



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #27: A Post-literate Culture

By William S. Lind

January 23, 2006

For years, conservatives have warned that America's children are not learning to read, and indeed are not reading: the classics of Western literature are now largely unknown to them. The next conservatism will have to confront the results of this dual functional and cultural illiteracy. Specifically, it will have to face the fact that American culture is increasingly post-literate.

Nor is the problem simply a vacuum. The place of reading has been taken by the viewing of images, images presented on electronic screens. The image has displaced the word. An unread Plato is hoist on his own petard: for more and more Americans, reality is defined by flickering shadows on the cave wall.

This development is more profound and far-reaching than most people comprehend. One of the defining characteristics of Western culture has been its painful struggle, waged now for a good 3000 years, to replace the image with the word. That struggle has defined both Judaism and Christianity – Jerusalem – and arguably Athens as well, in the development of philosophy from the ancient cults and their myths.

What took 3000 years to achieve has been lost in 30 years. The consequences for our culture range wide, probably beyond anything we can perceive at present. Some of those consequences are, in my view:

- A people cut off from its past. The West's traditions are mostly written, contained in its great literature, beginning with the Old and New Testaments and the works of classical Greeks and Romans. When those written works go unread, the content of Western culture runs out into history's sands. If Western culture loses its content, then the West loses its culture, and becomes . . . what? Probably extinct, something the West's birthrates point to in any case.

- A post-literate culture will have little ability to think logically. Reason and logic demand words; images, in contrast, feed emotions. It should not surprise us that Americans no longer think but rather feel. Again we

find ourselves up against one of the bedrocks of Western culture; logic and reason have been particularly Western characteristics. As that bedrock crumbles, what will happen to the structure erected upon it, a structure we call the Modern Age? Post-literate and post-modern may be cause and effect.

- A people cut off from its past, largely unable to reason and directed primarily by images, will be easy to manipulate. In fact, the people will be as easy to manipulate and control as the images themselves. This is a phenomenon we already see all around us, from the power of commercial advertising to the use of television by the cultural Marxists to psychologically condition us. Want to “normalize” homosexuality? Just run television show after television show where the only normal-seeming white male is a homosexual.
- A people that lives by the image rather than by the word will easily become entrapped in virtual realities, something again which we already see, especially among the very post-literate young. Unfortunately, all virtual realities come from Hell; if there can be more than one reality, there can be more than one God. On a purely practical level, all virtual realities eventually collapse; the more powerful they are, the greater the crash will be. America’s crash could be of epic proportions.

As Paul Weyrich has written in other columns, the next conservatism will have to grapple with some weighty issues, issues rather more difficult than marginal tax rates. The likely fate of a post-literate West is one.

But there is something the next conservatism can do now. It can call on all Americans to follow the old rule that when you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. Turn off the television (or better, like Russell Kirk, throw it off the roof of the house). Unplug the computers, especially the kids’ computers. Get out the old books, the books that convey the content of our culture, and start reading them again. It was not all that long ago that we stopped doing so. So far, at least, the books are still available (who knows for how much longer?). The home schoolers, thankfully, are doing just that.

At the heart of our culture lies the Word, the Logos. “In the beginning was the Word . . .” The next conservatism’s duty is to conserve precisely that. It is time we recognized the post-literate, image-worshipping culture of the electronic age for the mortal danger that it is.

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