

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Truth under assault

Early in 1834, Pennsylvania became the nation's first state to create a public school system. Local municipalities were directed to establish school boards with the power to levy taxes to build and operate free public schools for children and youth living within their jurisdiction.

When the legislators returned to their home districts, however, and their constituents realized what they had done, there was outrage. "You're going to tax us to educate everybody's kids, including all the riff-raff?"

Soon the legislators scurried back to Harrisburg to repeal the new law. The Senate acted first. Then the repealer went to the House when Rep. Thaddeus Stevens, a Gettysburg attorney, gave one of the most famous speeches in educational history.

"It would seem to be humiliating to be under the necessity, in the 19th century, of entering into a formal argument to prove the utility, to free governments, the absolute necessity of education.

"If an elective republic is to endure for any great length of time, every elector must have sufficient information, not only to accumulate wealth and take care of his pecuniary concerns, but to direct wisely the legislatures, the ambassadors, and the executive of the nation.

"If then, the permanency of our government depends upon such knowledge, it is the duty of government to see that the means of information be diffused to every citizen."

The attempt to repeal died. Every state eventually established free public school systems for all. For nearly two centuries, they have been a bedrock of democracy, helping Americans to understand and respect their com-

mon heritage and our democratic institutions.

And since the Civil War, despite many bitter disputes, the Republican and Democratic parties followed basic norms of behavior and played by the rules.

That came to an end on Jan. 20, 2017, when Donald Trump was inaugurated president. During the last four years, we have endured as chief of state a pathological liar and narcissist who sows hate and social division.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Incredibly, polls show that millions of voters not only tolerate his behavior, but believe Trump's preposterous claims that the presidential election was fraudulent.

There are many factors to explain this phenomenon, but a signal one has to be the internet and the rise of social media.

Thirty years ago, there were limited options for communicating with your fellow citizens. You bought an ad in a newspaper or on radio or television, or you did a mass mailing.

With the internet, anyone with a computer could inexpensively set up a website that all could see — if you could find it.

Two Stanford students established Google, which makes it possible for people to find information on websites. Google's algorithms decide what websites you will see.

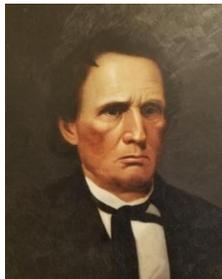
Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook, an addictive program that allows people to talk about themselves with their friends and others and to set up group websites which sometimes can — and do — become echo chambers of misinformation.

The more time people spend clicking, the more money Google, Facebook and other platforms make.

But these platforms don't concern themselves with truth, or decency, or societal good. It's all about clicks. And libel laws don't apply to them.

Thus we see a rise in wild conspiracy theories and hate, because social media platforms make a lot of money from polarizing society.

The role of public education to help young people discern fact from fiction has never been more important.



THADDEUS STEVENS



MARK ZUCKERBERG