

The Listening Post

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Column Editor

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Needed: Education for Economic Understanding

TOP-PRIORITY QUESTION this year, for succeeding issues of this Listening Post: How can teachers play their rightful part in forming public opinion and public policy?

Probably that flashes into your mind an image of teachers busy in civic organizations, plunging into politics. Rightly so. But before we get into all that, maybe we ought to remind ourselves of a sound old principle: It generally pays to clean up your own backyard first.

Perhaps more than any other one group, we ASCDers choose what America's youngsters shall become concerned about, study and discuss, and gradually grow to understand—and, by that token, what whole American families shall ponder, and slowly mature into a gathering concern and collective wisdom. Are we using the opportunity?—facing up to the responsibility?

Take Korea—that “lightning flash” suddenly revealing the stark outlines of the world's peril. In our classrooms this year, what are we going to do differently because of it? No one knows for sure what it means. Some say general war, now. Others predict long years of endless Koreas, wherein we wear ourselves to exhaustion while the massive heartland of the enemy grows ever stronger.

Suppose—to spend this brief space on one specific—it's to be the latter. This is the road that throws the heavier strain upon that long-range collective

wisdom which is the first business of the schools. What can we do about it?

We can—to take one specific again—teach economic understanding, because a lack of such understanding presents one great threat. The seldom-extravagant Senator Taft says that we shall have to spend on war production 50 or 60 billions a year, for at least 10 or 15 years. And many, facing such outlays, fear that they will “bleed our economy to death,” leaving us in the end a broken victim.

Well, how about that? Suppose the figure is somewhere near right: must it inevitably “bleed our economy white”? No! One might as well argue that our spending for tobacco, alcohol, movies and some other odds and ends will wreck us because they divert about the same amount from the “necessities of life.” As the economist sees it, there is only one essential difference between war production and other production: that we cannot personally buy back what we produce. But a determined people can buy war production collectively as it goes, and keep a sound, stable economy.

Of course, so great a sacrifice on the altar of war is a tragic waste, even if unavoidable. Inevitably it will eat into our reserves of basic resources, like iron and oil. Almost certainly it will cut deeply into the making of autos and many other things we value. But since when is that synonymous with the col-

lapse of our free American economy?

No, that disaster is not one which a nagging enemy can force upon us—only one which we can stupidly wreak upon ourselves. Our mortal enemy is an idea: that war years are the time when people—not just a few big industrialists, but millions of laborers, tradesmen and farmers as well—make a lot of money.

Oversimplified, here is what it all boils down to: Under the stimulus of big war production, national income is almost bound to be high, because income is generated by civilian production *plus* the making of war goods. Traditionally, we have financed most of the war production by borrowing, turning almost the total income back into the consumer market to inflate prices and create illusory shortages. Bad enough even for short emergency periods, this is the sure way to bleed ourselves to death in a long struggle.

But must we do it that way? Can we not, in sober wisdom, simply set aside in taxes as much of our expanded income as it takes to pay for protection? If we can, then we can maintain a solid economy and still have the highest standard of living in the world, growing ever stronger to meet whatever threats may come.

Can we generate the essential wisdom? There is the crux. We do not have it yet. Witness our timid leaders calling for a mere five billion dollars' boost in taxes while they authorize expenditures three or four times as large.

Yet the people stand ready—nay eager—to meet the crisis if only they understood. Education could create that understanding, not only of the one problem sketched above, which probably isn't the greatest, but of many, all related to the one underlying danger.

It won't be easy. It will take insight and vision. And it will take courage,

because there will be powerful opposition. Nothing less than a real mobilization of us professional people can carry it through.

But if we do decide to do it, we can. We have the know-how, and we can get the resources, including tremendous assistance from intelligent lay leaders, from government agencies such as the State Department, Department of Defense, and others. If we choose, we who serve at the engineering level in education, can speedily generate intense concern and will to work among the teachers. We can equip them with a wealth of sound resource materials of every sort. There is no reason why in this awful crisis our great school system should merely continue business as usual. It doesn't make sense that even the best teachers, eager to help, should be left unequipped to do much more than contribute a vague emotional concern.

We have the power to do a great service. In simple realism I propose that ASCD build an organization to mobilize ourselves on the largest scale we are capable of imagining, get the help of the best brains of the nation, decide exactly what we want to accomplish, and go to work.

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