

# Cato, American Exceptionalism, and Education

by Bill O'Connell on April 12, 2011

Share and Recommend:

[Share](#)



*(This is the second of a series of articles focusing on topics presented at the Cato Policy Perspectives 2011 conference held at New York's Waldorf Astoria hotel on Friday, April 8, 2011)*

Kicking off the conference, Ed Crane, president of the Cato Institute, talked about American exceptionalism and how President Obama doesn't believe in that. To illustrate, he gave the example where while in Europe the president was asked if he believed in American exceptionalism, and he hedged by saying he supposed so, just as the Germans believe in German exceptionalism, the British believe in British exceptionalism, and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. President Obama doesn't think that America is exceptional and to the extent that he might, he is doing everything in his power to root it out.

The other key point that Mr. Crane made concerned people talking about national goals and aspirations. Nations shouldn't have goals. People should have goals and nations

should protect their right to pursue them. Who wants Washington to set some goals and then have individuals reorder their lives to fit into the grand plan? To me that is the essence of the battle between libertarianism and statism. This is also a nice segue into the Cato presentation on education provided by Charles Murray.

## **Education**

One of the key contributors to American exceptionalism is a well educated work force, and we may be losing that edge. However, Mr. Murray found reasons for optimism. Another point of view I wish to consider was in an article in the [Wall Street Journal](#) today by Vint Cerf, one of the real forces behind the Internet.

At a time when we see the tragedy of K-12 education played out in the documentary *Waiting for Superman* and the pitched battle over public sector unions and teacher tenure in Wisconsin, Mr. Murray's talk titled, "The Coming Good News About Market Forces and Education," might seem a bit out of place. He didn't delve too deeply into K-12 education, other than to say there are a lot more options today than there were in the past, among them: home schooling, charter schools, and vouchers. Mr. Murray's focus was on post secondary education.

First the bad news:

- The BA degree is no longer a classic liberal education. There are precious few institutions (Murray could name four) that actually provide one.
- He called it a saccharin education with almost anything qualifying as a course. Some of my favorites are: The Stupidity Course at Occidental College (one of Obama's Alma maters); The science of Harry Potter at Frostburg State University; The Simpsons and Philosophy at UC Berkeley; and Tree Climbing at Cornell University
- It used to be you spent four years getting a BA to mature and grow. In the old days you had a more distant relationship with your professor, more like a supervisor at work. He didn't care how many other courses you had, he gave you an assignment and he expected you to finish it on time, if you didn't you failed. Which brought to mind a professor I had at Manhattan College who taught math. His famous saying was, "Engineer build bridge, bridge fall down, no partial credit." Today that's not the case. If you miss an exam, you take the makeup test. If you don't like your grade, you whine to the professor.
- There is now a residence staff at most colleges to do the things parents used to do, so that now four years living at school is just a way of prolonging adolescence.
- He called it a con game
  - You need a degree to get an interview
  - A degree will get you a wage premium over those who don't have one
  - There is no relationship between a degree and what you actually learned
  - An employer sees a degree and knows two things: one, you have some level of intelligence; two, you have some level of perseverance.

- A Yale graduate is important not because of what they learned at Yale, but the fact that they got into Yale when they were eighteen speaks to some amount of raw material to work with.

Now the good news.

- Universities were built to support a large library, bring together great minds for scholarship, and enable a large number of students to listen to lectures. Things have changed
- We no longer need a physical library — with the Internet and resources such as Google books you can access a tremendous amount of research material from home.
- Scholarship is now done through collaboration across the world, not across a campus.
- Distance learning works. Why listen to some adjunct give a lecture when you can sit in one room while a Nobel laureate a thousand miles away conducts the lecture?

With the expense of college seeming to be without end the status quo cannot continue. Employers know they are not being served. But there is an enthusiastic group of suppliers ready to provide solutions.

The real course work to learn a skill in college could probably be completed in one and a half to two year, Murray estimates. If a set of certifications could be developed, and Murray cites the CPA exam as an example, that would demonstrate to employers that the applicant before him has actually acquired a set of skills, what more would they need? If similar certifications for marketing, teaching, social work, etc. could be developed a new form of post secondary education might be born. Then the goal of a good education could be about learning how to find what you love and how to pursue it.

## **Innovation**

Vint Cerf has a slightly different take;

Despite our well-developed college and post-college system, America simply is not producing enough of our own innovators, and the cause is twofold—a deteriorating K-12 education system and a national culture that does not emphasize the importance of education and the value of engineering and science.

Perhaps there is a solution in the melding of the two. Our K-12 system produces 1 million dropouts a year and 70% of eighth graders cannot read proficiently. It is broken. We need to put students ahead of job security for teachers and allow talented teachers to receive the economic rewards worthy of their talent. Unions are for just the opposite, protect the inadequate teacher and don't reward the good teacher as they make the "rest of us" look bad.

But we do need more engineers and scientists. How do we encourage that? First we need to get education out of the hands of Washington. Washington will make sure the solution is bland and ineffective. One of the biggest backers of the creation of the Department of Education was the National Education Association the big education union, so that should tell you something. Let the fifty states come up with competing ideas on how to accomplish this.

Perhaps state schools could offer loans to engineering and science students that would cover whatever financial aid didn't, in other words a free education. The trade off would be that they had to work in that field in that state. If they did 1/10 of the loan would be forgiven in the first year, 1/9 of the remaining principle and interest would be forgiven in the second year, 1/8 in the third year, such that after ten years, the loan would be fully forgiven. Employers would be attracted to locate near the schools to pick up the talent that graduated. The additional revenue generated from high tech businesses in the state, the income tax revenue from highly paid engineers and scientists coupled with the lower cost of dropouts who end up in prison should make this a cost effective program. All of the capabilities that Charles Murray talked about could be used to form a K-12 to post secondary bond to interest younger students to go into the engineering and science disciplines.

Charles Murray thought this would happen over the next ten to fifteen years. It should a priority to set up sooner. If we fail to act, the replacement for the iPhone won't just be made in China, it will come from a Chinese company.