

# Letters to the Editor

Contributors: Richard Barnes Kennan

H. Gordon Hullfish

## Of Conspiracy and Tactics

October 13, 1955

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

In the October 1955 issue of *Educational Leadership* I have just read an article bearing the title "Whose Conspiracy?" over the name of H. Gordon Hullfish. I am hastening to write you to correct what I am sure must be an error, for the "Hank" Hullfish I know is not the sort of man to raise the drawbridge, batten down the hatches, shutter and drape the picture windows and withdraw into the pearly dimness of an ivied bomb shelter! I am afraid that a well known character known as Pollyanna has forged the Hullfish signature.

Some years ago a very fine old man, with a great deal of experience in politics, told me that when a professional and ethical person attempts to do battle with an unscrupulous individual he is licked before he starts, because he will not stoop to the tactics of his opponent. Such is the difficulty of the high-minded treatment advocated in the item in the October magazine. If it were possible to discuss the problems that education is facing on an urbane and intellectual level, and if the trouble-makers would be "gracious," "modest," and "less arrogant," then the Utopia that the author of the article hopes for might readily be achieved.

But graciousness and "sweetness and light" do not prevail when one is up against the completely one-sided hearings and distorted reporting of a Reece Committee, the efforts to tar with one brush all "educationists" of a Bestor, or the misrepresentation of research findings of a Flesch.

Our best hope in education, it seems to me, is to maintain the same attitude toward the destructive critics that President Eisenhower is using with the leaders of the U.S.S.R. While we should be ready to meet them on a friendly basis wherever it is possible, we should keep our defenses strong, our public relations program active, our professional organizations alerted, and thus be sure that a period of relative calm does not allow us to be caught by a new wave of attacks that might be truly destructive of the American system of education that has contributed so much to our way of life!

Richard Barnes Kennan  
Secretary, National Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education, NEA.

October 18, 1955

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

Be assured. I wrote the column. Dick ought to be assured, too. I have batted down no hatches. And were

I able to move swiftly to the other aspect of his shifting figure, I would enter a denial on all other counts of his charge against the Pollyanna who took you in. I'll stay with the first aspect, however. I'll meet any of the unscrupulous on deck, and in the open. But when I do I want to be sure of two things: (a) what I am fighting for and (b) a chance to have informed the opponent before all the blows are struck.

Dick may remember that I stumbled into a meeting in his office, immediately after Bestor's initial blast, when he was engaged in conversation with representatives of the American Council of Learned Societies. At that time I suggested we had more of a common problem than we had differences and we had better get about the business of trying to solve it together. I still believe this to be the case. What he does not know is that I wrote the column in question immediately after a conversation with Bestor this summer, trying in it to say more explicitly what I had tried to get Bestor to hear as we talked. And what he had better know is that no call for retreat is issued, though one for a sharpened understanding of what we seek is. We must not act as if a few voices speak for the liberal arts area entire. They don't.

I am not sure what attitude President Eisenhower is using with the leaders of the U.S.S.R., hence Dick's advice on this score does not help too much. I am hopeful that the correspondence he is currently having with Bulganin means what it seems to mean, that we are prepared to give a bit where they are equally so prepared. At this

high level of life, where a balance of power has been reached a unit of fear seems to be emerging as the recognition grows that what has been balanced is, in fact, the potential means of annihilation of all. I doubt that the analogy with education quite holds, but to the degree that it is admitted we need to be as sure on our level what it is that is at stake as our national leaders need to be on theirs. I know no way to gain this surety other than to try repeatedly to cut through the hard coverings that both shield and blind the adversaries.

It was good of Dick to "rush to my defense." He forced me to examine my thinking once again. This is always good to do, if disturbing. I find nothing soft in my position. What I do find, rather, is the hard essence of our democratic being, the determination that not even the unscrupulous are going to be given the chance to shove us off the base from which we grow, the steady effort to find those points of insight and purpose which we may more fully share. This, in the effort to build a growing *togetherness* which no blatant critic can shatter. The tactics of the unscrupulous are in no way appropriate to the securing of our ends. Stoop to his tactics I will not do, therefore. But I will stoop to compromise, as T. V. Smith said Lincoln had courage enough to do. Paradoxically, democratic man may stoop to compromise and yet remain upright, knowing all the while that his eyes are fixed on the ever-emerging glory of the human spirit.

My temptation was to address this letter to Dick. I did not for just one reason. You were the man who was

taken in. I had only fallen from grace. He will get a copy, in any case.

H. Gordon Hullfish  
Professor of Education  
Ohio State University  
Columbus

November 4, 1955

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

I have received a carbon copy of the letter of October 18 that Dr. H. Gordon Hullfish sent to you. I am surprised, disappointed and reassured!

After re-reading the article, I am still surprised that Hullfish would express himself in such general terms of "sweetness and light."

I am disappointed that one who wrote in such ringing words as he did when he worked on the basic statement for *Public Education and the American Heritage*, would now write as though those principles are no longer in jeopardy.

I am reassured when Hullfish seems to argue that, after being sure that we know what the real issues are, and after we acknowledge that there is a real possibility of mutual annihilation, we meet sincere proffers of friendliness with friendly action on our part—that we make steady efforts to find points of insight and purpose that can be shared—but that we endeavor to keep ourselves strong and united so that the unscrupulous will not damage or destroy us in an unguarded period.

I am quite confident that, basically, we are not really far apart in our opinions on this matter. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that it has taken a great deal of effort to alert the profession to some very vi-



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cious and continuing efforts that threaten American education. I think there is real danger in statements that might lull us into a sense of false security.

Richard Barnes Kennan  
Secretary

P.S. I do recall very clearly the meeting with Dr. Bestor to which H.G.H. refers. It was at that lengthy session that I became fully convinced that Bestor was more interested in selling his books than he was in making a real contribution to the advancement of American education. I do not enjoy the prospect of a dagger being inserted between my ribs, even when the man who inserts it is smiling while he stabs—as Bestor must have been smiling when he last talked with Hullfish.—R.B.K.

*Note by Hullfish (Dec. 16, 1955)*

The meeting I referred to in my letter of October 18 was not a meeting in which Bestor participated, though his "charges" were being considered. Officers of the American Council of Learned Societies were meeting with Dick. I "stumbled in," was invited to "sit a while." I did. I made much the same proposal there as I did in the column editorial in October that disturbed Dick. It is apparent that no one in the meeting heard what I said. There are times when opponents cannot hear. I guess this is what worries me—in education, on the world scene.—H.G.H.

November 15, 1955

Editor, *Educational Leadership*  
Dear Sir:

Some day I shall have to write to Dick Kennan. My last conversation

with Bestor was notable, only in this regard: a knife, if present, was in my hands. I had to ask him why he wanted to be called an "educator" when he found this group to be so illiterate generally. Where he stumbles upon legitimate purposes for education we would do well to acknowledge this and then permit him to hang himself through his excesses which show even his liberal arts colleagues that he does not understand what he has come upon. I do not believe that he will gain lasting converts and now, in order to establish himself as the leader he has so obviously tried to make himself, he has spun out a theory which is, in its detail, meaningless for American life. Next year he is to go to Oxford. There he will spin happily, in all probability, on his own bottom, though some of the boys at the University of London may bring to the fore the fact of his growing aristocratic tendencies, tendencies they know to be inappropriate for current English life, too.

It may just be that Dick and I disagree at a critical point. I know that I disagree with many in the profession at such a point. It is this: we should have been engaged these many years past in the effort to build bridges of understanding between the liberal arts and the professional areas. We cannot delay the effort longer. There are good men in these areas (I could turn up

two dozen on this campus in an hour; given a crisis involving the freedom Dick works valiantly to protect, I could turn up two hundred). As we build these bridges Bestor may discover (I predict that he will) that his is a lonely island. Whatever the result, I am more prepared to take this alternative than I am to assume an inevitable warfare which forces me to include as enemies so many who now are clearly not.

Language is a limited, if necessary, instrument. Dick finds me going soft. I would insist that the ring of my present words, if they may be said to have one, differs not at all from those I wrote when we put together the American Heritage statement. The same principles are at stake; my commitment is no less. And, because of Dick's work, our chance to defend them in education has been increased.

H. Gordon Hullfish  
Professor of Education

December 3, 1955

Editor, *Educational Leadership*  
Dear Sir:

The last letter from H. Gordon Hullfish is right up to par! I am sure that he is still the same leader in the battle for freedom, including intellectual freedom, that he has always been.

Richard Barnes Kennan  
Secretary

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