

The Listening Post

Column Editor: C. Glen Hass
Contributor: Ernest O. Melby

What Is Behind the Attacks on Education?

VICIOUS attacks on education are now an old story to all of us. The pattern of the attacks is quite the same in all sections of the country. The arguments and charges made are now becoming threadbare with repetition. They have been answered time and again by those in daily contact with our educational system. Parents who frequently visit schools and members of parent-teacher associations who are familiar with the work of our schools know that the charges are false and that they are, in many instances, examples of the "big lie" technique. Most of us, however, have been so busy meeting the attacks that we have not had time to examine the philosophical structure out of which they come. In this column, we shall call attention to three striking characteristics of these vicious criticisms.

Anti-Intellectualism

In many cases the vicious charges against education are prime examples of anti-intellectualism. Quite often the article or speech attacking education will begin by misstating the philosophy of John Dewey or William Heard Kilpatrick or perhaps with a distortion of the philosophy of progressive or modern education. Thus John Dewey is said to advocate a thought control pattern of education; Kilpatrick is charged with advocating socialistic or "pink" education and some curious process is utilized to show a supposed connection between communism and progressive education. Any careful thinker who would read the contributions of

Dewey and Kilpatrick or the basic literature regarding progressive education would, of course, instantly conclude that the critic in question has completely distorted the meaning of what these men have written and the underlying philosophy of progressive education. This process of distortion is no accident or result of mere ignorance on the part of the writer. It is a studied process designed to attack the whole method of intelligence as it applies to education, and the solution of problems in our society. It is based upon the theory that an oft-repeated gross misstatement will be accepted by a large number of innocent people. Many people hearing these comments so frequently believe that since they are stated so often and not immediately repudiated they must be so.

Freedom depends on the method of intelligence. Public schools have been established and an educational system developed in order that our people might know how to seek the truth. The scientific method, the method of intelligence, has been and is our accepted process for seeking the truth. Anti-intellectualism thus attacks the very foundations of freedom. Those who employ it know exactly what they are doing. They are seeking to destroy the democratic process. And they know that an attack upon the public school system is an attack upon one of freedom's most vital foundations. It is important in dealing with these attacks to help our people understand that it is not only education that is being attacked but our free society itself.

Isolationism

A second characteristic of many of the attacks is their fundamental isolationist character. Quite often there is severe resistance to teaching about UNESCO or the United Nations. UNESCO may be charged with being under Communist influence and the United Nations may be accused of advocating world government and sacrificing the sovereignty of the United States. These attacks upon the study of international understanding in our schools are, of course, a part of a larger attack now being made upon the United Nations and UNESCO throughout the length and breadth of the country. Such attacks certainly are an anachronistic characteristic of present day America.

We have elected a new president who has expressed unequivocal support of the United Nations and a clear commitment to the assumption of full responsibility by the United States in world affairs. Our new president has named as secretary of state an outstanding advocate of America's international responsibility. He has named as a representative to the United Nations a United States Senator whose thinking is in international directions. In the period since the war we have expended billions of dollars in foreign aid and otherwise in meeting our international responsibilities. The United Nations is located in the United States—in New York City. It is financially and morally supported by our government. As a people we have put much of our faith in peace and security, on the effective functioning of the United Nations. It would seem that the American educational system could do little else but support American efforts in these directions as it is generally assumed it will support other aspects of American government and American policy. Yet

schools are attacked for teaching about the United Nations and for participating in the activities of UNESCO. Here again we have an example of the irresponsible character of many of the current attacks upon education. In this instance as in many others the design of the attack is to weaken the foundations of our free society.

Character Assassination

A third characteristic of the attacks is the repeated use of the technique of character assassination. In a nearby community a new attack has broken out against one of our outstanding school systems. In this instance two local organizations have joined hands in charging that about a dozen of the teachers in the school system are Communists or fellow-travelers. If an investigation were made, I am sure it would show that none of these teachers is even remotely connected with Communism, that all of them hate every form of totalitarianism, and that all of them are doing everything they can every day to prepare citizens who will be effective in maintaining a free society.

The question may well be asked—if this is the case, why are the charges made? I venture to say that at sometime or other the teachers in question have supported public housing, equal rights for Negroes, federal aid to education, support of the United Nations, and perhaps expressed themselves favorably concerning the TVA. Few of us can believe that the moving spirits in the current attacks on education seriously believe that they will locate any considerable number of Communists in the American school system. They are really not after Communists but after people who, through the years, have supported the American tradition, people who believe in freedom of speech, a free educational system and

a gradual process of economic, political and social democratization for our country.

The anti-intellectualism, the resort to militant isolationism and the character assassination all have the purpose of misleading our people, throwing fear into the hearts of teachers and destroying public confidence not only in education but in our whole democratic system. These techniques have been used over and over again in European countries where totalitarianism of one form or another has taken over. Those of us who have observed the Nazis, the Fascists and the Communists at work know exactly what the techniques are; and by now the results of such techniques are matters of history. We have an obligation to lay bare the nature of these attacks—helping our people to see what lies behind them and pointing out clearly what their effects are likely to be if they continue unanswered.

Remedy: Teaching Social Responsibility

The remedy for the situation is to make every school an outstanding example of the democratic process. In it we must constantly teach the method of intelligence, both by example and by

word of mouth. We must ever engage in an earnest, sincere search for truth. Our boys and girls must be taught to meet their social responsibilities both at home and abroad, by meeting their social responsibilities now. We must make a world-wide approach to the solution of our problems and not make a narrow provincial attack upon them. Finally we must emphasize in every possible way the sacredness of individual human personality. We must help boys and girls and men and women to see that any person's good name is his most sacred possession and that anyone who wantonly and irresponsibly destroys another person's good name is committing an offense not only against the person in question but against the very foundations of our free society. In the months and years to come we in the profession will need to think clearly, act wisely and ally ourselves with our friends in the larger community. The life of freedom is at stake and we have the obligation as prime defenders of freedom to warn our citizens against hazards to freedom and to join with them not only in its defense but in its further development.—*Ernest O. Melby*, dean, School of Education, New York University.

The Importance of People

(Continued from page 449)

obvious lack of scholastic fundamentals and interpret this child in terms of an ill-mannered and spavined quadruped? Should I deduct that in later life he might profitably follow the horses?

It's all so horribly complex. There

must be a middle ground. Someway I have to find it. In the meantime, I'm going to keep on loving those youngsters and take a chance that maybe some of them will turn out all right! —*Nellie M. Thomas*, Washington Junior High School, Rockford, Illinois.

Copyright © 1953 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.