

# Education and the Evolving National Purpose

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*"For the first time in history, the speed and efficiency of national (and in fact worldwide) communication make it possible for every moment of ugliness, every violent encounter, every nefarious plot uncovered, every happy breakthrough, every event of healing and peace, to become nearly a universal experience, and therefore a prod to more concerted correction and celebration."*

**A**MERICA'S Bicentennial celebration evokes extreme and disparate emotions in me both as a citizen and as an educator, and I suspect it is affecting many others in the same way. Our minds and our senses are being assaulted by so much jingoism, crass commercialism, hucksterism, and even historical revisionism, that sometimes I almost wish we could somehow turn it off, or at least start over. On the other hand, there is much that I find healthy, therapeutic, and instructive in the extra effort we are now making as a nation to understand where we have been and what we have done in our first two centuries as a nation. Even more significant for all of us is the stimulation the Bicentennial is giving to our thoughts about the future and the goals we are setting for ourselves in the years to come.

Americans, including those of us who teach, suffer from an endemic lack of interest in history. Like most peoples over the ages,

we have nurtured and cherished our myths and legends, and our general predilection for forgetting or prettying up the embarrassing and the shameful is abundantly evident in the history that we Americans have chosen to pass on to our young. This is not to imply that our story as a people is less dignified and prideful than that of other nations—actually, I think our values, our institutions, and our behavior over these 200 years have brought us *far* more credit than shame—but rather to scold us for too low a present level of political, social, and moral intellectuality. The Bicentennial offers a timely challenge for citizens to strive toward a more informed, a more sincere, and a more enlightened patriotism.

Similarly, the Bicentennial challenges educators to understand and to deal with the myths, the legends, and the habits (both bad and good) that have been carried forward from eight or more generations of schooling, so that a more informed, a more sincere, and a more enlightened professionalism may emerge.

## The American Achievement

American society over 200 years has been marked by continuous, rapid, and exten-

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sive changes; and of the social institutions that have responded to the evolving demands and expectations of each successive generation it is the schools that have had the basic responsibility. Ralph Tyler, in a recent essay, concludes that the schools have discharged that function "with amazing success."<sup>1</sup> In his and other accounts, there is indeed much to sustain professional pride. It seems arguable, for example, that the United States could not have become the economic, military, and political giant that it has been within my lifetime except for the great contributions of the schools in providing a labor force, in helping millions of immigrants to adapt to their new land, in preparing individuals for roles of leadership, and in reinforcing the concept of a democracy. It is also worth remembering and celebrating, that ours was the first nation in history to build its institutions on a theory of progress,<sup>2</sup> to commit itself, albeit somewhat cautiously, to the position that all people (male and female alike, rich and poor alike, all racial and ethnic groups alike) are equally entitled to educational benefits, and to commit a significant fraction of its national resources to implementation. While the more competitive and selective systems of some other nations at times may have seemed qualitatively superior to ours, nowhere even now is the effort more earnest and the service more generous.

Despite what I have just asserted, however, the present day school system is paradoxical in the extreme. Most educational leaders, for example the members of ASCD, are deeply troubled about the many inadequacies and imperfections of the schools in which they toil, and yet at the same time they are proud of the good things that are happening to many children and the environmental improvements that are under way. Phrases such as "the individualization of instruction" speak to the brave aspirations of the schools in further augmenting the Amer-

ican dream of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." There remains stubborn and even stupid adherence to various policies and practices that damage or demean children, although more and more one finds the openness, the flexibility, the variety, and the humaneness through which children are more suitably prepared for implementing and sustaining the American dream.

### **Constitution Lacks Provisions for Education**

One advantage we enjoy in 1976 is that our leaders are far better informed about the values and purposes of education than were the leaders of previous ages. As almost everybody realizes, provisions for public schooling were not even mentioned in the Constitution of the United States of America and therefore, as in the case of many other things, it later fell to the individual states by default to create and support an educational system. As far as I can tell, not even the notion of a *modest* system of public schooling was countenanced by our founders. The two who apparently had the greatest interest in education were Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and little in the writings or the legacies of these two marvelously enlightened and enormously talented gentlemen seems especially premonitory of the elaborate educational structure that the nation eventually produced. I suspect that they would be extremely surprised at the magnitude, the breadth, and especially the universality of twentieth century schooling.

In the late eighteenth century, the colonies that later became a nation enjoyed only about 15 percent literacy at best. The existing schools were primarily concerned with promoting basic religious literacy and with providing the future labor force with minimal skills. The need for well-educated persons seemed limited, and far less interest was shown in the education of girls than of boys. Thomas Jefferson's (unsuccessful) plans for an educational system in Virginia called for both boys and girls to have three years of free schooling, after which only the boys were to go through several successive

<sup>1</sup> Ralph W. Tyler. "Tomorrow's Education." *American Education* 11 : 16; August-September 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Adolphe E. Meyer. *Grandmasters of Educational Thought*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1975. pp. 142-45.

"screens" (my word) at the end of which a mere ten boys would have been "raked from the rubbish" (Jefferson's own, and I think offensive, phrase) each year and selected for university education. From these and other insights into the educational philosophy and posture of Jefferson and some others, I conclude that when that great man wrote the immortal phrase about all men being created equal he was voicing primarily a moral and political idea, and not even indirectly commenting on the ultimate general educability of the millions for whose future independence and freedom he pleaded.

### The Turbulent Present

Throughout much of modern history, if we may judge by our own brief experience with it, people have fretted over the enormous problems at hand and violated their own imagination and conscience by employing manifestly inadequate solutions. There have, of course, been some exceptions but our Constitution, given its position on slavery, was probably not one of them. Nor, usually, is each successive presidential, gubernatorial, or congressional election. The compromises that we seem driven to make and the thoughtless and/or wicked actions that we choose not to contest, continually confront the next generation with unfinished business.

In theory, each successive generation is expected to raise the general level of skill and morality, and therefore to reduce the general wickedness; and, with a profound and grateful spirit I believe that such improvements *have* occurred since 1776 and that for all its troubles and frailties, the America we know in 1976 has a more wholesome view of humankind, a greater commitment to morality in its many dimensions, a far greater fund of useful knowledge on which to draw, and greater consensus within the citizenry about the need for dedication to the principles of liberty, than have existed ever before.

Whether our relatively stronger situation portends an eventual victory is, of course, the crucial question, and history offers too little encouragement. Wickedness also seems to

have escalated, and both the ugliness and the extreme recency of political corruption, of benign neglect of the poor and powerless, of bigotry and hate toward itinerant school children, and of avaricious neglect of the

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ecosystem, cause some to wonder if we are yet ready for the effort a victory would require.

Although I would much prefer that the turbulence would subside, its awesome presence offers us at least one advantage. For the first time in history, the speed and the efficiency of national (and in fact worldwide) communication make it possible for every moment of ugliness, every violent encounter, every nefarious plot uncovered, every happy breakthrough, every event of healing and peace, to become nearly a universal experience, and therefore a prod to more concerted correction or celebration. Although neither Vietnam nor Watergate was "processed" by the available machinery with suitable speed and efficiency, each serves as a recent and encouraging example of the process that is evolving. The current public furor over school busing, similarly, is an agonizing but vivid example of Americans being forced to find a solution to one of the most unhappy legacies of a flawed Constitution, this time much more quickly than post-Civil War America was inclined or able to arrange.

I come, then, to an essentially ethical conclusion. All laud and honor to America's founders, without whose stirring words and brave actions we would be much less than we are. At the same time, let us accept some of the problems they were either unable or unwilling to confront, and especially let us continue to insist that a higher level of morality, reinforced by two centuries of additional knowledge, shall guide the public as well as the private decisions that problem-solving entails. □

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