requires an effort and an application which must be both intense and prolonged. They bring into action all the faculties of observation, understanding and reason. To become proficient in them is to become possessed of self control and of intelligence, which are the foundations of all character

We often hear Greek and Latin referred to as dead languages. There are some languages which may have entirely expired, but I do not think any such have yet been discovered. There are words and forms in all languages which are dead because no longer used. There are many such in our own language. But Greek and Latin are not dead. The Romance languages are a modified Latin, and our own language is filled with words derived from Greek and Latin which have every living attribute. This is so true that to a certain extent there can be no adequate comprehension of the meaning of a large part of the

language employed in everyday use, and the language of science and scholarship almost in its entirety, without a knowledge of Greek and Latin. Our literature is so filled with classical allusions that an understanding of its beauties can scarcely be secured by any other means.

The most pressing requirement of the present hour is not how we are to solve our economic problems, but: Where are we to find the sustaining influences for the realities of life? How are we to justify the existing form of government in our Republic? Where shall we resort for teachings in patriotism? On what can we rely for a continuation of that service of sacrifice which has made modern civilization possible? The progress of the present era gives no new answers to these problems. There are no examples of heroism which outrival Leonidas at Thermopylae, or Horatius at the Bridge. The literature of Greece and Rome is through and through an inspiring plea for patriotism, from the meditations of their philosophers to the orations of their statesmen and the dispatches of their soldiers.

The world has recently awakened to the value and the righteousness of democracy. This ideal is not new. It has been the vision which the people of many nations have followed through centuries. Because men knew that ideal had been partially realized in

Greece and Rome, they have had faith that it would be fully realized in Europe and America. The beginnings of modern democracy were in Athens and Sparta. That form of human relationship can neither be explained nor defended, except by reference to these examples and a restatement of the principles in which their government rested. Both of these nations speak to us eloquently of the progress they made so long as their citizens held to these ideals, and they admonish us with an eloquence even more convincing of the decay and ruin which comes to any people when it falls away from these ideals. There is no surer road to destruction than prosperity without character

There is little need to mention the debt which modern literature owes to the great examples of Greece and Rome. Even the New Testament was written in Greek. It is un-thinkable that any institution founded for the purpose of teaching literature should neglect the classics. Nowhere have the niceties of thought been better expressed than in their prose. Nowhere have music and reason been more harmoniously combined than in their poetry, and nowhere is there greater eloquence than in their orations. We look to them not merely as the writers and speakers of great thoughts, but as the doers of greater deeds. There is a glory in the achievements of the Greeks under Themistocles, there is an admiration for the heroes of Salamis, there is even a

pride in the successful retreat of the Ten Thousand which the humiliating days of Philip and Alexander can-not take away.

But when we turn to Rome we are overwhelmed by its greatness. When we recall the difficulties of the transportation of that day, which made the defense easy and attack difficult, her achievement, not only in conquering all that there was of the then civilized western world, but of holding it in subjection with a reign of law so absolute that the world has never known a peace so secure as that of the Pax Romana strikes us with wonder. They gave to the world the first great example of order, and a tolerable state of liberty under the law. As we study their history, there is revealed to us one of the greatest peoples, under the guidance of great leaders, exhausting themselves in their efforts that the civilized world might be unified and the stage set for the entrance of Christianity. In their conquests, we see one of the most stupendous services, and in their disintegration one of the most gigantic tragedies which ever befell a great people.

Everyone knows that the culture of Greece and Rome are gone. They could not be restored, they could not be successfully imitated. What those who advocate their continued study desire to bring about is the endurance of that modern culture which has been the result of a familiarity with the classics of these two

great peoples. We do not wish to be Greek, we do not wish to be Roman. We have a great desire to be supremely American. That purpose we know we can accomplish by continuing the process which has made us Americans. We must search out and think the thoughts of those who established our institutions. The education which made them must not be divorced from the education which is to make us. In our efforts to minister to man's material welfare we must not forget to minister to his spiritual welfare. It is not enough to teach men science, the great thing is to teach them how to use science.

We believe in our Republic. We believe in the principles of democracy. We believe in liberty. We believe in liberty under the established provisions of law. We believe in the promotion of literature and the arts. We believe in the righteous authority of organized government. We believe in patriotism. These beliefs must be supported and strengthened. They are not to be inquired of for gain and profit, though without them all gain and all profit would pass away. They will not be found in the teachings devoted exclusively to commercialism though without them commerce would not exist. These are the higher things of life. Their teaching has come to us from the classics. If they are to be maintained they will find their support in the institutions of the liberal arts. When we are drawing away from them, we are

drawing away from the path of security and progress. It is not yet possible that instruction in the classics could be the portion of every American. That opportunity ought to be not diminished but increased. But while every American has not had and may not have that privilege, America has had it. Our leadership has been directed in accordance with these ideals. Our faith is in them still

We have seen many periods which tried the soul of our Republic. We shall see many more. There will be times when efforts will be great and profits will vanish. There have been and will be times when the people will be called upon to make great sacrifices for their country. Unless Americans shall continue to live in something more than the present, to be moved by something more than material gains, they will not be able to respond to these requirements and they will go down as other peoples have gone down before some nation possessed of a greater moral force. The will to endure is not the creation of a moment, it is the result of long training. That will has been our possession up to the present hour. By its exercise we have prospered and brought forth many wonderful works. The object of our education is to continue us in this great power. That power depends on our ideals. The great and unfailing source of that power and these ideals has been the influence of the classics of Greece and Rome. Those who believe in America, in

her language, her arts, her literature and in her science, will seek to perpetuate them by perpetuating the education which has produced them.

Calvin Coolidge had studied classics at Black River Academy, St. Johnsbury Academy, and Amherst College. Coolidge was proficient in Classical Latin, Classical Greek, German, French, and Italian. Calvin Coolidge would become the 30th president of the United States (1923 – 1929).