

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

Column Editor: H. Gordon Hullfish

A Conference—and a "Spotlight"

WILLIAM G. CARR, writing in the January 1956, *N.E.A. Journal*, expressed the indebtedness of all in education "to our fellow citizens, educators and laymen alike, who gave generously of time and talents to make the White House Conference of 1955 a landmark in the history of our country and its schools." (p. 9) Mr. Carr noted these achievements: overwhelming approval of an increase in federal funds for school-building construction; a demand by citizens for a broad-gauged program of education; a well-balanced public understanding of the achievements and the needs of public education; and unusually fine teamwork between the educators present and the participants from other occupations.

This report has been substantiated from many quarters. Bice Clemow, publisher of the *West Hartford News*, a member of the delegation from Connecticut, for instance, praised both the achievement and the process of the conference in a guest editorial written for *The Saturday Review* (December 31, 1955):

"Most of the 1,800 participants left . . . with the feeling that they personally had helped hew a plank. And, quite subjectively, the whole platform, platitudes and all, is a strong space-station from which those who wish to fight for better schools can successfully wage a more effective campaign. It can be documented airtight that the thirty-four-

man committee which planned the affair for the President created a unique conference structure and climate in which a wide diversity of individual opinions, staunchly held, found democratic group expression." (p. 22)

In Clemow's opinion the conference worked. "Some 1,800 delegates have gone back to their hometowns to fight for better schools, conscious of a clear national view, whether they agree with it or not. . . . The conference could be a stimulating turning point in our political determination to employ our resources to the utmost in behalf of today's children." (p. 29) It is his conclusion that the conference advanced "the day when the quality of public education will be the dominant political issue of our time." And he believes that this day "is not far off."

The educator (outnumbered two to one) was in the minority in a conference that brought together "butcher, baker, and candlestick maker." All were placed in face-to-face situations of discussion. It may have come as a surprise to lay delegates, incidentally, to discover that the educators, despite what some critics have claimed, had no party line, that, in their diversity, they, too, are butcher, baker and candlestick maker. The delegates were given the responsibility of reaching conclusions on selected problems (these had been discussed at the state level earlier) within specified time limits. They were also provided the opportunity, as

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the conclusions of the conference were formulated, to express and to file dissenting opinion. The conference was a sort of school, therefore, for participants in the solution of the political issue Clemow foresees. Specifically, it was, at the least and perhaps at the most, a challenge to the participants to continue this shared concern for the advancement and improvement of public education on their home grounds.

All reports indicate that the delegates, divided as they were into small working groups (there were 166 of these), exchanged ideas vigorously and, of course, openly. No suggestion of the manipulation of either ideas or of individuals has appeared, though the procedure would seem to be made to order for leaders hell-bent on the achievement of what they would call consensus were they to pull the strings. But no method, after all, is meaningful apart from the ends held by those who use it or, differently, from the spirit in which it is used. The achievements of the conference are a measure of the sincerity and integrity of the delegates generally and of the directing committee specifically.

Not all in Washington at the time of the conference hoped for the results achieved. One member of an Eastern delegation, for instance, was handed a copy of *Spotlight* (undated, though numbered E-331), devoted to "Why Education's Sad State?" *Spotlight* is distributed by the Committee for Constitutional Government, Inc., with headquarters in New York City, and, as this delegate has said, "It was privately distributed at the conference."

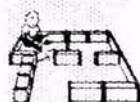
This issue (it is a one-page, three-

column, printed-on-both-sides affair) was written by Willford I. King, professor emeritus of economics from New York University. Like all issues it was made available "To all Editors, Columnists, Commentators—for immediate release as feature article, letter-to-editor, or as background material for editorial writers." Its author and distributors could hardly have been happy over the outcome of the conference.

Professor King lists the usual charges against education, from the "Johnny Can't Read" cry to the undeniable fact of juvenile delinquency. He then states his belief as to why these conditions have come about. His story would shock the educational historian but, for reasons not related to scholarship, it would shock equally the uninformed but sincere citizen to whom it is obviously addressed. His is a simple, if misleading, thesis. He alleges that our educators substituted, early in this century, an "Impressionistic" method that eliminated "foundation principles," "enforced periods of study and drill" and "dispensed with . . . rigorous discipline. . . ." A few children prospered under this scheme but not the rank and file. At an unmentioned point in time the "Impressionists," described only as they are said to have been against the rigorous procedures the author believes to be right, became the "Progressives"; these terms, at least, are used interchangeably. And then it happened! The cult was courted in the early-1920's by top collectivists who, meeting in Washington, decided that "the only feasible way of replacing our competitive capitalistic economy with a social-

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ist system was to secure the aid of the schools."

Readers familiar with "educational literature" of this type will know how the thesis is further developed. According to Professor King, Teachers College, Columbia University, became a directive headquarters, "as early as 1925." Progressive education made "amazingly rapid headway" (it did). And, since terms are loosely and freely used, this coalition of educators (called "schoolmen," since "one cannot logically call them educators") seem alternately to have been socialists or communists or to have been captives of their ideas. Thus it is that education came to its sad state. Thus it is, also, that fact and fiction are intermingled so that *Spotlight*, with its blinding beams turned upon education, may, somewhat in the shadows, accomplish its questionable purpose.

The bright light tells us that "the net effort of this system upon our nation's children has been to give them not mastery of the three R's, but, instead, training in the three C's—collectivism, chaos, and crime." The shadows reveal a motivation for these criticisms. The author does not like "our absurd system of compulsory school enrollment for adolescents." He thinks boys who are unfitted and unprepared for advanced study should be at work, not in high school (girls, apparently, may remain). He thinks high schools serve as meeting places where such boys, in gangs, may "plot criminal escapades." If we were but sane we would cut out our "soft" (or "collectivistic") approaches to students.

There would then be need neither for additional high school space nor for additional equipment. And, of course, when the spotlight is turned into the shadows we discover that any need for additional taxes would disappear!

This column earlier urged that the pre-conferences, held in the states and territories as delegates prepared for the national conference, become a permanent feature of the American approach to educational problems. It does so again. There is no better way for the layman to gain a feeling for the complicated problems educators now face. There is no better way for him to participate effectively in solving them; nor is there a better way for the professional educator to demonstrate the relevancy of the knowledge he possesses to the problems he and the layman must jointly solve. Moreover, no better way for sifting fact from fiction has been discovered than to turn the spotlight of enlightened and informed discussion upon the calculated misreading of a problem.

It is not surprising that this issue of *Spotlight* was privately distributed at the White House Conference. Public scrutiny of it would have repudiated it on the instant. There is nothing soft in the determination of the American public to make available to all of the children of the nation increasingly improved educational opportunities. They will not, under conditions of open and informed discussion, be blinded by a rigged spotlight.

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