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What Is Education?

A Response to the Council on Foreign Relations Report,
“U.S. Education Reform and National Security”

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INTRODUCTION

Ideals of Culture: Responses to the Council on Foreign Relations Report, “U.S. Education Reform and National Security”

Rosanna Warren

In March 2012, the CFR (Council on Foreign Relations) in New York City published a report entitled “U.S. Education Reform and National Security,” the work of a task force chaired by Joel I. Klein and Condoleezza Rice. This Report has proven controversial, provoking a sharp exchange between Diane Ravitch and Julia Levy, the Project Director for the Report, in *The New York Review of Books* (June 7 and July 12, 2012). It also inspired a critical Op-Ed piece by Michael Roth, President of Wesleyan University, in *The New York Times* (September 5, 2012). The full Report may be obtained, in print version or for digital downloading, from the website <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/us-education-reform-national-security/p27618>.

The authors of the Report “believe America’s educational failures pose five distinct threats to national security: threats to economic growth and competitiveness, U.S. physical safety, intellectual property, U.S. global awareness, and U.S. unity and cohesion” (7). Using nationally consistent tests administered by NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, through the Department of Education), and drawing on international comparative test scores, the Report documents serious failings in American schools (or at least, in some of them). The authors then make some proposals: 1) severe changes to the curriculum to emphasize “subjects vital to protecting national security” (5)—mathematics, science, technology, “strategic” languages, and “informational” reading texts (as opposed to imaginative literature); 2) expanded support for alternative schools, whether charters or through voucher programs; and 3) a “national security audit” to hold schools and policymakers accountable for results—raising the specter of a vast testing of tests in an educational system already suffering from indiscriminately imposed and often badly conceived standardized tests.

The ALSCW (Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers), as an organization, takes no position on this Report or on any other. But since we are a group of teachers, scholars, and writers dedicated to the arts of letters, our members take a lively interest in

the debate about how (or whether) to reform education in the United States. We invited twelve authors to reflect upon the CFR's diagnosis of the ills of education in our country; its claim that poor education threatens our national security; and its proposals for reform.

The contributors to this issue of *Forum* represent divergent views, and are university professors (including Elizabeth Samet, a professor of English from West Point), scholars, and high school teachers from both public and private schools. Certain common themes do emerge. Several of our authors note the sternly utilitarian ethos informing the CFR report, with its demand that all K-12 education be subordinated to the aims of "producing" better future soldiers, commanders, and security analysts, as if expecting our country to maintain a state of perpetual militarized alarm if not outright warfare. Our authors variously question the terms in which the Report asserts the value of "creativity" while at the same time limiting the study of imaginative literature: the Report praises the Common Core State Standards (adopted by all but five states and set to be "rolled out" in time for the 2014-2015 school year). Those standards require "that 50% of time between kindergarten and the fifth grade be spent reading informational texts" (37). This commendation follows the extraordinary and unsupported statement that "in recent history, U.S. elementary students have spent most of their time reading narrative fiction." (If only they had!) Several of the essays in this issue of *Forum* argue for the importance of the arts of interpretation, another subject neglected by the data-driven CFR report. Collectively, the essays gathered here enlarge the discussion of contemporary educational reform by placing it in the context of earlier national efforts: the Lincoln and Morrill Act founding the land grant colleges in 1863; the National Defense Education Act of 1958; *A Nation at Risk* by David Gardner *et al* in 1983; and most recently, President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act and President Obama's Race to the Top.

We are grateful to the CFR for starting up once again the ever-urgent conversation about education and its relation to the kind of country we aspire to be, the citizens we hope to shape. If we do not attend to our schools, our children will be shaped by other forces, including advertising and a culture of frenetic material acquisition. Under such a regime, we would become—perhaps we have already become—not citizens, but a flock of consumers.

The ancient Greeks had a name for education conceived as the power to shape the ideals of culture: *paideia*. As Werner Jaeger described it in his classic work on the subject, *Paideia*, the English translation of which appeared in 1939 while the world tilted into barbaric violence, the ancient Greeks distinguished between merely technical training ("skills," we might say) and true education which was meant to introduce students to their full cultural inheritance and sense of being, an understanding of the myths, arts, philosophy, and mathematics that gave a unified meaning to Hellenic civilization across its many city states. *Paideia* was based on a vision of the human being as a virtuous, cultivated, ethical person, someone capable of abstract reflection and also of practical wisdom, realizing the

full possibilities of human nature. That nature, for the Greeks, was political: the human being understood as a member of a community. The Romans adopted this Greek ideal and used it as a model for their education in what we have come to call humanism.

The CFR report challenges us to imagine our country as an ideal, and to imagine an educational system that might help us toward that ideal. The Founding Fathers of the United States had the Roman Republic rather than Athenian democracy as their model. Several of our authors point to a sinister political assumption floating in the CFR report but nowhere in it argued or defended, that the United States is from now on to be committed to the enterprise of global domination. That assumption is suggested in statements such as the following: "The dominant power of the twenty-first century will depend on human capital" (xiii); "...whether the United States can defend itself, project its power, and thrive in a global economic environment" (14); "Urgent shifts in educational policy are necessary to help the country hold onto its status as an educational, economic, military, and diplomatic global leader" (6). It matters a great deal to our national identity whether we conceive of ourselves as one of several "global leaders," or as "*the* dominant power," and the vocabulary in the Report is slippery enough to arouse suspicions of the world view guiding its line of thought. James Miller reminds us of Franklin's and Jefferson's commitment to education in order to realize America's promise to be "a self-governing republic of enlightened citizens"—not an empire. David Bromwich argues that "a democratic society requires an educated citizenry if it is to persist not in projects of a dominant empire but in the conduct of an exemplary republic." And James Engell asks us to think seriously about the role of education in shaping the character of our nation as well as its security policy.

Allied to the question of what kind of nation we dream ourselves to be is the question of what we consider *persons* to be. One of the more repellent features of the CFR report is its persistent referring to human beings—students and teachers—as "human capital," a matter Lee Oser takes up in his essay. This terminology may be fine for economic planners or those writing about corporate success, but as an educational vision it is chilling, for it reduces human beings to instruments in an imperial project in statements such as the following: "Human capital will determine power in the current century, and the failure to produce that capital will undermine America's security" (4). And, in a paragraph lamenting that teachers still teach without the full armament of new software: "But technology is largely still being used to advance old-style teaching and learning with old-fashioned uses of human capital" (that is, *teachers*) (33). A plan for education—the hallowed task of transmitting knowledge, modes of thinking, and values to the young—cannot succeed if it degrades the individual personhood of the humans involved. Young minds awaken in an intense encounter and mutual recognition between teachers and students. These awakened young individuals grow into the enlightened citizens of the self-governing republic imagined by Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, and their companions. The CFR authors seem, by con-

trast, to regard people as units of merely instrumental value in larger systems of corporate production and military defense.

Most of the contributors to this issue of *Forum* agree that American public schools are failing some students, though the degree of that failure is a matter of wide disagreement. Some scholars of education point out that the picture is not as bleak as the CFR claims; that high school graduation rates and test scores in reading and math are rising; and that the schools that do the worst job are in poor communities, suggesting that the problem lies not in American public education in general but in social and racial inequality.¹ But the rates of illiteracy and innumeracy among American citizens, variously measured, are indeed shocking, and it is true, as the Report claims, that “in international tests of literacy, math, and science, American students rank far below the world’s leaders in Finland, South Korea, and Shanghai” (ix). Having taught in medium security prisons in this country, I can testify that many prisoners struggle to read and write. Anyone with an elementary sense of justice may well be stirred to indignation by the inequalities of education within the United States, even leaving aside anxiety about international competition.

The CFR has performed a signal service by demanding that we citizens pay attention to the state of our schools. The terms of the Report provoke fundamental reflection on the relation of education to our political and social ideals, and to our idea of the human. The Council is not alone in doing so. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has, currently, a commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, one of whose tasks is to articulate “the importance of the liberal arts to America’s national security, to maintaining an effective foreign policy, and to continued U.S. leadership in the global economy.”² That commission will issue its initial recommendations early in 2013, and readers can find out about its work at the website <http://www.humanitiescommission.org>.

Members of the ALSCW, as an organization devoted to literature, necessarily bring that perspective to the proposals made by the CFR report. But it is not only humanists who are concerned about the damage to learning being inflicted by wrong-headed and coercive reforms. One of the most eloquent objections to hardcore, “data-driven” theories of education I have seen recently was written by a mathematician, John Ewing, President of Math for America, in the June/July issue of *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*. In a critical review of Howard Wainer’s book *Uneducated Guesses: Using Evidence to Uncover Misguided Education Policies* (Princeton 2011), Mr. Ewing declares:

Education is about critical thinking, about developing taste, empathy, and values. Education is about learning to carry out complex analyses of complex problems over extended periods of time. Education is about learning to learn. . . . Education is much, much more, and little of this is measured by test scores.³

John Ewing could have been describing Greek *paideia*. What should American *paideia* be, and how may we achieve it?



NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Diane Ravitch, “Education and National Security: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, July 12, 2012, p. 68.
- 2 *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 2012, p. 2.
- 3 John Ewing, *Uneducated Guesses: Using Evidence to Uncover Misguided Education Policies*, in *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*, vol. 59, n. 6, p. 817. I am grateful to Joel E. Cohen for bringing this review to my attention.

The Reformers and the Humanities

John C. Briggs

We have before us yet another call for federal educational reform, this one from the Council on Foreign Relations. It recommends, with an urgency heightened by concerns for national defense, changes in curriculum and training that would prepare more students for national service, particularly in fields that demand a wide range of knowledge and a variety of high-level skills. In the center of the text, there is a sentence that captures many of the elements of a broader, enduring debate about the course of education in the American republic:

In surveys and interviews, most employers say the skills that are in high demand today are the same skills that students were supposed to be learning in school fifty or one hundred years ago: the ability to write and speak clearly and persuasively, the ability to solve problems and think critically, and the ability to work both independently and on teams. The difference today is that more skilled workers are needed than in the past. (42)

Here the controversies concerning American K-12 education and higher education are focused and framed in terms of the *kind* of education that is needed, the quality of that education, and the extent to which it can be transmitted or cultivated among as many students as possible. Although the diction of the debate frames these issues narrowly in terms of skills, many of which are certainly indispensable, it registers a sense that something is lacking—a combination of liberal, specialized, and vocational education that leads to competence drawing from insight and understanding.

If education for the sake of skills is persistent and open-minded, it will sooner or later encounter the need for students to immerse themselves in the humanities: learning that requires engagement in and reflection upon the connection of those skills to the experience of being human. In other words, for the sake of testing its seriousness and true relevance, it will need to become engaged in understanding the context, significance, and possible applications of its targeted skills. Students and instructors will therefore encounter (or experience

their lack of) the study of history, literature, and philosophy as well as science. What they make of that lack determines whether their learning will go on. If they acknowledge that they feel that absence and act upon it, their education in technical skills is more likely to approach an education in older kinds of skill, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* amply documents as a capability connected to understanding, insight, and wisdom. With such old knowledge, “[i]f thou eate of the tree of the skill of good and euill,” you must admit the bracing possibility of failure, not inevitable success.¹ In Ecclesiastes, the King James Bible renders that meaning of “skill” with a poetical pessimism:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.²

The idea that skills must be the leading outcome of education, coupled with the idea that a larger *proportion* of the school-age population must become proficient for the sake of national defense, needs to take account of these layers of meaning in the word, and their complicating implications for the prospect of success. Education in skills is doomed to facile applications and disappointment if it does not acknowledge the scale of the task.

The famous Morrill Act, signed during the Civil War by President Lincoln to create the land-grant institutions of higher education, took a different path. In the process of establishing a means of fostering education in mining and agriculture, it provided for “other scientific and classical studies”—despite the dire circumstances of its birth. In a time of imminent danger, it maintained and fostered the liberal arts. Moreover, it did not isolate the study of agriculture, military science, and the mechanic arts. It assumed that the education it was encouraging would be both “liberal and practical.”

[This Act will create in each state] the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, *without excluding other scientific and classical studies*, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the *liberal* and *practical* education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.³

It was Lincoln who argued eloquently for combining agricultural and liberal education so that American farmers would temper their land hunger with their own self-governed prosperity:

no other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable and agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought, as agriculture. I know of nothing so pleasant to the mind, as the discovery of anything which is at once new and valuable—nothing which so lightens and sweetens toil, as the hopeful pursuit of such discovery. And how vast, and how varied a field is agriculture, for such discovery. The mind, already trained to thought, in the country school, or higher school, cannot fail to find there an exhaustless source of profitable enjoyment. Every blade of grass is a study.

The key to that combination, for Lincoln, was “thorough work,” by which agricultural labor, “or any labor,” could mesh with “cultivated thought.”⁴ The ability to comprehend and complete the task, to follow through, derives from liberal and practical education working together. Each strengthens the other.

The CFR report’s neglect of the humanities and their combination with practical training contrasts more immediately with the treatment of these issues in *A Nation at Risk*, the seminal 1983 report that inspired educational reform for the next generation.

That report famously advocated resistance to “a rising tide of mediocrity” in American K-12 and higher education, and associated the decline of excellence with the neglect of the humanities. Weak or superficially reformist curricula, it warned, endanger the humanities when schooling focuses narrowly on the mechanics of literacy and vocational education. There are grounds, it said, for worrying that these trends will become increasingly damaging, even if they are introduced in a spirit of reform. The concern is that

schools may emphasize such rudiments as reading and computation at the expense of other essential skills such as comprehension, analysis, solving problems, and drawing conclusions. Still others are concerned that an over-emphasis on technical and occupational skills will leave little time for studying the arts and humanities that so enrich daily life, help maintain civility, and develop a sense of community. Knowledge of the humanities, they maintain, must be harnessed to science and technology if the latter are to remain creative and humane, just as the humanities need to be informed by science and technology if they are to remain relevant to the human condition.⁵

The 1983 report concludes that there must be a rededication to studying—among other things—“our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding.”⁶

The spirit and agenda of the Council on Foreign Relations proposal are closer to that of the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which opened the way, after Russia’s launch of the first satellite, to massive federal aid for higher education to support the

national defense. Like the CFR report (and to some degree the Morrill Act and *A Nation at Risk*), that legislation promoted a second goal: to open opportunities in higher education to greater numbers of students. But unlike the Morrill Act and *A Nation at Risk*, the CFR report dedicates itself to this dual purpose with little, if any, reference to the humanities or their role in higher educational achievement.

The NDEA did not refer to the humanities; and yet its ultimate influence on education in the humanities turned out to be immense. It led to a rapid expansion of opportunities for American high school graduates by calling for a sudden enlargement of the college-going population. The speed and breadth of that change led to the expansion of faculties in many fields, including the humanities. Those faculty members proceeded to expand the role of the humanities, and to influence—by means of the requirements for breadth and core courses they built into the curriculum—the way that technical and vocational education were conducted.

This change was welcomed by many, including some of the bill's sponsors (and the grateful author of this essay, whose graduate education was financed in part with NDEA loans), though nowhere was it explicit in the legislation. It was not in the NDEA's articulation of its own purposes. It arose from an unspoken consensus about the importance of liberal arts education and the importance of its combination with scientific training.

That consensus no longer exists. The Council on Foreign Relations' call for retooling K-12 and higher education not only forgoes meaningful reference to the humanities. It advocates the teaching of "national security skills" in a vacuum, without broad political and philosophical support for the study of the humanities. It mentions the study of history only once, on page 47, and there for the sake of preparing for studies in international relations. It endorses a 50% reduction in the reading of literature in the schools in favor of "informational" texts. It makes no gesture toward recognizing the difference between information and literary non-fiction, or the power of works of history and ideas, or of biography and autobiography, or of oratory and works of reflection. And yet these are the qualities that make reading worth reading. How voluminous and how useful would students' reading be, as it must be, if half their reading lists were stripped of their compelling titles?

Deprived of the humanities—of a setting in which the limitations and potentialities of human experience can be discovered and explored—such proposals tend to contribute inadvertently to the distortion of educational purposes. Defense and equity become mutually undermining goals. The uncritical use of educational technologies feeds dogmatic expectations of universal student access, while encouraging premature specialization or superficially technocratic training. The better students pursue narrow specialties that certify their intelligence; their fellows are invited to study and graduate without undergoing the rigors of education. Both groups are less likely to develop their minds. National defense and the pursuit of equity are going to be compromised until good sense—including, one

hopes, the good sense and sensibility of the humanities—can prevail.

Good can come of all this. Read in the context of previous reports and recommendations for the reform of American education, the Report of the Council on Foreign Relations witnesses a waning of the humanities in the minds of reformers. The humanities, since they are the humanities, remain in themselves robust: they can be recovered from this apparent oblivion.



NOTES

- 1 Cited in the *OED* (definition 7): Sir P. Sidney & A. Golding tr. P. de Mornay *Trewnesse Christian Relig.* xxvii, 495, 1587.
- 2 Ecclesiastes 9:11, κJV.
- 3 The Morrill Act, 1863. <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=338&page=transcript>, Section 4. (Italics added.)
- 4 Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 236.
- 5 David Gardner, et. al., *A Nation at Risk, Communications of the ACM*, 26 (July 1, 1983), 470.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 475.

Mouse-Boys, Literate Spiders, and the Security of Imagination

Elizabeth D. Samet

In a 1969 *Paris Review* interview E. B. White responded to a question about the need for “shifting gears” when writing books for children with a warning that signaled his deep respect for the capacities of this particular audience: “Anybody who shifts gears when he writes for children is likely to wind up stripping his gears.” White continued:

Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. I handed them, against the advice of experts, a mouse-boy, and they accepted it without a quiver. In *Charlotte’s Web*, I gave them a literate spider, and they took that. . . .
. . . Children are game for anything. . . . They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention.¹

In *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte’s Web* White wrote the sort of book the authors of the Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force Report on “U.S. Education Reform and National Security” mistrust.

The Report celebrates the advent of Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, as an “extraordinary achievement” (36). In the area of literacy that achievement has been, the Report claims, “a greater emphasis on students’ ability to read, understand, and summarize informational texts than previous state standards. In recent history, U.S. elementary students have spent most of their time reading narrative fiction” (37). Any reasonable person would agree that reading, understanding, and summarizing texts are necessary skills; nevertheless, they are reactive rather than active, they expose yet do not make meaning. This is especially true when they are exercised on an informational text, which strives (valiantly but often tediously) to achieve clarity by means

of linear organization, convenient generalization, and uniform presentation.

Narrative fiction, by contrast, summons a very different kind of reader: one able to reckon with disorder and ellipsis; one willing—when confronted with mouse-boys, literate spiders, and other non-state actors—to enter for a time a world governed by radically different rules from those to which she is accustomed; one capable, as she grows, of learning how to reckon with narratives as fearlessly unreliable and opaque as E. B. White's are honest and clear. Informational texts often invite a reader to answer a series of questions at the end of each chapter; fiction demands that a reader figure out which questions to ask. Readers of fiction are no strangers to the vertigo that accompanies the act of wandering through the labyrinth of another—occasionally adversarial—mind. Instead of simply communicating to readers what has happened, imaginative literature, to paraphrase Aristotle, suggests what might happen next.

At the heart of the CFR report there lies a paradox, for its anatomy of national failure underscores a deficiency that the most assiduous readers of narrative fiction are best qualified to repair: "The 9/11 Commission highlighted four U.S. shortcomings that opened the door to the terrorist attacks. One of these was a failure of imagination on the part of U.S. security agencies. In 2001, the failure to spot and connect the dots was catastrophic for the United States. The Task Force believes that all young people . . . must develop their imaginations from an early age" (47). How young people are to go about this project, the task force fails to make clear—beyond the endorsement of some vague thing called "lessons in creativity," which seem to be primarily the preserve of "extracurricular programs" (47).

In their expression of concern about Americans' imaginative shortcomings, the Report's authors echo President Obama's remarks on January 5, 2010, after the attempted Christmas Day airline bombing: "The bottom line is this," the president insisted: "The U.S. government had sufficient information to have uncovered this plot and potentially disrupt the Christmas Day attack. But our intelligence community failed to connect those dots."³

Connecting dots is an act of interpretation and synthesis rather than one of scientific calibration. While informational texts may fill up the mind with facts, they do little to stimulate creativity or to involve the imagination. Like the detective who must distinguish between the red herrings and clues left by a clever criminal, or like the reader of novels whose narrators withhold as much information as they supply, the task force's ideal citizen must be able to weave a jumble of evidence into a plausible narrative.

As a teacher of students who will go on to serve as commissioned officers in the U.S. Army, I work in an institution directly concerned with the education of such citizens. I am charged with the preparation of young people for the national defense in what everyone seems to agree are uncertain, unpredictable times. Wartime urgency tempts educators to

surrender to the tyranny of relevance: teach today only the information your students will need to survive tomorrow. I understand this impulse, the overwhelming pressures to teach to the moment, but the moment is soon past. What was relevant yesterday in that ticker-scrolling, headline-screaming, blogospheric way is irrelevant today. And if tomorrow really is as uncertain as everyone insists it will be, my students need to envision not merely the immediate but also the distant future. Because the study of literature awakens that imaginative capacity, I've come to think of it as a teacher of strategy as well as tactics.

Despite its invocation of democratic values and founding ideals, the CFR report manifests a rather incongruous tendency to regard Americans as fundamentally instrumental. National crises have not always provoked shortsightedness, and it is the army—that institution one might expect to have so little room for inquisitive mouse-boys and literate spiders—that offers an illuminating and inspiring historical counterexample.

The army of the 1940s, a massive organization mobilized to confront an immediate threat, nevertheless kept one strategic eye open always to the future. Winning a war, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall recognized as well as anyone, required imagining a peace. Maj. Gen. Frederick Osborn, the head of the army's Information and Education Division during World War II, evinced a similar understanding when he described his responsibilities as giving soldiers an understanding of not only "the causes of the war," but also "what it will mean if we can bring them back . . . resolved that as citizens they will see to it that those things are done that will make for a permanent peace."⁴

Osborn's division included the Special Service Units, trained "to provide athletic, recreational, informational and exchange services to troops on duty overseas." Among the equipment these units brought even to the remotest outposts was a standard-issue theatrical kit containing "everything from false hair to stage money." With it, the theatrical technicians of the Special Service—we might think of them as *commandoes of the imagination*—could stage a show, as *The Fort Meade Post* put it, "at the drop of one of the funny hats in the same kit."⁵

To see a 1945 or 1946 announcement for a Special Service "theatre workshop production" of *Volpone* or Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* performed in Germany, its cast composed of U.S. military personnel and Civilian Actress Technicians, is to realize how singularly robust an understanding Americans once had of the degree to which the enduring security of the nation depends—just as much as its founding did—on citizens possessed of liberated cultural and political imaginations.

The opinions the author expresses here are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.



NOTES

- 1 E. B. White, *The Paris Review Interviews*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Gourevitch (New York: Picador, 2009), pp. 146-47.
- 2 Remarks by the President on Security Reviews (5 Jan. 2010); available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-security-reviews>.
- 3 “Col. Darby To Rejoin Medical Corps,” *The Fort Meade Post* (20 Nov. 1942), p. 5.
- 4 Corp. Dick B. Gehman, “Morale Men: Soldiers Trained at Meade Will Take ‘Fun’ to Yank Troops All Over the World,” *The Fort Meade Post* (26 Mar. 1943), p. 6.

Who's Afraid of the Liberal Arts?

James Miller

We all know that *liberal* has become a dirty word in contemporary American politics. But it is startling to realize how the same word has virtually disappeared as well from influential discussions of American education. For example, it's missing from the recent report, "U.S. Education Reform and National Security," prepared for the Council on Foreign Relations under the direction of Joel I. Klein and Condoleezza Rice. (The only appearance of the word comes in a dissenting opinion, appended to the Report's main text, on page 77.)

Oddly enough, despite the association of Klein and Rice with Rupert Murdoch and George W. Bush respectively, their Report also eschews the adjective *conservative* and the verb *conserve*—as in conserving and transmitting the best that has been thought and said in the world. It seems that the disappearance of the word *liberal* in conjunction with *education* isn't just a result of political partisanship—more troubling still, it's a symptom of the sort of blinkered pragmatism that now dominates virtually *all* contemporary debate over American education, from kindergarten to graduate schooling, for Democrats as well as Republicans.

So what's gone missing here?

In the ancient Roman context, and for many centuries afterwards, the primary use of the adjective *liberal* was in conjunction with the noun *education*. The adjective *liberal* was the distinctive epithet of those arts and sciences that were considered "worthy of a free man"; as opposed to those trades regarded as servile.¹ As Benjamin Franklin put it, "the best Capacities require Cultivation"—one reason that America's founders frequently championed a liberal education for the citizens of the new republic. As recently as the twentieth century, a "liberal education" meant a course of learning directed to general intellectual enlargement and refinement—and not narrowly restricted to the requirements of technical or professional training.

Compare now the language in the Klein and Rice report's introduction: "Measured against global standards, far too many U.S. schools are failing to teach students the academic skills and knowledge they need to compete and succeed" (3). The language itself betrays an overriding concern with producing hands for industry and the state.

The Report goes on to decry a dearth of skilled American workers, qualified soldiers, and experts able to speak such “strategically important languages as Chinese, Dari, Korean, Russian and Turkish” (4).

At risk, the Report asserts, is America’s “human capital.” The proposed solution? 1) Enforce a set of “Common Core State Standards,” to ensure that students in elementary and high schools are “mastering the skills and knowledge necessary to safeguard the country’s national security;” 2) create more competition in the K-12 school marketplace, through unbridled privatization; and 3) launch a “national security readiness audit” to hold schools accountable for their demonstrable success in teaching students “science, technology, and foreign languages,” and also (almost as an afterthought) “creative problem-solving skills and civic awareness” (5).

Neither classically liberal nor truly conservative, the Klein and Rice report exemplifies instead an all-too-modern expediency. Preoccupied with staffing up the military-industrial complex, the authors only pay lip service to creativity, and that in a wooden, barely literate prose—as if in defiance of the eloquence prized by Cicero and other classical partisans of the “liberal arts.”

Let’s grant that America needs smart people for its workforce, military, and foreign services. To meet these needs, the Report might have focused not just on K-12, but on higher education. As most developed societies long ago conceded, a lifetime spent studying the liberal arts is *not* pertinent for every person. Yet the United States, unlike Germany, France, Japan, and many other advanced industrial countries, has been woefully slow to develop first-rate technical institutes that can produce the best and the brightest young engineers, administrators, skilled laborers, and applied scientists. One can even imagine creating American versions of the French *grandes écoles*, to train the most promising students of engineering, commerce, and social science, to supplement the existing American versions of the great liberal arts colleges and universities.

By contrast, America’s primary and secondary schools have been, and should be still, *the* places where young men and women are *all* encouraged to develop the full range of their gifts and talents while absorbing the best that has been thought and written. Founders like Franklin and Thomas Jefferson understood that our public schools ought to be laboratories of a classically *liberal* education, one that enables future citizens to cultivate a range of capacities, and to learn about a variety of arts and sciences—a curriculum that will help each student make an informed choice of an appropriate path in life, when the time comes. As the authors of a recent report on the sad state of the liberal arts in America’s public schools put it, a classically liberal education “is a largely unacknowledged prerequisite to equal opportunity.”²

A generation ago, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the most recent prestigious report

on the status of American education, called for a renewed commitment to liberal education, at least in theory. The weakening of this commitment in the years since has been gradual and perhaps inadvertent—it seems, in part, to be an unintended consequence of the national standards movement that produced No Child Left Behind, reinforced by various state reforms and the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative.

In an effort to meet targets set by these policies, there has been a dramatic increase in the instructional time devoted to reading and mathematics; at the same time, expert studies indicate that there has been a correlative *decrease* in instructional time for the arts and the humanities—a decrease that has been most marked in poorer school districts.³ The impact of the new literacy standards has been especially paradoxical: one might have expected that an increase in instructional time spent reading would bolster the role of literature in the K-12 curriculum—but this has not happened, because the new literacy standards stress understanding “informational texts” instead of narrative fiction.⁴ Other implications of the recent stress on standards “may be as obvious as diminished time for music,” or “it may also be more subtle as teachers and counselors encourage fewer students to take liberal arts electives and administrators budget less money for liberal arts course materials.”⁵

Klein and Rice would have us accelerate the tendency, already strong in our public schools, to jettison subjects for widespread study that are “disinterested”—that is, not motivated by immediate, utilitarian interests. In the name of bolstering national security, they are offering an intellectual starvation diet for the vast majority of American students.

It is worth underlining a horrible irony of America's current situation: many of our nation's best *private* schools, including a number of Catholic and other religious schools, in fact *do* offer a classically liberal education. But by urging states to enforce a narrow set of common “core standards” in all public schools, the Klein and Rice report would, in effect, make a rich diet of learning an option open only to a tiny, perversely self-perpetuating elite of students (I am talking about the children of people like myself and the likely readers of this essay).

Liberal education may survive for a few—but equality of opportunity is honored in the breach.

Yes, America's primary schools should help to train future workers, soldiers, and foreign service officers; but above all, they should help train every single American the rudiments of how to think for him or herself, and to bring every student to a certain level of intellectual maturity, of creative ability, with an independent sense of direction and initiative.⁶

Yes, our elementary schools need to teach basic math and useful reading skills; but they also ought to excite the imagination, and eventually prepare young adults to grapple with large questions that are not just practical, but also speculative: for example, What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?⁷

In other words, America’s primary schools should aim, not just to impart useful skills, but, in addition, to give every single student “something commensurate with his capacity to wonder.”⁸

The cultivation of human capacities of course was one of Benjamin Franklin’s great goals. That it remains unachieved for too many American students three centuries later does not make the goal any less pressing, for it is, as Franklin and Jefferson understood, a constitutive part of America’s promise: a self-governing republic of enlightened citizens.

I close with a quote from Isaac Leon Kandel, another great American educator, who put it this way in 1940:

Education, true education, should liberate: it should cultivate the genuinely free man, the man of moral judgment, of intellectual integrity; it should give us the power to see the other side; it should impart nobility of purpose and kindness of spirit. It should leave us with the inescapable truth that man is a spiritual being and that the struggle for the mastery of the forces of nature is not merely for the satisfaction of human needs but is also inspired by the spiritual end of reaching out beyond our immediate lives to something eternal.⁹



NOTES

- 1 See the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry on “liberal.”
- 2 Claus von Zastrow, with Helen Janc, *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools* (Council for Basic Education, March, 2004), p.12.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.7.
- 4 This switch in emphasis is praised in the Klein-Rice report: see p. 37.
- 5 Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Beyond the Basics: Achieving a Liberal Education for All Children* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July, 2007), p.5.
- 6 I am paraphrasing Antonio Gramsci’s similar pleas for Italian primary education in “From the ‘Prison Notebooks,’” trans. Joseph A Buttigieg, *Daedalus*, Summer, 2012, p.73
- 7 As Kant puts it in *Critique of Pure Reason*, A805/B833.
- 8 F. Scott Fitzgerald, from the closing paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby*.
- 9 Isaac Kandel, “Address at St. Paul’s Chapel, Columbia University” (1940), in J. Wesley Null and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Forgotten Heroes of American Education*, p.413.

A Response

Rachel Hadas

A poet and professor of English at the Newark campus of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, I intend to comment on a few passages in the Report, considering both some implications and some omissions. I'll conclude with a couple of broader observations.

To begin with an area of agreement: like many other teachers of the humanities and very likely also the social sciences, I endorse the statement that “Many students . . . cannot recall, interpret, critique, or evaluate texts” (17). These students are presumably elementary and middle school students, but the same dismal trend holds for many high school and college students. There are notable exceptions, for as the Report repeatedly stresses, education in the United States is extremely unevenly distributed.

Regarding such educational deficits, the Report goes on to declare (21) that “colleges typically cannot make up for what students fail to learn at the secondary level.” This blanket statement seems overly pessimistic. A great deal of college work, at least in the fields of reading and writing, is indeed remedial in nature, and often the results are encouraging. At Rutgers-Newark, where most of our students are the first in their families to attend college and many are not native speakers of English, a rigorously administered writing program is designed to address exactly such deficits, and the same is true of many other colleges and universities.

The Report states, “Evidence is increasing that students who require remedial classes in college tend to struggle and drop out” (21), citing a government study; but this study appears to focus on community colleges. There is undoubtedly a problem with the degree of preparation in reading and writing many students bring to college, and institutions of higher learning deal with this problem in various ways and with varying measures of success. But based not only on my own experience at Rutgers-Newark but also on conversations with friends and colleagues who teach at either the secondary or the college level at schools and colleges nationwide, teachers are resourceful and inventive when it comes to combining remediation with the now all too unfashionable skills of close reading. College students, even struggling freshmen, often benefit from discovering a literary text they didn't

previously know. Perhaps they are reading less, but as Paula Marantz Cohen has recently argued in an inspiring essay, they may be reading better and learning more.¹

It is when the Report focuses more specifically than in the above passage on reading and writing that its fundamental discomfort with and distrust of these concepts becomes evident. One passage reads:

In literacy, the [proposed] standards place a greater emphasis on students' ability to read, understand, and summarize informational texts than previous state standards. In recent history, U.S. elementary students have spent most of their time reading narrative fiction. The new standards aim to build knowledge from an early age by requiring that 50 percent of students' time between kindergarten and the fifth grade be spent reading informational texts. In addition, the standards place a greater emphasis on evidence-based writing...as opposed to writing only narratives or personal opinion essays. (37)

Ironically, in view of the Report's stern emphasis on information and evidence, this entire passage is remarkably obscure. What is an "informational text"—a textbook? "In recent history" might mean either "in recent years" or "relating to the way recent history is taught." And what does "narrative fiction" denote—history presented in the (suspect?) guise of fiction? Or perhaps the term is a redundant reference to fiction, a genre that tends to be narrative by nature. As for the narratives that, together with personal opinion essays, have (we can infer) been unduly encouraged before, to the detriment of students' literacy—are these "narrative fiction," or what?

The new standards proposed by the Report "will require students to analyze sources and develop conclusions in their essays." These standards require that "80 percent of what high school students produce be written... to inform and... to argue."

The language here is too cloudy to allow for certainty. But it looks as if fiction as being dismissed as a soft subject, an easy way around the imperative to learn (and to regurgitate) facts, as in "informational texts." It would be interesting to know what "narrative fiction" the authors of the Report have in mind. I'd be tempted to refer them to Chapter Two of Dickens's *Hard Times*, where Mr. Gradgrind terrifies Sissy Jupe with his emphasis on Facts. The notion that one might learn some history, as well as a measure of literacy, from reading some such "narrative fiction" as a Dickens novel seems foreign to the thinking behind the Report, which never recommends any specific text.

Having implicitly denigrated "narrative fiction" (though, as we've seen, whether in the context of overall literacy or the pedagogy of history remains unclear), the Report goes on to even murkier waters. On page 47 it grapples with the slippery terms *imagination* and *creativity*—concepts which, however desirable they are said to be, remain vague. Granted,

the Report is in favor of imagination and creativity. If “narrative” as an adjective connotes, in the context of the Report, imprecision and an inability to analyze information, then the terms *imagination* and *creativity* are always seen as advantageous. The advantages these qualities confer seem to be strategic, though the connection between imagination and strategic advantage is never spelled out:

The Task Force believes that all young people—those who aim to work in national security and those who aim to work in corporations or not-for-profit organizations—must develop their imaginations from an early age. This is increasingly important as information becomes more and more abundant and as the world becomes more interconnected and complex. The United States has traditionally led the world in patent applications, invention, and innovation. The Task Force members believe that to retain this important competitive edge, lessons in creativity—whether in the arts or creative analysis or imaginative problem solving, must begin in early elementary school.

Creativity and imagination, then, apparently have a lot to do with technology and security; they also help us maintain (or regain) our “important competitive edge.” But since creativity is never defined (what is “creative analysis?”), its role in fostering such desirable national traits remains hooded. Similarly on page 46, the Report recommends that students “be able to use technology to find and process information, fuel creation and creativity, and collaborate and communicate with others.” To the desirable verbs “collaborate” and “communicate,” a telling third is added in a passage that recommends that students “be better equipped to converse, collaborate, and compete with peers worldwide.”

The Report is severely pragmatic. Global competitiveness and (as per its title) national security provide the motivation for improving students’ literacy and imagination. There is little acknowledgment of the wide range of professional benefits that are enabled and enriched by literacy, let alone of the human value of learning certain things about human culture.

Perhaps the notion that knowledge is valuable for its own sake is quixotic and outdated. Nevertheless, particularly in view of its stress on literacy as well as on the never-specified notions of imagination and creativity, the Report’s failure to make any specific recommendation for books to read is striking to this professor. Utterly absent is any awareness that the nature of the “texts” students may be called on to recall, critique, evaluate, and interpret makes any real difference. Absent as well is any mention or suggestion of any sort of reading list, probably because “canon” has become a suspect word. Absent is any sense of connection between the unformulated buzzwords *imagination/creativity* and the crucial role played by reading in building not only vocabulary and cultural literacy but yes, those very qualities of imagination and creativity.

Andrew Delbanco, in his 2012 study *College*, observes that “literature, history, philosophy, and the arts are becoming the stepchildren of our colleges.” Reading the Report makes it clear that at least in some quarters this is no less true of elementary, middle, and high school education. Delbanco’s further observation also resonates in the context of the Report. This inferior status of the humanities “is a great loss,” he writes, “because...they provide a vocabulary for formulating ultimate questions of the sort that have always had a special urgency for young people. In fact, the humanities may have the most to offer to students who do not know that they need them—which is one reason it is scandalous to withhold them. One of the ironies of contemporary academic life is that even as the humanities become marginal in our colleges, they are establishing themselves in medical, law, and business schools, where interest is growing in the study of literature and the arts as a way to encourage self-critical reflection...”²

Reflection and self-criticism, or indeed questioning of any sort, are not among the benefits the Report associates with education, or indeed with national security. Yet just such rumination is inseparable from imagination and creativity as poets have always understood them.



NOTES

- 1 Paula Marantz Cohen, “The Seduction,” *The American Scholar*, Winter 2011.
- 2 Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 99-100.

Gradgrinding American Education

Robert Alter

Take Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind, the Utilitarian overseer of schools in *Hard Times*, adjust him for more than a century and a half of cultural inflation, multiply him into a large committee, and you have a good sense of the authors of "U.S. Educational Reform and National Security." It suffices to recall the words of Gradgrind that begin the novel: "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."

The Report diligently identifies grave failings in American education that should concern us all, but virtually everything it says is skewed by its commitment to a latter-day version of Utilitarianism. Granted, the avowed mandate of the Report is to investigate the consequences of the state of American education for our national security, but that is precisely the source of the mischief, and one wonders who dreamed up the idea. The notion that the deterioration of our educational system, which is plain enough to see, could undermine our national security may have been seized on as a potential motivator for bureaucrats who control federal budgets, but it is an abysmal way to begin thinking about education. Should a teacher's motives for introducing seventh-graders to science be that she is preparing cadres of future technicians who will be able to design bigger and better defenses against ICBMs? Is the chief purpose of education to enhance the eventual economic prospects of the students—the learning-earning nexus is a recurrent theme of the Report—so that the American economy will be globally competitive in the next generation? It does not seem to have occurred to the authors of the Report that the ruthless instrumentalization of the student population they envisage is quite likely to alienate young people rather than excite them about learning.

One hardly wants to quarrel with the notion that science and mathematics must be important bases of general education, though the framers of the Report, given their instrumental bias, scarcely glimpse the possibility of pure science or pure mathematics—which is to say, that the discovery of the physical structure of the world and the elegance and complexity of mathematics have an intrinsic appeal quite apart from any pragmatic use to

which they may be put.

The most egregious misconceptions, however, fostered by the Report are in its view of the study of language, literature, and history (though the last two items are given scant attention). The idea of "innovation" is trumpeted, as though primary and secondary education should be based on the model of technology. Some things, of course, can be accomplished now in the classroom that were not previously feasible thanks to the use of computers and state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. It is nevertheless a dim idea to imagine that the crucial criterion for the teaching of language, literature, and history is innovation. At Columbia College, where I did my undergraduate work, Mark Van Doren was a great teacher of Shakespeare in the middle decades of the twentieth century. I would guess that James Shapiro, Columbia's eminent Shakespearian today, teaches equally well though differently, but innovation is not what is at issue. Two different fine minds, bringing to the classroom different sensibilities, ranges of reading, and life-experience, may do different things in the classroom, and though the later one may have available to him certain perspectives unknown to his predecessor, the difference between the two is nothing like substituting the electronic calculator for the abacus.

The approach of the Report especially to language and literature is not merely dim but scandalous. The monolingualism of young Americans is appropriately deplored, but the rationale for the study of foreign languages proposed here is to give people the tools to conduct international business and diplomacy. There is no intimation of the sense of enlarging wonder a student might experience in discovering a whole new culture—perhaps even a whole new world-view—in mastering French, Italian, or Russian, not to speak of one of the major Asian languages. Needless to say, there is no place whatever in this purview for Greek or Latin because you can't cut a deal with a multinational in the language of Homer or Virgil. Literature itself is relegated in the Report to a distant and irrelevant memory because it has no utilitarian application. The authors recommend an instruction in reading concentrating on "informational texts." What the Report no doubt has in mind is guiding students to the comprehension of, say, a page explaining the process of raising corn for the purpose of conversion to ethanol. Comprehension of such texts is surely a necessary part of education, but to place the main emphasis in reading classes on texts of this sort is an excellent recipe for instilling a hatred of reading. The notion, moreover, of "information" put forth here is entirely unexamined. From what one can make out, it essentially corresponds to the Gradgrind view: "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts." There is no awareness that what constitutes reality is not just facts but a variety of complex phenomena, many of which cannot be reduced to facts, as well as the interpretation of the data of reality that every one of us, willy-nilly, must constantly undertake. To restrict education to the conveying of factual information is to cripple the students' ability to negotiate reality. That surely could not be a good thing for national security.

To put the matter differently, a short story by Hemingway or a novel by Edith Wharton swarms with information, some of it factual reflections of social, economic, cultural, or historical realities, some of it manifested in the psychology of the characters, the intricacies of their relationships, the moral issues raised by the choices the characters make in varying circumstances. It would surely be an educational gain to show students how to assimilate such complex information.

The Report, along with its adherence to informational texts, advocates "evidence based" writing as the means to insure that as a nation we will be able to keep pace with our international rivals in the political and economic spheres. Evidence, one may ask, of what kind? The assumption is that if you assign a high-school senior a paper on *Macbeth* rather than on coal-mining in Kentucky, what you will inevitably get is vague and subjective impressions of the play, emotional gush, soft thinking. These educational and governmental bureaucrats do not appear to understand that interpretation itself is an activity that requires the marshalling of evidence, even if there is a margin of debate about the conclusions. On the basis of what the play itself tells us, what sort of man is Macbeth that he should be so susceptible to the witches' murky oracle and that he should yield so readily to his wife's urging the murder of Duncan? Why on the evidence of Shakespeare's text is it highly dubious to claim that Macbeth is a pathological sadist who gets sexual kicks out of killing people? To lead students to engage in such questions is not only to introduce them to an activity that is likely to be more deeply interesting and instructive than following the production of ethanol or the process of coal-mining. It is also the promotion of a kind of education that might prepare young people to live their lives more alertly and more thoughtfully. What the authors of the Report by contrast assume is that students are ultimately cogs in a national machine intended to generate profit and power that one wants to run smoothly, and that their imaginations, their very consciousness, their capacity to appreciate and enjoy the world, are of no concern.

Should We Educate to Meet the Demands of the Age?

Diana Senechal

Every so often, we get a new crisis report on the state of education. Each one follows a formula: it presumes that schools must meet the economic, social, and political demands of the present and near future. It bewails the discrepancy between our schools' output and our society's needs. It then proposes reforms that correspond with its premises and goals, thus subordinating education to the perceived demands of the moment. "U.S. Education Reform and National Security," a report of the Council on Foreign Relations, falls pentagonally in this category. Arguing that that our schools are failing to meet our national security needs, it explains how to educate for national security. The recurrent error lies in the assumption that education should primarily serve the times—or, rather, a particular interpretation of the times.

Yes, it is important to prepare young people for the current world, but education should also transcend it. It is through education that we learn to put our individual demands and those of society in perspective. When studying history, we learn how to stand back from a situation and analyze it carefully; when studying literature, we enter forms and worlds that change our perception of our own. At its best, education takes us through the details of a subject into its principles and problems. Just as the student of music gradually comes to hear patterns in a piece, so a student of liberal arts comes to recognize the etymology of words, the philosophical underpinnings of a political policy, or the allusions and rhetorical devices in a speech. We learn that there's more to a situation than the PowerPoint slideshow suggests.

The CFR report opines that "America's educational failures pose five distinct threats to national security: threats to economic growth and competitiveness, U.S. physical safety, intellectual property, U.S. global awareness, and U.S. unity and cohesion" (7). After explaining how current reforms (such as school choice and the Common Core State Standards) have begun to address these problems, it details the additional reforms needed. It recommends that schools "implement educational expectations in subjects vital to protecting national security"—namely, science, technology, and foreign languages, as well as "creative problem-solving skills and civic awareness" (44). It calls for structural changes, particularly school

choice and competition. Finally, it calls for a "national security readiness audit" involving new assessments aligned with the Common Core (53).

While there is every reason to teach technology, science, and foreign languages, and to emphasize creativity, the Report distorts the meaning of these endeavors. Take, for instance, its emphasis on "strategic" languages. "The Task Force does not argue that *all* U.S. children should begin studying strategic languages and cultures," the authors write. "However, the opportunity to learn these languages and about the people who speak them should be available to many students across the United States, and *all students* should have access to high-quality foreign language programs starting in the earliest grades" (47). Presumably, languages not deemed "strategic" would receive lower priority.

Foreign languages count among the most important subjects that a school can teach. Students who understand the nuances of a second language gain a special perspective on their mother tongue. They begin to notice cultural differences. They develop both an analytical and intuitive sense of grammar. Those who can read literature in the original absorb and grasp those sounds, rhythms, and words that do not translate easily. Those who have learned a language may visit other countries, take part in conversations, and understand films, plays, and scholarly works that would otherwise lie out of reach. In addition to all of this, some may choose to use their language skills for specific work as translators, interpreters, diplomats, or teachers. Students often develop such skills after high school, even after college, in specific training programs or on their own.

With respect to foreign languages, then, the Report proposes doing the right (or partially right) deed for the wrong reason—a treacherous mix. Schools heeding its recommendations would likely emphasize not only "strategic" languages, but also "strategic" means of teaching them. The curriculum would focus on current events, everyday communication, and practical application—not unworthy in themselves, but transient and incomplete. The Report does call for "instruction about other countries' history and culture," but subordinates this to the goals of "cross-cultural competence and practical ability to communicate" (47)—a fraction of what one might gain from the study of history and culture, and an unstable fraction at that. As the educational historian Diane Ravitch has noted, "strategic" priorities could easily shift; there's no guarantee that a language currently in demand will be in demand a decade from now. Moreover, the percentage of students reading Homer, Cicero, Dante, Racine, Gogol, Rilke, or Borges in the original would be minuscule, as the priorities would lie elsewhere.

By caving in to the moment, the CFR report creates a cave of its own. In privileging science, technology, and foreign languages—subjects that seem to address current needs—the authors ignore the subtle importance of imaginative literature. If any subject adds to our intellectual, cultural, and spiritual wealth, literature does. What does one learn, for instance, from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*? We need not read it for lessons, yet it

may leave us deeply taught. We see Ishmael committed, along with the others, to capturing *Moby-Dick*, yet also devoted to putting forth a large, marvelous, playful, and tragic story, rich with insights into whales, humans beings in nature, mortal obsession, and the expanse and strictures of language. Ishmael's purpose goes beyond what even he supposes (as does Melville's, presumably). Similarly unsuspecting of its ends, there is the *Rachel*, the ship whose captain has decided to retrace his path in search of his lost sons—only to end up rescuing Ishmael, the bearer of the tale. When we read *Moby-Dick*, we start to sense something beyond even our own purposes, beyond our Ahab-like fixations.

What about creativity, then? Isn't the CFR report correct in stating that schools should emphasize it? Yes, but again it provides the wrong reasons. Creativity takes many forms and does not always transfer from one domain to another. If students are studying foreign policy, then, yes, they should explore different ways of analyzing and envisioning foreign policy. But if they are studying sonnets, it is for the intrinsic value of studying sonnets: the logic, the taut relationship of form and meaning, the possibilities of the fourteen lines. Such study will not necessarily help them become good spies or diplomats (though it might play a role). But it will take them into sonnets—and that will outlast many fashions, urgencies, and fads.

When it comes to assessments, the Report states merely that they should be meaningful, should align with the Common Core, and should not merely replicate past assessments. This isn't quite as benign as it sounds; if the goals of education are skewed, so will the assessments be, and a "national security readiness audit" will skew things even more. Policymakers need to consider carefully and fully what education is—by listening to teachers and scholars, studying actual subject matter, and reading educational philosophy and history. From there, they can outline ideas for rich curricula, and from there, appropriate assessments. Curricula may vary from school to school, but they should have certain principles and domains of knowledge in common.

We live not in one age alone, but in layers of ages. Education makes us aware of these layers. Students who know literature, history, mathematics, science, languages, and arts can walk into a workplace and learn the necessary skills—but can also live and think beyond work. Some students will be drawn to foreign service, some to scholarship, some to law and medicine, some to nonprofit work, some to the arts, and some to business. No matter what they choose, they will have resources and interests to carry through their lives and pass on to others. When faced with crises and calls of alarm, they could do worse than to remember a phrase from Persian and Jewish lore, "This too shall pass."

Grand Strategy and Education Reform

David Bromwich

A proud and powerful country that supposes itself in decline always stands in need of a scapegoat. American self-confidence about American “security” might easily have faltered in the 1990s when attempts to restructure the lagging economies of the former communist bloc did not cause those countries to prosper quite as was anticipated. This was a failure of self-education, undoubtedly, at levels far above the K-12 schooling dealt with in the Council on Foreign Relations pamphlet “U.S. Education Reform and National Security.” But in the years since 2001, the panic fear of American degeneration has spread. Who should answer for the decline of American prestige in the world? This pamphlet renders a curious verdict. Not economists, not corporate heads, not generals or presidents or their advisers. No: public school teachers are to blame.

President George W. Bush’s education program No Child Left Behind was succeeded, with the coming of the new administration, by President Obama’s Race to the Top. The two programs are in most essentials the same. No losers means all winners. The remedy proposed by both administrations was tests, more and better tests, as many tests as possible—tightly administered and closely monitored. If the students don’t pass the tests, it is the fault of their teachers. President Obama on March 1, 2010 applauded the “sense of accountability” demonstrated by the school board of Central Falls, Rhode Island, in its automatic firing of the entire faculty of Central Falls High School because students at the school had scored too low on standardized tests. Yet the parents of those students did not join the president in celebrating the courage of the school board. They knew that many of the teachers were dedicated to their calling, and most had a competence adequate to their jobs and commensurate with their experience. But the scores left the teachers no grounds for appeal. So, in one stroke of a new regulation, veteran teachers became defective instances of “human capital.” This is the kind of action the CFR pamphlet demands more of, with added periodic emergency checks in the shape of a new bureaucratic device: the “national security readiness audit.” We are not far from a time when students who take the tests that trigger the audit will be referred to as “product.”

The CFR task force treats the putative crisis of national defense as the sole and sufficient reason for concern with the fortunes of public education. Their work was instigated by a lawyer, Joel Klein, who spent a little over a decade as an education administrator, and by two leaders of the foreign-policy elite, Richard Haass and Condoleezza Rice, both of them better known for their proximity to power than for services to education. These persons, supported by two dozen others, have employed 70 pages of text along with many graphs and charts to persuade us that the most important effects of our failures in teaching grades K-12 will come in the form of weakened national security. The power of making war or wielding coercive force is treated as the largest consideration in the crisis of American education. *Nowhere in this presentation are learning and wisdom conceived of as good in themselves.*

Still, if national defense is the reason for education, we ought to be permitted to ask: defense of what, and for what purpose? The answer of the task force on this point is clear. Education is good for the perpetuation of a global dominance which the American policy elite conceive to be good for the U.S. and good for the world. Shouldn't this thesis be subject to challenge by educated opinion, and not just by securitized opinion? And supposing the premise about American dominance is true—that the U.S. successfully dominated the world from 1945 until quite recently—how good a thing will it be in the future for the U.S. to maintain or attempt to regain such dominance? That question was never asked by the task force; the present pamphlet indeed presumed an answer on which the security establishment were agreed before they began to write.

"U.S. Education Reform and National Security" takes the militarization of the motives for education to an unprecedented extreme. Almost three decades ago, William Bennett, as director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, wrote a pamphlet called "To Reclaim a Legacy" which argued that the aim of liberal education ought to be the preservation of the values of the West. The values in question were not defined with patience or clarity by Bennett, and the content of "the West" was taken on trust; but, demagogic as it was, "To Reclaim a Legacy" at least dealt with books, with an idea (however crude) of tradition, with habits of thought as having a certain weight or valence. By contrast, "U.S. Education Reform and National Security" is a story of security only—not the West, not the humanities, not "values." The protagonist is simply American defense; and the hundreds of thousands of teachers and the millions of students whose lives the pamphlet seeks to influence are taken to have their chief importance as servitors of national security.

Some way through this production, one may be tempted to think it an elaborate tactical hoax. Can it be that Richard Haass and Joel Klein and Condoleezza Rice are, in fact, deeply concerned citizens who, cherishing a high-minded but necessarily secret tenderness toward liberal learning, felt their backs against the wall, and that they could hit on no rationale for *selling* education to Americans other than security? In a somewhat similar quandary, Jonathan Swift wrote "An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity" to promote the Christian spirit

that a cost-cutting age of schismatics and lukewarm believers no longer knew how to care for; on the way to telling his disagreeable truth, Swift appeared to take on board the most irreligious utilitarian arguments against Christianity itself. Yet Swift published his hoax to reveal under the glare of ridicule just how instrumental the pursuit of Christian conduct had become. One could wish that the CFR task force had written with some such esoteric motive—promoting an idea of education based on national-security desiderata in order to show how brutally anti-intellectual have become the demands that we Americans make of our public schools.

The pamphlet, however, goes too far for such a satirical purpose; it defeats the ends of satire by exceeding the imagination of any probable satire. What can be meant by “strategic languages”? (“The Task Force does not argue that *all* U.S. children should begin studying strategic languages and cultures,” p. 47.) Not one language is specified after the use of the peculiar phrase, but we recognize with a sickening thud exactly what it means. Why, of course, Arabic and Chinese! Languages of the projected security enemies of the near future! And perhaps also Japanese and Korean. Languages of present allies who must on no account be permitted to drift. But not French, not German, not Italian, not Danish or Swedish or Polish. Certainly not Greek or Latin. What about Parsi? It depends how many undercover agents we require in a country where we plan to have neither boots on the ground nor diplomats in the embassies. The lines of support for the study of strategic languages are the lines of contemporary geopolitics. How, then, will the first generation of strategic language speakers associate with later generations who have studied different languages? Presumably through the universal language of technocratic English—the language in which “U.S. Education Reform and National Security” has been written.

The most depressing feature of this pamphlet is its shallowness, but the most irresponsible feature is its complacency. For there is a truth of culture which is never uttered here, and of which the authors seem hardly aware (with the exception of Carole Artigiani and a few other dissenters whose statements are given at the back). A democratic society requires an educated citizenry if it is to persist not in the projects of a dominant empire but in the conduct of an exemplary republic. Citizens of the United States, who may actually have interests at odds with the policy elite, would be well advised to investigate the sources within American society of a document like “U.S. Education Reform and National Security.” It emanates from an institution which has distributed substantial funds, and the promise of collaborative immunity and collective prestige, to recruit to its cause many leaders of the education establishment, with an unaccountable emphasis on the charter-school movement. To arrive at the recommendations they venture about the value of K-12 education as a business strictly instrumental to national security, the convener, the chairs, and the signers of the pamphlet must have felt they had the upper hand in some larger but unstated argument. They should have trusted their readers and fellow-citizens enough to say

what that argument is. As it stands, the intellectual bankruptcy of this enterprise suggests a corruption of mind more dangerous to a free society than any combination of military stalemates and diplomatic defeats.

Losing Battles

Michael B. Prince

I have not to deal with war, nor yet with warlike weapons, otherwise than by way of application.¹

Analogy is a double-edged sword. It helps us imagine two different things as importantly related, but may also fool us into thinking the relation is closer than it is. The analogy the Council on Foreign Relations report “U.S. Education Reform and National Security” draws between deficiencies in American public education and a national security crisis provides “a clarion call to the nation, aiming to magnify the need for change” (xiv), warning that “mere tweaks to the status quo will not create the necessary transformation” (5). Yet the comparison leads the authors to propose solutions that unwittingly repeat many of the strategic blunders that got the United States into this quagmire in the first place.

Whether from political caution or genuine uncertainty, the Report does not explain how the greatest nation on earth could so mismanage its educational system that a committee comprised of leaders of government, education, business, and the military would declare that we are losing the battle to educate our young, and have been losing it for decades. The Report calls for a national audit, not of past failures, but of future results. However, until we understand what went wrong, and what continues to go wrong, we cannot expect improvement. If this really were a war, and we had suffered defeat after defeat, those in charge would order inquiries to identify intelligence failures and change misguided strategies. As a professor and a patriot, I offer a *communiqué* from the trenches, supplying vital information missing from the Task Force’s report.

The most remarkable assertion the Report makes is that the failure of our educational system transcends race, class, geographical region, and type of school.² “Evidence is mounting that K-12 schools are not adequately preparing students who *do* graduate from high school for college or work. . . . One recent report by the ACT, the not-for-profit testing organization, found that only 22 percent of tested high school students in the United States met ‘college-ready’ standards in English, mathematics, reading, and science. . . . The results of

international exams do not show merely that the average U.S. student is falling behind; they also show that the top students in the United States would not be considered top students elsewhere in the world, particularly in mathematics" (21, 24-25). The Report further asserts that increased investment has had little effect on the problem:

The tripling in inflation-adjusted spending per student suggests a misallocation of resources and a lack of productivity-enhancing innovations. Per-pupil investment in education in other countries, including in some that are now outperforming the United States, is below the U.S. level. (29)

If our crisis in education transcends class, race, geographical region, and type of school, and has not improved despite increased funding, then what factor or factors could explain such system-wide failure? Here the Report fires a blank. It fails to pinpoint the causes of our educational decline.

This lack of attention to underlying causes does not keep the Task Force from proposing rather predictable solutions. In particular, the Report calls for renewed investment in educational technology:

It seems clear that technology has the power to help students learn in new ways, to assess more rigorously how much students are learning, and to help teachers tailor instruction to students' individual learning needs. But technology is largely still being used to advance old-style teaching and learning with old-fashioned uses of human capital. . . . [C]omputers and digital technology have thus far not been used innovatively to change the way the United States educates its students, but instead simply to reinforce past practices The Task Force recommends that technology expectations be thoroughly integrated with math, literacy, science, and foreign language curricula so that students learn how they might effectively apply technological skills in diverse and constantly evolving settings. (32-33, 46)

On the face of it, this recommendation seems reasonable. Technology is so obviously a part of our students' lives, that pedagogy today apparently needs to play catch-up to the new possibilities technology offers. However, the Report itself offers no evidence to support its conclusion. On the contrary, it maintains that recent educational innovations, in which technology has already played a role, have failed to achieve positive results. The Task Force also acknowledges that many educational goals remain traditional: "U.S. generals caution that too many new enlistees cannot read training manuals for technologically sophisticated equipment. . . . [In] surveys and interviews, most employers say the skills that are in high

demand today are the same skills that students were supposed to be learning in school fifty or one hundred years ago: the ability to write and speak clearly and persuasively, the ability to solve problems and think critically, and the ability to work both independently and on teams" (10, 42). The Report fails to connect the dots, oblivious to any possible link between increased focus on technology and decreased competence in fundamental skills. Instead, it declares that the main problem with educational technology is that it had not been taken far enough as an alternative to "old-style teaching and learning."

In addition to pushing the technology agenda, the Report advocates less time spent studying literature in grades K-12, and more time with informational texts. The Task Force notes approvingly that the "new [Common Core] standards aim to build knowledge from an early age by requiring that 50 percent of students' time between kindergarten and the fifth grade be spent reading informational texts" (37).

Although the Task Force pays lip service to goals typically taught within the humanities—"all young people—those who aim to work in national security and those who aim to work in corporations or not-for-profit organizations—must develop their imaginations from an early age" (47)—its diagnosis of the problem and final recommendations share the general anti-humanism of the system it purports to criticize.

Once upon a time, humanists confronted a situation not so different from our own. Threatened by political absolutism and superstition, and aware that a revolution in print technology was creating a new market of individuals seeking access to literacy, humanists considered how best to impart skills of reading, writing, and communication to the public. They too reached for the analogy of war to stress the urgency of the situation and the consequences of not arming oneself, rhetorically speaking. The Renaissance writing guide that supplies the epigraph to this essay offers the following advice:

Hee, therefore that is to play the part of the warriour, ought with his force and valliauntnesse, to joyne substantiall furniture, that the service of his naturall abilities, and the use of his instrumentall powers, may concurre and goe together, making him the more venturous to withstand his enemies assault, and fuller of force also to give him the discomfiture. . . For, there shall be no kinde of letter, but in framing the same, thou shalt (though the gifts of nature wherewith thou art endued, be but weak and slender) have knowledge, cunning, judgement, and experience sufficient: be the person to who thou writest never so princely, never so learned, never so woorthy, never so noble, never so friendly . . . finally, be his qualities of this kinde, or that kinde, what so ever.³

The words sound antiquated, but look more closely. We find here a potent program for rapid assimilation of literate skills, not just for the elite, but for beginners. The soldier, like

the writer, must have courage and train for all contingencies. Such training involves mock encounters with a yet invisible enemy. How should these play-acts be staged? Through frequent exercises in imitation. Read a letter; write one like it. Read another letter written for a different audience and occasion; write one like it. Observe the similarities and differences of form, style, appeal, respect. Reproduce these and learn from the adjustments; learn to make them spontaneously. This approach combines the student's natural ability (emulation) and instrumental power (application), filling the mind with "substantial furniture," an archaic phrase perhaps, but one relevant to our analogy: "the condition of being equipped whether in body or mind; equipment in dress or armour; preparedness for action; mental cultivation, culture" (*OED*).

In this same passage, the author clarifies that he serves not as a "Martialist," but as a "Mercurialist;" that is, the comparison of writing to war holds not because writing is always an act of aggression, but because both battle and writing require skills of instantaneous adaptation. Here is the heart of the humanist pedagogy—the teaching of conscious rhetorical adjustment through the power of imitation. There is nothing strictly literary about this approach, although it uses literary models to challenge young writers. Pedagogy is attuned to practice, practice made routine through habituation, habituation made potent through imitative exercises saved from dreary repetition by the knowledge that at any moment the writer might be called on to communicate with readers across the social spectrum, on topics diverse and challenging. The goal is command of an arsenal of grammatical and stylistic options. These are some of the hallmarks of a humanist pedagogy that served students in the Classical world, early modern Europe, and America.

Our current educational orthodoxies cannot abide such ideas. We don't see students even analogically as future warriors (for better and for worse); we don't view the brain as containing "substantial furniture" (although we speak willy-nilly of "critical faculties"); we take a dim view of any pedagogy that so much as mentions *imitation*; we have jettisoned grammar instruction and the teaching of stylistic variation that grammar makes possible; we favor pedagogies that immerse students in the "process" of learning and downplay "product" (i.e. writing to a deadline, for a grade). Above all, we have reimagined the student. Once we challenged our students with frequent and ambitious graded assignments. Now we nurture and protect. We see that students are easily wounded by bad grades, and so we delay or even avoid grading. In the student-centered pedagogies that dominate English language arts and college composition nationwide, we put our students first by encouraging them to think, read, and write critically, downplaying "teacher-centered" skills such as memorization, recitation, imitation, paraphrase, and summary. While abandoning the last vestiges of humanist pedagogy, we have rejected canons and curricula that once gave substance to courses in reading, writing, and rhetoric.

Such statements might sound overblown, so let me instance them through examples

drawn from schools close to home—mine. Six years ago, I signed on to help a struggling inner city high school threatened with closure by the state. All of the alarming conclusions the Report draws were already evident to state and local officials who flooded the school with fresh resources and personnel, manifestos and educational consultants. Nothing helped. What held this school back? Not the teachers' union, whose power was limited by the declared state of emergency. Not apathy. Tremendous optimism accompanied this last attempt to turn the school around. No. Bad ideas prevented progress. The district mandated that classes meet frequently in small group workshops, not only in English language arts, but in most other subjects. Thus, some of the least prepared students in the city became each others' teachers, not because this approach met the test of common sense, but because it had become impossible to uncouple the progressive goal of helping our most disadvantaged students from the progressive commitment to collaborative learning. The district also mandated adoption of a textbook for writing instruction, based on a best-selling rhetoric used in many college composition courses. The popularity of this book had to do with its being perfectly in tune with a number of fashionable, albeit untested ideas: that it does not matter what students read as long as they learn techniques of rhetorical analysis applicable to any and every text; that the purpose of reading and writing instruction is to instill critical thinking skills through the writing of essays that analyze the rhetoric of signs, advertisements, graffiti, and others texts; that these essays should be written in gradual stages, moving through brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, revising, peer reviewing, and other activities that effectively put off the day the teacher receives finished papers and undertakes the time-consuming job of commenting and grading.

The results at this school were abysmal. Because there was no other plan in place for a substantive curriculum, the lessons in the rhetoric were "articulated" to all grade levels. English classes focused on the rhetoric of argumentation, dutifully preparing their students for college writing courses whose focus would also be the rhetoric of argumentation. By the middle of the year, teachers were trying to invent a reading curriculum as they went along. They soon abandoned textbook and curriculum.

The next year, the school swung to the opposite extreme, a traditional English and American literature curriculum for which the students were woefully unprepared. However, administrators had not yet lost faith in workshop or process pedagogy. This meant that most of the first term of tenth grade English was spent reading *A Tale of Two Cities* and writing a single multi-stage essay on that text. In all of these decisions, teachers and administrators firmly believed they were acting in their students' best interest. Six years and two fired headmasters later, test scores and college acceptance rates show little improvement, and the school remains under threat of closure.

At the other end of the educational spectrum, elite colleges and universities remain in thrall to process and workshop pedagogies, now given new impetus by the portfolio move-

ment. At the university where I teach, the writing program director ended a long-standing commitment to provide all graduate student composition instructors with a crash course in grammar, prose mechanics, and the rules of usage, along with strategies for imparting these effectively in the classroom, because he viewed the “de-contextualized” teaching of grammar as out of step with best practices in the field of composition. When faculty asked why the review of grammar had been dropped, they were directed to the so-called Braddock Report of 1963, which concluded that direct grammar instruction is “useless, if not harmful.”⁴ Discontinuing grammar instruction freed up time for technological initiatives, ePortfolio and Digication, along with increased focus on academic argument, all likewise sold as best practice.

Recognizing that what happened at my university is part of a nationwide trend, I posed this question to a leading portfolio theorist in America and to the ePortfolio technologist at my school: has anyone published an analytical study comparing portfolio-based writing instruction to the more traditional approach of students submitting (whether electronically or in hard copy) frequent finished products that are returned in a timely fashion with comments and a grade? No one could produce such information. Instead, I was informed that recent research questions the value of graded assessment and calls for more fully “contextualized” writing and evaluation. Further, ePortfolio need not justify itself in comparison with more traditional approaches because the new benefits it brings to the classroom alter the goals of composition itself: portfolio makes learning “visible” to students; it gives them experience with new writing technologies; it helps teachers emphasize all stages of the writing process; it gives students something to carry away from class and use in future job applications, much as artists and designers do.

These assertions ignore the fact that students, like athletes, artists, musicians, lawyers, doctors, electricians, and soldiers—indeed, all who seek to master complex crafts and professions efficiently—learn through repetition of carefully sequenced tasks, reviewed by caring teachers. Ask Bill Russell how he acquired his skills as a basketball player; ask Twyla Tharp how she learned the arts of dance and choreography; ask Robert Louis Stevenson how he learned to write.⁵ They all say the same thing: conscious, creative, repeated emulation of good models. It is possible that a well-designed technology might assist such an approach. But in the case of ePortfolio, as with other recent innovations, technology tends to serve whatever pedagogical theories are ascendant

Of course there is nothing wrong with technology itself. Students live and breathe in the electronic ether. What pedagogy could afford to ignore it? No one wants to subject students to Gradgrind-esque grammar drills, so let’s liberate native speakers from knowledge of the structure of their own language (and then complain when they have trouble learning foreign languages). We’re constantly manipulated by commercial culture, so let’s make critical thinking, reading, and writing the principal goals of adult literacy. Bad grades

sometimes discourage, so let's find better ways to motivate students.

When these half-truths coalesce into a system that claims to be liberal and liberating, student-centered and up-to-date—a system, moreover, that dictates outcome goals for writing programs nationwide—then we can begin to see why we are failing to fulfill our mission in English language education, and why the crisis pervades all regions, races, schools, and income levels. Increased investment, better equipment, and even more skilled teachers cannot counteract conformity to a flawed and hopelessly politicized pedagogy.

We should take seriously the Task Force's statement that an "after-action report from a U.S. military intelligence headquarters in Iraq, found that, of a staff of 250, only 'four or five personnel were capable analysts with an aptitude to put pieces together to form a conclusion'" (10). But we should also question the way the Task Force interprets this fact. Was it critical thinking these personnel lacked? Sure, but also something more fundamental: the skills necessary to comprehend texts that present a range of stylistic and conceptual difficulties. The humanist tradition always emphasized these skills because its model of writing made accurate comprehension of texts a prerequisite for critical response. Humanists were first of all *translators* from one language to another, one genre into another. Their purpose was to make complex ideas available to a wider audience. Their pedagogies kept this goal in mind, which is why grammar, recitation, translation, imitation, paraphrase, summary, and explication were among the foundations of learning. The critical thinking movement rushes our students past this training; it views the humanistic arts of imitation and variation as insufficiently analytical. Unfortunately, the Council on Foreign Relations' clarion call merely recapitulates the anti-humanism that has gripped American secondary and post-secondary education since the 1960s.

The profession of Composition and Rhetoric has a long and distinguished history. Educators in the trenches of college composition and high school English perform noble service. We should honor and reward their work. However, we should think twice before recommitting to failing technological and pedagogical strategies. If the failure of K-12 education in the U.S. really amounts to such a dire threat, then follow through on the analogy. Go into the field and judge the situation from the ground. Test your weapons before buying more, if you are concerned about national security.



NOTES

- 1 Abraham Flemming, *A Panoplie of Epistles, or a Looking Glasse for the Unlearned* (London: Ralph Newberie, 1576), sig. v verso. The passage comes from the introductory epistle, "To the Learned and Unlearned Reader."

- 2 The Report does acknowledge inequalities in U.S. education based on region (see p. 17), but also states that the entire system lags behind the international competition.
- 3 *A Panoplie of Epistles*, "To the Learned and Unlearned Reader," sig. v verso. Abraham Flemming (also, Fleming, c.1552-1607) was an Elizabethan translator, "learned corrector" (editor), and humanist, who eventually became rector of the parish of St. Pancras Somers Town. He entered Peterhouse College, Cambridge as a sizar, or poor scholar, and became a prolific translator of a great diversity of works, including the first English translation of Virgil's *Bucolics* (1575) and Synesius's *A Paradoxe, Proving by reason and example, that Baldnesse is much better than bushie haire* (1579). In *A Panoplie of Epistles* Flemming "combines features of humanist educational theory with those of self-education manuals for the literate merchant classes, which had surged in popularity with the rise of printing." See the article by Patricia Brace in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 236: British Rhetoricians and Logicians, 1500-1660, First Series. A Brucoli Clark Layman Book, ed. Edward A. Malone (Missouri Western State College: Gale Group, 2001), 126-39.
- 4 Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1963). "For many years now," writes David Tomlinson, "opponents of grammar in the classroom have been able to shut down debate by saying that scientifically rigorous studies have repeatedly shown grammar teaching to have absolutely no effect on developing writing skills. They are mistaken." "Errors in the Research into the Effectiveness of Grammar Teaching," *English in Education* 28 (1994), 20. Commenting on the Braddock Report, John Mellon states that "it maligns a method of teaching that has worked . . . throughout the history of education." "A Taxonomy of Compositional Competencies," in Richard Beach and P. David Pearson, eds. *Perspectives on Literacy: Proceedings of the 1977 Perspectives on Literacy Conference* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1978), 247-72. Martha Kolln adds, "That famous statement [Braddock's claim that grammar is 'useless if not harmful'] has probably had a more harmful effect on our students . . . than all the time spent memorizing rules and diagramming sentences." "Closing the Book on Alchemy," *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981), 147.
- 5 See Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979) 66-67; Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it for Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 162-63; Robert Louis Stevenson, "A College Magazine," in *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1887). I develop this argument more fully in "A Rescue Plan for College Composition and High School English," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* July 27, 2009; <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Rescue-Plan-for-College/47452>.

Human Capital versus Human Creativity

Lee Oser

The dominant power of the twenty-first century will depend on human capital.

— “U.S. Education Reform and National Security,” p.xiii

The phrase “human capital” rings like a lost cell phone throughout the recent report of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. I recall there were times when, inspired by Aristotle’s reactionary belief that “All men by nature desire to know,”¹ I would open the CFR report to learn the truth about “human capital.” In an extended coffee jag, though, I read through a large pile of recent books written by economists from Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and other institutions my immigrant grandparents chose not to attend. It turns out (I am sad to say) that the phrase “human capital” owes its popularity to that strident and stridulous breed, *homo economicus yahoo*. You see, the truth about economists is basically this. An economist, unless he brings to his discipline a well-rounded education and a deep knowledge of human nature, is a person with powers of predicting the future—in a world of probabilities. If the ship hits an iceberg, a war breaks out, the price of oil skyrockets, the quarterback twists his ankle, or a large fly lands on top of a spotless vanilla wedding cake, things will not go as planned. In other words, your average economist is a cog in a system that serves no other end than spinning its own shiny wheels. That doesn’t stop him, though, from wanting to remake the rest of us in his image.

What exactly is wrong with the phrase “human capital?” In the writings of economists who have a philosophical outlook, the phrase may have some merit. (Theory has its place in any discipline, and humanities professors have their own sins to answer for.) In the writings of corporate managers and academic hacks, it is a phrase that treads like a monster of oblivion over the universal moral principle that a person should be regarded as an end in herself, not as a means to the end of others. It strikes a blow against the individual. It strikes a blow against the dignity of real labor. It is not even good capitalism, which recognizes that the market cannot supply the virtues (honesty and the like) that make capitalism possible. Wise capitalists, speaking in public, might say that the most important resource is

people, not that people are human capital. Slaves are human capital. There will be those who object, "You provide a service, nothing more, nothing less." This opinion is naïve not only about what it means to maintain a reliable and trustworthy workforce, but also about where the necessary virtues come from. Social interaction is a complex phenomenon with many aspects outside the cash nexus: many an economist would benefit from picking up his old dog-eared copy of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick Carraway was a bond salesman.

In J. H. Newman's *Idea of a University*, written before the Computer Era (BCE) by an English priest who was not primarily concerned with national security, the author laments the arrival at Oxford University of a new breed of specialist, "political economists" they were called, the forerunners of today's *homo economicus yahoo*:

I only say that, though they speak truth, they do not speak the whole truth; they speak a narrow truth, and think it a broad truth; that their deductions must be compared with other truths, which are acknowledged to be truths, in order to verify, complete, and correct them. They say what is true, with necessary exceptions; what is true...but must not be ridden too hard, or made what is called a *hobby*; true, but not the measure of all things; true, but if thus inordinately, extravagantly, ruinously carried out, in spite of other sciences... sure to become but a great bubble, and to burst.²

Being human beings like the rest of us, the managers of "human capital" are not likely to remark how this "great bubble," inflated with so much rhetorical helium by a wordy English pedagogue, resembles any number of great bubbles that seem to follow them around, popping now and then with a gloomy and deafening reverberation, but only because of some unfortunate disagreement over a fine point of *yahoonomics*. In retrospect, at least, the true specialist can always stop the bubble from bursting.

I fear the habit of thought that popularized the phrase "human capital" is gathering momentum and will sweep away everything in its path. We need to invest wisely in human capital to grow the economy, which should be more robust. The dominant power of the twenty-first century will depend on human capital. We are tempted to say to human capital, "Buck up! Face your destiny!" But from the point of view of well-rounded human beings before we are all converted into human capital, the thinking of *homo economicus yahoo* looks like a form of intellectual cancer. If untreated, it will devour the creative energies it seeks to harness. American society may accomplish this destructive feat with the best of intentions, including national security, a need no rational person can dismiss. We may accomplish it with nothing but pride and avarice, and (much to our credit) without the least trace of lust, envy, wrath, sloth, or gluttony. But if creativity is something we value, we must scrap the "human capital" approach.

Regrettably, there is no tried-and-true method for growing geniuses like petunias. The author of *The Idea of a University* is good on this point too:

Works of genius fall under no art; heroic minds come under no rule; a University . . . does not promise a generation of Aristotles or Newtons, Napoleons or Washingtons, of Raphaels or Shakespeares, though such miracles of nature it has before contained within its precincts.³

Our real moral obligation, and our best gamble as American educators, is, with a lively vigilance, to keep open the means to high achievement. Digital technology is a means to this end, not an end in itself, and any temporary confusion on this point can only hinder our students from realizing their best potential:

technology is largely still being used to advance old-style teaching and learning with old-fashioned uses of human capital. That is, computers and digital technology have thus far not been used innovatively to change the way the United States educates its students, but instead simply to reinforce past practices. (33)

This grandiose proposal—to use new technology as the basis for new educational practices—flaunts the utopian promise of technology (“synergy,” anyone?) while neglecting the possible advantages of “old-style teaching and learning.” Old-style education, if we mean by that a broadly humanistic tradition originating in Plato and Aristotle, renewed by Cicero, carried into modernity by Erasmus, shepherded by Jefferson, and at last delivered in full measure, after great political agitation, after immeasurable suffering, to the nation of Lincoln and Whitman, of Douglass and Stanton, well, at least that tradition has the advantage of experience. Its slower and quieter ways in the classroom are well suited to the human animal, who does not differ in essentials from his or her hunting-and-gathering ancestors, even if evolution offers the exciting prospect of a break from the genetic routine.

We should all agree by now that change is rarely an unalloyed good. Parents of schoolchildren have grown very sensitive to the dangers of too much “screen time.” Our sons and daughters are awash in billions and billions of dollars of educational technology; there are billions more to be made (or squandered); but so far the results are discouraging (as Mark Bauerlein has shown in *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*). Philosopher John Dewey argued that technology can help change the ends of education, by supporting a pluralism of goods that are forever in flux. Dewey meant well, but there is no guarantee, far from it, that such transformations would support the American tradition of democracy. Technology can spawn new goods that are incommensurable with the finest old ones. It can divide the public realm, exacer-

bate class distinctions, and build gene pools with new norms of physical and intellectual performance. As citizens and educators, let us draw a strong clear line between our ability to serve technology, and technology's ability to serve us.

The authors of the CFR report desire creativity, but they want to have it on their terms. Are their terms credible? "Creativity," observes neuroscientist Oliver Sacks, "involves the power to originate, to break away from existing ways of looking at things, to move freely in the realm of the imagination, to create and re-create worlds fully in one's mind—while supervising all this with a critical inner eye. Creativity has to flow with the inner life—with the flow of new ideas and strong feelings."⁴ As we know, the CFR report aims for high-level vocational training and marketable "skill sets." I would agree that these aims may emerge under the auspices of originality, imaginative thinking, and a critical inner eye. But high-level vocational training and "skill sets" will not, if left to hypertrophy, generate the kind of creativity that Sacks describes. Over time, if fed and refined as goods in their own right, apart from other modes of thought and feeling, they will inspire a lot of gadgetry, mechanize the imagination, and induce tunnel-vision. The educational focus is too narrow, the time-frame too short. Creative people need other stimuli than the shifting surfaces of a cash-value world.

A traditional liberal arts education cannot manufacture creativity, but it can attend to it, nurture it, and help guide it. At the same time, such an education can help us understand the uses and abuses of technology. These two mutually loving capacities—to open paths for creativity while seeking after wisdom—are in the national interest.



NOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 689 (*Metaphysics* 980).
- 2 John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 71.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 4 Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (London and Basingstroke: Picador, 1995), 230-31.

The Trouble with Testing

Helaine L. Smith

Much of the 103-page “U.S. Education Reform and National Security” report of the Task Force of the Council on Foreign Relations talks about tests and assessments and statistics. Among other things, the Report advocates “more technologically advanced assessments” (48); it suggests that the Defense Policy Board “periodically assess whether what and how students are learning is sufficiently rigorous to protect the country’s national security interests” (50); it contains statistical chart after statistical chart to prove its contentions—more tests are needed, new tests, tests to measure tests. What’s missing is the starting point, for the Task Force takes as a given the value of tests, and doesn’t “test” its own assumption.

As a student I took tests; as a reader for the College Board, I scored them; and in the classroom, I give them, but only occasionally and with some reluctance. Let me explain why.

In my first year of teaching, nearly forty years ago, I was blessed with a chairman who told me that learning should go on all the time, that even when students took tests they should be learning something new. No moment of teaching time, she said, should ever be wasted.

That’s a high but possible standard, and it’s also the only valid standard for anyone who cares about students.

What, then, is a good test? A good test is something with a moment of “aha!” in it, a moment when a student thinks of something she or he hadn’t thought of before. A good test grows out of the immediate experience of the classroom. It must, if it is to take students a step further. It cannot be created before a unit or a text is taught, but only afterwards, because each year each unit is different and that difference comes from the interaction of teacher and student, from the ideas that get tossed about and followed to their limits—that is, as far as the best minds in the class can take them. Never should a valid discussion be truncated because the teacher needs to prepare students for some looming test whose questions are pre-set. Of course, the ability of a teacher to guide such a discussion or grade such papers depends upon teachers having gotten degrees in academic disciplines, rather than in education. Nor should a teacher be compelled to use a textbook that has been written to

accord with test criteria. (Countries that do that tend to score well on these statistical charts. They produce many technicians, and teach their children that conformity and advancement within a set system are all-important.)

Even good tests are flawed. That's because some students, clever, inventive, and earnest, are bad test-takers. Their imaginations work in different channels and their pace, too, is different. I know this, not from having taught weak students, but from having taught "the best and the brightest." The Task Force, at least in one sentence within its Report, says we should nurture the imagination of students: "The Task Force believes that all young people—those who aim to work in national security and those who aim to work in corporations or not-for-profit organizations—must develop their imaginations from an early age" (47). Yes, of course. But if our country is deficient in its production of inventors and scientists, code breakers and researchers, people who, according to the Report, use their imagination—and we do not seem to be deficient in that regard—then making standardized tests the measure of academic achievement is entirely illogical. Einstein might not have passed a single standardized test. Nor Edison. I would press for something more modest and more difficult than "nurturing the imagination": I would suggest simply trying not to stifle the imagination.

Tests are also flawed measures of student learning because students learn over time, and tests measure short-term learning. No test tells us what students retain. Teachers with at least ten years classroom teaching experience—and that would appear to be no one on the Task Force—know that students, sometimes weak ones, come back years later to say that what they learned in sixth grade or tenth or twelfth became clear to them only much later, or that the habits of mind and the models their schools provided, things they did not fully grasp or "get" when they were younger, were not lost on them, and have served them well. Are students to be penalized for the natural processes of learning? Are teachers?

And what of standardized testing? How informative is it? At private schools and public schools—I have taught at both—teachers meet frequently to discuss the progress and needs of students. Before hearing what classroom teachers have to say, the school psychologist or guidance counselor or skills department expert reads to the group at large the student's score on standardized tests for Reading Comprehension, Verbal Ability, Reasoning, and so on. Time after time there is no correlation between these statistics, derived from industrially vetted tests, and student performance. Superb students sometimes have low scores, poor students high ones. Some, but not all, of these disparities can be ascribed to effort. The rest, for precisely the reasons that I have indicated above, call into question the value of tests.

And, since the Report finds its *raison d'être* in issues of national security, we should also look at the statistics upon which it relies for its conclusions. Those statistics are based on test results. Ranked very near the bottom of many of the charts in the Report, just above educationally-challenged Mexico, Chile and Turkey, is Israel. Israel produces, *per capita*,

more engineers, scientists, innovators, and Nobel Prize winners than any other country. More, *per capita*, than Finland, the country at the top of these same charts. The United States, Israel, and other countries that are, unlike Finland, melting pots, and that contain diverse populations and pockets of poverty, don't chart as well as more socially and culturally homogeneous nations.

The Task Force might have done something quite different. It might have jettisoned its own ties to the testing and textbook industries; it might have urged teachers to seek degrees in academic disciplines rather than in education; it might have advocated pre-kindergarten schools for children whose homes so disadvantage them that, by the time they enter kindergarten or first grade, they are already behind; it might have upbraided the media and the newspapers of record for the paucity of information and for the misinformation that those outlets provide about history and civics. The Task Force might even have taken to heart this best of all descriptions of teaching and learning:

You go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. Above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge. (Charles Goodford, Headmaster of Eton, 1861)

Had the Task Force done any of these things, teachers and students would be in its debt. But politicians seeking an easy object of blame and the vast educational industry itself might be less than pleased.

Some Modest Objections

Virgil Nemoianu

I read with mixed feelings the Rice/Klein report (“U.S. Education Reform and National Security”). Its intentions and most of its assessments seemed to me good and judicious, and even some of its proposals are broadly correct. Yet the very discourse it uses (fuzzy and abstract) somehow illustrates the very problems it strives to solve. The solutions it suggests place the Report as an additional link in the chain of tedious regulations and comments of the last thirty years (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; more recently Race to the Top, Teach for America, and others) that had little if any impact on the situation on the ground. The Report is close to becoming just another of those successive measures that have the mischievous tendency to melt into futility when they do not actually worsen the situation they claim to cure.

First the question: is the preparation of American K-12 students nowadays indeed less substantial than it ought to be? Less substantial than in the past? Let us look at just a few questions selected out of an exam requested for graduation from eighth-grade American students almost 120 years ago:

Grammar. 1. Give nine rules for the use of capital letters. [...] 3. Define verse, stanza, and paragraph. [...] 6. What is punctuation? Give rules for principal marks of punctuation. *Arithmetic.* [...] 3. If a load of wheat weighs 3942 lbs., what is its worth at 50cts/bushel, deducting 1050 lbs for tare? [...] 5. Find the cost of 6720 lbs. coal at \$6.00 per ton. 6. Find the interest of \$512.60 for 8 months and 18 days at 7 percent. [...] *U.S. History.* [...] 4. Show the territorial growth of the United States. [...] 7. Who were the following: Morse, Whitney, Fulton, Bell, Lincoln, Penn, and Howe? 8. Name events connected with the following dates: 1607, 1620, 1800, 1849, 1865. *Orthography.* [...] 3. What are the following and give examples of each: trigraph, subvocals, cognate letters, lingual? [...] 5. Give two rules for spelling words with final “e.” Name two exceptions under each rule. [...] 7. Define the following prefixes

and use in connection with a word: bi, dis, mis, pre, semi, post, non, inter, mono, sup. [...] 9. Use the following correctly in sentences: cite, site, sight, fane, fain, feign, vane, vein, raze, raise, rays. [...] *Geography*. [...] 2. How do you account for the extremes of climate in Kansas? [...] 7. Name all the republics of Europe and give the capital of each. 8. Why is the Atlantic Coast colder than the Pacific in the same latitude?¹

Not much comment is needed. Clearly nowadays hardly any college undergraduate, and only a relatively small section of graduates are endowed with the amount of information and discriminatory sophistication to provide correct answers to such questions. The decline is entirely real.

This selective quote and the comparison it imposes are helpful, I believe, in explaining where the Report errs. It is less often in what it says, but frequently in what it fails to say. I will enumerate (briefly, for reasons of time and space) some specifics.

The Report rightly tells us that the teaching of civics ought to be more emphatic, that this field ought to be enhanced, quantitatively and qualitatively, in the classroom. However, it fails to touch even gingerly the issue of ethical and religious values. Civics taken out of their natural environment, the ethical and religious one, is like a fish out of water: it cannot be well explained historically, and it is devoid of a supportive structural framework. I admit that specific advice on how to actually implement this task remains a delicate and complicated issue, but then what are commissions for?

The knowledge of foreign languages and cultures: certainly a most desirable purpose. The more, the better! Yet how can this intention be achieved when the underlying teaching philosophy is one of uniformity, of political correctness, of the imposition of strict relativist dogmas? Besides, the replacement of clear-cut disciplines such as history, geography, zoology and others with broad and imprecise fields such as "social sciences" and "life sciences" seems to me a culprit here. Be that as it may, the emphasis on "information" in the Report is fully justified. Without informational precision and abundance, it is hard to imagine cultural grasp and linguistic skills.

Better teachers, with social dignity and financially satisfactory rewards! Who on earth can disagree with this battle-cry? But then how can one obtain this, on the basis of a Report that repeatedly and emphatically distinguishes between leaders/managers (i.e. the very bureaucracy that is elsewhere in the text deplored) and actual teachers (contemptuously, or should we rather say, contemptibly) several times described as "human capital" by the authors? Unless teachers are endowed with substantial decision-making authority and powers, it is doubtful that anything will change. This authority, in turn, rests on their being trained in real disciplines, not in empty forms of pedagogy. Simultaneously, as long as stricter rules of school discipline are not devised and instated, teachers will (very naturally) hesitate to

make the appropriate instructional efforts, full well knowing that they will be unsuccessful.

Of course I subscribe to and applaud the (less than frequent) passages in the Report that express reserve toward the proliferation of school bureaucracies. Yet can I honestly trust such exclamations, when the whole text is swarming with alphabet soups of armies upon armies (PISA, NAEP, OECD, PARCC, SBAC and the rest) of "controllers," "monitors," "regulators," and "evaluators?" Or when the reliance upon these is such that few if any ask themselves any longer about the de-personalizing consequence of avalanches of forms and the simplifications they imply? We are all enthusiastic about the role of the computer in our lives and cannot imagine existing without it (I among these many); yet should we not also raise the issue of whether organic personalities and minds are smothered and dried up by its relentless reductions and, yes, "robotizations?" All too often rigidity, reductions, and distortions are the outcome of these mechanical formalizations.

Lack of imagination and initiative. Well, I submit that it is precisely the humanities (marginalized in the Report) that could provide such flexibility. Let me offer another quotation, this time culled from the internationally celebrated Italian philosopher-semiotician Umberto Eco. He defines the usefulness of literature as a mode to "cultivate abilities such as perceptual alertness, rapid induction, construction of hypotheses, positing of possible worlds, moral sophistication, linguistic proficiency, value awareness."² If this is true, and I am profoundly persuaded it is, then it is in literature that we can seek and find an answer to many of the dis-satisfactions of the Report's authors.

Additionally, I must say that I am less than interested in the authors' hot or obsessive concern for the military usefulness of graduates, their relevance for "national security." Simple ruthless objective selectivity will heal such bouts of anxiety. Transforming the school system into a laboratory for social experimentation, seeking uniformity of outcomes, and leveling gender, class, and other distinctions have proved to be rather hopeless after insistent attempts.

While all I said until now referred to issues of *partial incompleteness*, I will conclude with something that constitutes a *second*, equally major, field of discussion. The current imperfections of child and adolescent education have to be judged keeping in mind that school instruction (particularly in contrast with education two or three centuries ago) has to compete with a tidal wave of external information, with huge packages of information reaching the ears and the minds of children and teenagers early on, as well as during their schooling. Again: this is something that most commentators seem unaware of, or uninterested in. Nevertheless, this is the actual content of the real world that surrounds, affects, and colors everything else.³ A more helpful "report" would have to start from here.



NOTES

- 1 These are some of the questions presented in 1895 at the eighth-grade final exam in Salina, ks. The original document is on file at the Smokey Valley Genealogical Society and Library and was published in the *Salina Journal*. (The whole exam was supposed to last six hours.) I would like to thank Ms. Alyce-Ann Bergkamp-Woroniak, Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences at Catholic University of America, for directing my attention several years ago to this information. By the way, is anybody engaged in the study of exams at different levels in the American school system over the last two centuries? If so, it would be interesting to hear something about it. If not, why not?
- 2 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979). Cited in Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 141 and in Virgil Nemoianu, *Post-modernism and Cultural Identities* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. 179.
- 3 Again, this seems a key topic almost totally ignored by historians/sociologists: and yet it is perhaps the most important in the field. The indifference is not entirely surprising, since the whole matter of the impact of information on sociopolitical developments is ever hardly touched upon, except in the most superficial way.

The CFR Task Force Report on “U.S. Education Reform and National Security”: A Reply and a Response

James Engell

I

During the last fifty years, America often has acted wisely to remain secure and to secure freedom for others. However, during that same time, significant failures of American foreign policy have stemmed from an ignorance of history, religion, culture, and language. These failures damaged national security, weakened the nation’s economy, and added greatly to its debt. No matter what one’s view of the Vietnam War, involvement in Nicaragua and El Salvador, sending marines to Lebanon, prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, America’s role in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, or our comparatively small engagement with Africa while China pushes full bore on that continent, the mistakes involved in deciding to wage wars, promulgating long wars, and carrying out relations with unstable nations cannot trace their origins to technical, scientific, or entrepreneurial shortcomings, nor to failures of our public schools.

On the contrary, American technology and science have been at the forefront. The agony of Vietnam, its cost in more than 50,000 American and more than half a million Vietnamese lives; the nearly decade-long war in Iraq, its more than 700 American civilian and more than 4,450 American military lives lost (several times that in serious, debilitating injuries), as well as at least one hundred thousand Iraqi lives; the war of a dozen years in Afghanistan with more than 2,000 American lives lost (1,000 in the last two years); and the vast financial burdens of these undertakings, estimated for the second Iraq war alone at two trillion dollars and for Afghanistan at 500 billion: none of these deaths, costs, or debts can be attributed to an inferior level of scientific or technical knowledge, to a failure in innovation and entrepreneurial spirit, or to poor public schools.

One can counter that hindsight is twenty-twenty. However, at the time these decisions were made, informed and dissenting voices warned against them, or warned against the manner in which they were being executed. Many decisions proved misguided and costly. They required further intervention, expense, and sacrifice of life to mitigate or rectify.

In the last fifty years, individuals in power in both major political parties have made decisions about the use of power without adequate, operative knowledge of the *specific* histories, faith, cultures, and languages of many nations they engaged. (It is their education that we should be concerned about, too, as well as that of our students.) Yet, such knowledge was available and often presented to them. Some officials admitted errors. President Kennedy apologized for the failure of the Bay of Pigs. Robert McNamara later conceded that as Secretary of Defense he possessed fatal ignorance of Vietnamese history. President Reagan honorably apologized for the deaths of 241 marines he sent to Lebanon. President Clinton remarked that his biggest regret in foreign policy was not to confront genocide in Rwanda. Richard A. Clarke, once head of the Counter-terrorism Security Group and later the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-terrorism, as well as chief counter-terrorism adviser on the National Security Council, apologized to "the loved ones of the victims of 9/11." Other officials have been stubborn in silence.

The point is this: the most costly and longest-lasting damage brought about by myopic decisions in foreign relations has been caused by relative ignorance of the way people elsewhere live, what they believe, the languages they speak, the values they hold sacred, and the particular history, *more remote as well as recent*, that motivates them. These subjects fall within the qualitative social sciences and the humanities—history, the study of religion, language, philosophy and ethics, and also the cultural arts, which represent all these subjects through the lens of specific and dramatic human experiences. The CFR report mentions history, enjoins attention to "world" or "global cultures," and promotes the study of languages. However, languages are discussed only as an instrument for "diplomatic, military, intelligence, and business contexts" (12), rather than *also* for understanding the customs, habits, values, and long histories of foreign nations, peoples, and their leaders. Furthermore, today's "strategic language" might well not be tomorrow's. Familiarity with a "local culture" is cited only as something that soldiers should know in order "to correctly read and assess situations they encounter" (12). Indeed, knowledge of cultures is strongly placed foremost in a military context (12). If policymakers themselves heeded such knowledge more, then perhaps soldiers would need it less often. Startlingly, the scenario in the Report seems to assume that an *imposed* American military presence within other sovereign states will constitute a regular feature of our foreign relations.

The study of world religions, repository of the deepest values of almost every culture and nation on Earth, is not mentioned once in the Report. As this is being written, a U.S. Army veteran has apparently shot and killed six Sikh worshippers at a temple north of Milwaukee in what the FBI is treating as an act of domestic terrorism. News sources indicate he was a white supremacist. In our country the history of crimes against Sikhs, Muslims, and, in the past, against Jews, Mormons, and Catholics, is long.

President Obama has recently announced a program for grades K-12 in which teach-

ers of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) will be eligible for \$20,000 above their regular salary. This is good news, but there is sadly no parallel talk of increased funds for education in writing, reading, speaking, history, languages, culture, or the study of humans as religious beings, areas in which we fare no better (in some, arguably far worse) than our K-12 international performance in science and math.

II

Speculative and unscrupulous individuals operating in under-regulated environments, often trusting to sophisticated mathematical models and backed by highly technical knowledge, have perpetrated huge financial damage to this country, even fraud, and weakened the security of this nation. In addition, the purity of rational market theory has been refuted in real-world practice. These observations do *not* argue against free markets or capitalism. Rather, they argue for adequate regulation and against the myth that an unregulated market can promote or reward honesty and social conscience when it permits unscrupulous actors to thrive. Main Street has lost far more than Wall Street. Was this ethical?

Studies show that in our schools, public or private, student cheating, dishonesty, and plagiarism are on the rise. School administrators in many locations have themselves been caught cheating in order to make the performance of their students look better. Federal and other studies indicate that scientific misconduct and falsification of scientific data are increasing problems. A society without ethical education cannot expect either good government or real security, no matter what shape its laws take or how "reformed" its educational system. The damage done may come slowly but the rot is deeper. The Report says nothing about ethical or moral aspects of education.

The Founding Fathers of the United States all believed that human nature is inherently flawed and that, given opportunities, it will amass power and pursue monopoly. Madison's *Federalist 10* is good reading on this subject, as are statements by Franklin (e.g., his final speech to the Constitutional Convention), Washington (e.g., his Farewell Address), and others who warned about the natural tendency of human beings to pursue power and wealth beyond the point where power and wealth corrupt. The entire scheme of American government with its checks and balances is predicated on preventing power from falling into the hands of any one faction in any branch for any prolonged period of time. Adam Smith warned against monopolies and urged behavior commensurate with fair and widespread social improvement, not the sharp enrichment of a small wealthy class. In most popular interpretations, his *Wealth of Nations* has been bastardized, and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which regards sympathy as a key to the long-term success of any society, has been ignored.

The Report is laudable in calling for renewed education in civics, yet such education should not be largely celebratory or purely informational. It should be also cautionary and

ethical. The original security of this nation, the organization of its government and the bedrock of its Constitution, were founded on the suspicion that tyranny and greed from within would constantly practice chicanery and subterfuge: tyranny not only from external enemies, but *first* coming from our own proclivities. And education in civics should point out the long, often continuing struggles of disenfranchised groups in American society—those enslaved, women, subsistence wage earners, ethnic and religious minorities, those whose adult private sexual lives do not conform to the sexual lives of the majority, and the disabled. As the country has become more powerful, it has slowly but surely acted to remove barriers to full citizenship and equal rights. We are much stronger for it. Until all citizens not convicted of a crime enjoy *exactly* the same federal rights under the Constitution and Bill of Rights (and are subject to the same duties), our polity will continue to suffer.

III

Corporations and businesses rightly expect that American education will provide graduates with skills in math, science, communication, critical reading, and the ability to solve problems cooperatively and to think imaginatively. However, it is another matter to demand that high schools and colleges completely train graduates for a wide array of specific jobs, especially when the nature of those jobs is fast changing. In the last fifty years, large American corporations have, on the whole, reduced the percentage of their budgets spent on job training (exact figures depend on what are chosen as the initial and final comparison years). A lot has changed in corporate culture, including the assumption that most employees will stay with the firm for decades—too much downsizing and outsourcing. The real point is that some corporations, as John Kenneth Galbraith years ago predicted, now expect that American education should simply be a servant or handmaiden, saving them money in job training and producing not critical thinkers who might rock the status quo, but ready-to-work employees who will nevertheless not enjoy real job security, and whose innovations will often mean that they themselves will not hold patents for what they invent—their employers will.

If “informational texts” in the Common Core Standards indicate intellectual prose, then all the better. After many years in which schools and colleges have downplayed literature and its formative power, we should be enlisting more teachers to do what some have always done well, present human affairs and experience not as bare facts but as actions and motivations in complex contexts that always need to be interpreted. Every “informational text” cries out for interpretation. It is not a series of “take-away” or bullet points summarized in skeletal outline. Harry Truman urged anyone who cares about leadership to read history and biography. Edmund Burke believed the Greek tragedians as good a guide to historical tragedies of foreign and domestic relations as political study, and he saw the involvement

of Great Britain in its American War as a latter-day Greek tragedy. Lord North and King George did not listen to him. Jefferson studied rhetoric and moral philosophy at William and Mary and said that his teacher in that subject (as well as in mathematics), William Small, "probably fixed the destinies of my life." The Declaration of Independence is a document of the kind that Small and Jefferson's textbook in rhetoric advocated as the most irrefutable of statements, a syllogism whose major premise is a self-evident truth. Lincoln immersed himself in poetry and rhetoric, in literature, Shakespeare, and the Bible. Teddy Roosevelt loved literature and among presidents probably knew more poetry than any other. JFK praised Robert Frost and the power of the poet to critique power itself. In a more distant past, John Milton became a considerable political figure in his office as well as in his art; an understanding of the forces of rebellion, class inequalities, and human oppression might also be taken from William Blake, John Steinbeck, or Jane Addams. More recently, Ronald Reagan owed much to what William Wordsworth calls "the hemisphere of magic fiction." Reagan's work in radio, film, and television not only made him a marvelous communicator able to achieve intimate yet authoritative touch with the American people, it also opened him to the wider world of ideas and values. It is foolish to criticize him as an "actor" who read lines written by someone else. The modern arts of representation largely shaped his character. As a related point, ask young people around the world what they *most* admire and like about the United States today and the common answers embrace our movies, art, poetry, literature, and music. Such soft power is priceless, and it creates no deficit.

"Wild Bill" Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services in WWII and in WWI the recipient of the three highest military honors that the U.S. Army and Congress could bestow, including the Congressional Medal of Honor, read military history avidly. Yet his favorite reading was Shakespeare. When he visited a beleaguered England in 1940 to speak with MI5 and the Head of MI6 (and also bumped into a British intelligence officer by the name of Ian Fleming—the oo Ian Fleming), he gathered valuable information for FDR. On his return to the United States, the British Air Force tucked him in his transatlantic boat plane with a bottle of champagne and a volume of the writings of Edmund Burke. Later, when America entered the war, Donovan and the novelist Pearl S. Buck warned FDR against the internment of Japanese Americans. He ignored their advice.¹

IV

It is salutary that the Report mentions imagination and the emphasis of the 9/11 Commission Report on that quality of mind and feeling. Yet in this respect the CFR Report seems to miss more than half the game. After stating the obvious, that students should "develop their imagination from an early age" (47), it gives no example how this might be done—by the creative and performing arts, perhaps?—and then immediately discusses only patents

and inventions (47). These are indeed vital. One of Abraham Lincoln's most amazing (and little known) speeches is specifically on patents and inventions, still worth reading. Lincoln himself held a patent for lifting boats over shoals on navigable waterways, the only patent ever held by a US president. We need more patents and inventions, as well as the ability to capitalize on and manufacture them.

Yet, emphatically, this is *not* the kind of imagination that the 9/11 Report laments was absent in the time prior to that tragedy. It is an unimaginative misreading of the 9/11 Report to think so. When the 9/11 Commission Report decries a lack of imagination, it points not to a failure to invent devices or software needed to solve specific problems or to facilitate greater ease and productivity. Rather, it points to a failure to construct possible outcomes from the welter of current events, information, and capabilities at hand, not a technical failure but an imaginative and cooperative failure. Here imagination means constructing and sharing a narrative of possible events, inventing or imagining not new material goods or technical devices but foreseeing the possible results of human motives and actions gleaned from extensive intelligence, and then actually heeding those narratives. This is something that can be done only through considerable reading and reflection in history, psychology, biography, and narrative art. It is precisely deep practice in reading and in producing narrative art through language or film that develops an imaginative ability to "connect the dots."

To say, as the Report does, that "short essay exams *might* still have a *limited* place" in student assessment (48, emphasis added) elevates information or sheer mechanical skill above information and skill viewed critically and placed in the service of complex judgments. Apparently, even essays of modest length are anathema, for they actually take time to read, correct, criticize, and revise. Instead, "more technologically advanced assessments that simulate real-world applications" are urged. It is not stated what these are. They apparently do not require genuine judgment, or much painstaking time for the teacher to assess. They represent problem solving handled mechanically or by automated grading—in other words, with no imagination. Used exclusively, such student assessment is exactly what authoritarian governments relish.

v

One of the permanent and now fastest growing areas of national security—the Pentagon knows this if no one else does—is environmental security regarding food, water, climate, rare earths, energy sources, pollutants, and more. This pertains to environmental conditions globally and within the United States, with focus on hot spots. One cannot grasp the possible future of Africa without grasping its environmental fragilities. And one cannot approach the Middle East or Pakistan—or the American west and southwest—without carefully studying water scarcity and floods. The melting of Arctic ice is another case in

point. Though this may provide a new race for fossil fuels and minerals under an ocean previously covered with thick ice, burning fossil fuels is intensifying droughts, enlarging floods, expanding wildfires, and creating more extreme natural events. Nevertheless, we do not give students sufficient education in environmental study. Few schools require it. The CFR report never mentions it. Students often do not learn the science of largely human causes of climate change now forcing accelerated species extinction and extremes of temperature, rainfall, and violent storms, as well as a generally hotter climate.

Many schools also do not present to students the practice of personal, preventive health care, or the extent to which human pollution and environmental degradation increase many cancers. Cancer strikes one in three Americans. The president's national cancer panel, its members having been appointed by President George Bush, reported to President Obama in 2010 that environmentally caused and environmentally linked cancers are "grossly underestimated," and that carcinogens in our environment cause "grievous harm." It may sound naïve to state, yet it's a hard fact that our security is also weakened by an alarming increase in childhood diabetes and by a national epidemic of obesity. These two conditions sap military preparedness by limiting the pool of those qualified for service and they damage the economy by adding billions of dollars in health-care costs and by diminishing labor productivity.

From the past, Teddy Roosevelt provides an excellent model of a public figure deeply concerned with conservation, health, and the environment. He was militant against the power of monopolies and large industrial complexes, yet unafraid to promote American greatness, physical vigor, and competitive spirit.

Next Generation Science Standards and National Science Education Standards (National Research Council) offer one hope that science education will improve. As with Common Core standards in other subjects, these are taken up state by state and do not reflect a federal mandate. Yet, a nation in which nearly half the population believes that evolution is a largely untested theory, one to be rejected or "balanced" with other views such as intelligent design, is doomed to an attitude toward *all* science that will produce clear mediocrity and damage our security: we cannot pick and choose what science we support. At present, a ballot initiative in Missouri, if passed, would permit any student in public school to skip science lessons—or lessons of any kind—that the student could persuade authorities was somehow infringing on personal religious beliefs. This initiative would also apparently prohibit any teacher from assessing students' written or oral work in any subject, including science, in a way deemed to discriminate against the "religious content of their work." If personal religious belief is accepted *as part* of science—as part of *any* subject—true assessment is crippled if not impossible.

A country in which human-caused climate change is still openly “debated,” as if it were a mere hypothesis, as if the evidence were roughly equal on both sides, or as if thousands of international scientists were conspiring to foist it on a credulous world in order to gain grant money, cannot hope to execute wise policies. Nor can it hope to maximize the industry and profit from sources of alternative and renewable energy.

Blindness in our public acceptance of basic scientific results—results that the rest of the educated world has accepted after repeated scrutiny—a blindness often acquiesced to and even reinforced by public officials, has already cost the nation in disease prevention, agricultural production, sustainable resources, and, most troubling, in respect for the procedures and results of science itself. Such willful ignorance, masquerading as the legitimate skepticism practiced by genuine science, has negative impacts on our economy, foreign relations, and security. With time these impacts will deepen.

VI

The Report laudably points out the dearth of good educational opportunities for many citizens with lower incomes. A lack of social mobility increasingly grips the nation. However, rather than rely heavily on privatization of K-12 schools as a preferred solution, the root causes of middle and lower income stagnation and growing inequality might be an equally valid (or better) target. Moreover, at the post-secondary level, as recent Congressional investigations led by Senator Tom Harkin have demonstrated, it is shocking the amount of federal educational loans that end up in the coffers of for-profit educational institutions (i.e., companies) whose graduation rates run from the disastrous to the dismal, and whose job placement records are spotty. Executives heading these “institutions” often enjoy multi-million dollar salaries.

It is telling that multiple “Additional and Dissenting Views,” constituting ten of sixty-six pages in the CFR report proper, almost all criticize the heavy emphasis in the Report on shortcomings of public schools. These additional and dissenting views come primarily from individuals who have lived and worked as teachers in several different kinds of educational institutions (not just public schools), and who have often studied American education and its history with diligence and care.

In the late 1970s I spoke with Archibald MacLeish at his farm in western Massachusetts. He expressed concern that our national policies and the individuals responsible for our security were drifting away from principles of humanity and practical judgment embodied in historical, philosophical, and literary texts, fiction and non-fiction. He happened to state this while Jimmy Carter was in office, but he had in mind a trend of some decades. MacLeish

also worried that academic humanists, retrenching in the academy, were drifting away from public service and no longer viewed their subjects as part of a wider public inheritance with practical as well as aesthetic value. His worries, justified on both accounts, could be discounted as coming from a poet and literature professor. He won the Pulitzer Prize (for poetry and drama) three times; as Librarian of Congress he re-organized that institution; at Harvard he taught as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric; he won a Tony and an Academy Award, too. However, before that discount gets deep, it's helpful to recall that he spent his early career as a superb lawyer. He later wrote extensively for *Fortune*. In WWII he served as Director of the War Department's Office of Facts and Figures and as Assistant Director of the Office of War Information. He became Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and represented the United States at the creation of UNESCO. For both international relations experts and humanists, his worry over the growing split in our society between STEM subjects and economics and politics on the one hand, and humanistic learning on the other hand, is worth heeding.

All this is to say, yes, we desperately need more cyber security experts; we need more engineers; we need more scientists, a populace much more science literate, and better teaching of science and math in K-12 and colleges. We need to study foreign languages and cultures for business and military use. We need more entrepreneurs to apply knowledge and provide solutions to specific problems. Yet, even if we have all that, it will do only limited good and may even at some junctures do harm if we do not also have individuals who know the deep history and culture of other nations and of their own (and not simply since WWII or 1980), and the faiths and languages of other cultures as well as of our own, not for trade and the military purely but for a capacious grasp of other beliefs, social systems, and values. Our students should, in written and spoken communications, be able to articulate well-crafted judgments that reflect insight into human motivation and character. They should immerse themselves in the narrative arts. Ideally, many students will gain acquaintance with several areas: science, math, history, economics, civics, ethics, the arts and the humanities. A high level of technology brings advantages and greater prosperity, at least for many, yet a high-tech society and its military remain remarkably vulnerable to low-tech weapons and tactics. A high-tech society also remains prone to growing inequalities and to arrogance. In the last fifty years this is what experience has clearly shown.

There is a much in the CFR report to support. It is what the Report leaves out—and the resulting imbalance that the Report promotes—that is distressing. This is not a question of either/or, that is, of either the specific vision that the Report articulates or the more encompassing vision expressed here. We can and should have *both*. We cannot be a secure, leading nation without excellent scientific, mathematical, engineering, medical, and technical

education. We cannot be great without being utterly practical. Yet, we cannot and will not be a secure, leading nation without prizing and applying the knowledge, skills, and judgment gained from pursuing the lessons of history and culture, the lessons of languages as embodiments of beliefs and values, the lessons of world religions, the hard-won lessons of close reading and careful writing, and *all* the lessons of science. We cannot be great without cherishing and following ideals.

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NOTE

- 1 Douglas Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

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