

The Right Wing Critics of Education: Yesterday and Today

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A review-in-depth of the issues at stake in earlier attacks upon schools and educators by right-wing critics. This writer recommends a more realistic strategy of response than the "head-in-the-sand" tactic that failed school people so miserably in face of the vitriolic forays of the McCarthy era.

The period 1949-1954 has historically been described as a time of transition in the United States. In this period, anxious people, disturbed because of an international situation, holding varying viewpoints on freedom and security and on individualism and teamwork, and facing increasingly difficult domestic problems, reflected their attitudes in their treatment of educational problems.

To those Americans who lived through the challenges of the McCarthy era, the anxieties were deep and shaking. Americans found little respite in the victory that crowned World War II. In place of the old enemy, Nazism, there was a new one, Communism; and it suddenly seemed to have planted itself everywhere. Americans were also exasperated by a strategy of containment premised on the belief that the United States had to live with the danger and fears of the world of Communism indefinitely.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., shrewdly observed in 1949 that:

. . . frustration is increasingly the hallmark of the century—the frustration . . . of the most generous hopes, of the most splendid dreams. Nineteen hundred looked forward to the irresistible expansion of freedom, democracy and abundance; 1950 will look back to totalitarianism, to concentration camps, to mass starvation, to atomic war.¹

That there was a great deal of frustration in the United States during this era of anxiety was made evident by a proliferation of right wing societies, leagues, committees, councils, and crusades that proposed to stop the clock of social change—or to turn its hands back to some easier time when men could move more readily and directly to achieve what they wanted.

These groups have sometimes been referred to as the "Radical Right," but the fact is that there was nothing radical about them. They offered no novel solutions to the problems that plagued them; indeed, they offered no solutions at all. They were immensely discontented with things as they were and furiously impatient with almost everyone whom they thought could be held responsible for their frustrations. As Alan Barth pointed out: ". . . They are fundamentally and

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Vital Center: Politics of Freedom*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949. p. 1.



Senator Joseph R. McCarthy as he appeared on "Meet the Press" October 4, 1954. "To those Americans who lived through the challenges of the McCarthy era, the anxieties were deep and shaking." Photo: Documentary Photo Aids, Mount Dora, Florida.

temperamentally 'aggrainers.' And perhaps the commonest characteristic among them is anger. They can fairly be called, if nothing else, the Rampageous Right."²

Who may be considered the major right wing critics of education of the late 1940s and early 1950s? What were their convictions? How did they justify these convictions in their own minds, if at all? Was this kind of extremism dangerous to democracy and to education at the time? Explanations and answers to these important questions in various psychological terms can be illuminating at times, but by analyzing a few right-wing individuals and organizations, the sometimes hidden goals, views, and tactics of these critics can better be understood.

The Right Wing Critics

William Van Til has described the right wing critics as a wave of criticism "coinciding with the late Senator Joseph McCarthy era," and representing an "educational counterpart to the McCarthyism which accused government employees

of being disloyal, liberals of having Communist sympathies, and the United States Army of harboring traitors."³

These critics included professional propagandists who hoped to thrive upon the discontent and suspicion they could succeed in engendering in the public mind; tax-cutters and related groups with economic interests who wanted to sharply reduce the costs of education; representatives of religious organizations who questioned seriously that public education could safely be carried on separate and apart from positive instruction in religion and who proposed, therefore, either to introduce sectarian teaching into public education or to persuade the public to subsidize church-related schools; organizations of patriotic citizens who conceived of themselves as the sole custodians of orthodoxy in doctrines political, economic, and social to which the school should be com-

² Alan Barth. "Report on the 'Rampageous Right.'" *The New York Times Magazine*. November 26, 1961. p. 25, col. 4.

³ William Van Til. *Education: A Beginning*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974. p. 161.

mitted; and finally, intellectuals who profoundly distrusted the direction professional educators were evidently giving to contemporary education. For the most part then, these critics condemned public school education as being communistic and socialistic, as godless and atheistic, and as disloyal and unpatriotic.

Criticisms of schools during the McCarthy era, particularly of the secondary schools, were set forth by many individuals and groups. From full-dress book critiques, such as John T. Flynn's

"Stung by criticism, some schools and colleges are discarding innovations in favor of traditional goals and techniques."

The Road Ahead, E. Merrill Root's *Brainwashing in the High Schools*, or Frederick Rand Rogers' *Treason in American Education*, to more frequent articles in periodicals and pamphlets such as Frank Chodorov's *A Fifty-Year Project To Combat Socialism on the Campus*, Irene C. Kuhn's article "Your Child Is Their Target," and Allen Zoll's *They Want Your Child*, the schools were the target of the critics.⁴ The screen, the radio, the theater, and the public platform, as well as the press, were the media for the complaints of critics of the schools.

The National Council for American Education and Allen Zoll

In July of 1948, a respectable sounding organization called the National Council for American Education (NCAE) was incorporated under the laws of New Jersey. Listed among the trustees was A. Alderson Zoll II, who later served as its executive vice president. The January 1951 issue of *Nation's Schools* described the NCAE as:

Slogan: "Devoted to the stimulation of sound education and the eradication of Marxism and Collectivism from our schools national life."

Publishers: Educational Guardian. Issues pamphlets "exposing" Communist teachers and Communist teachings in schools and colleges. *Red-ucators at Harvard University*, *Progressive Education Increases Delinquency*, etc.

Allen A. Zoll, Executive Vice-President.⁵

The NCAE stated of itself that it was "the only organization in America specifically and exclusively opposing, on a national basis, subversive influences in schools and colleges."⁶ To accomplish these ends the NCAE published pamphlets with the following titles: *Progressive Education Increases Delinquency*; *Socialism Is Stupid*; *Academic Freedom*; *Red-ucators at Harvard*; *A Fifty-Year Project to Combat Socialism on the Campus*; *Should Americans Be Against World Government?*; *Awake, Awake, and Pray!*; *The Yale Whitewash*; and *They Want Your Child*, to name a few.

Some of the earliest publications distributed by the NCAE include: *How Red Are The Schools?*; *Harvard Red Hunting Ground*; and *Harvard Crimson Harvard*. These pamphlets and articles were written, as Robert Skaife, then field secretary for the NEA's National Commission for the Defense of Democracy thru Education, points out, "in such a fashion as to lead the reader to believe that deadly fifth columns of un-American propagandists have been vigorously at work in the schools for the last three decades."⁷

Zoll, throughout his writings with the NCAE, maintained that the "great luminaries" of the educational profession, from John Dewey on, have known precisely what they were doing. "How could they fail to know?"⁸ That Zoll thought little

⁴ John T. Flynn. *The Road Ahead, America's Creeping Revolution*. New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1949; Edward Merrill Root. *Brainwashing in the High School*. New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1958; Frederick Rand Rogers. *Treason in American Education: A Case History*. New York: Pleiades Publications, 1949; Frank Chodorov. *A Fifty Year Project to Combat Socialism on the Campus*. New York: Monographs and Papers of the National Council for American Education, 1952; Irene Corbally Kuhn. "Your Child Is Their Target." *American Legion Magazine*, July 1952. pp. 18-19, 53-60; Allen A. Zoll. *They Want Your Child*. New York: Monographs and Papers of the National Council for American Education, 1949.

⁵ Robert A. Skaife. "They Sow Distrust." *The Nation's Schools* 47(1): 29; January 1951.

⁶ Allen A. Zoll. *They Want Your Child*. New York: Monographs and Papers of the National Council for American Education, 1949. p. 2.

⁷ Robert A. Skaife. "They Oppose Progress." *The Nation's Schools* 47(2): 32; February 1951.

⁸ Allen A. Zoll. *Progressive Education Increases Delinquency*. New York: Council for American Education, N.D. p. 2.

of Dewey and men such as George Counts was made evident from a speech Zoll made to the Twentieth National and Ninth International Convention of Zeta Tau Alpha, July 2, 1950, at Mackinac Island, Michigan. He stated:

How many of you in the room are teachers? (Several hands were raised.) You probably have either gone to school under, or have gone to school under two of the people who are in the Columbia list—George Counts and John Dewey. Those two men, in my opinion, more than any others are responsible for the situation that exists in our schools and colleges today. Many of the students who believed in these men and became indoctrinated with their precepts, today are teachers in normal schools and colleges where teachers are taught. I tell you frankly that their precepts, if carried on, will absolutely ruin the United States of America.⁹

Zoll based most of his assumptions on the premise that John Dewey's pragmatism was a godless materialistic philosophy. The syllogism then appears to have run something like this: Since the schools are godless, they lack moral and spiritual values; since they lack moral and spiritual values, juvenile delinquency increases; hence progressive education increases delinquency.

Opposition to the Critics

The right wing attacks during the period 1949 to 1954 demonstrated a tendency to snowball, gathering strength and momentum as each critic gained adherents for his point of view. Unless the protests or demands of a critic were answered—or at least faced in some way—a critic could eventually persuade people within a community to bring extensive changes to its schools.

It was only to be expected that defense and counterattack by the educators would be made only after the attack itself had been developed to the point where its objectives, tactics, and strategy could be ascertained with some degree of certainty. Although the defense and counterattacking, at times, made alliances between educators from various and differing backgrounds, all were, however, alarmed and concerned about the same things.

The ASCD's 1953 yearbook, *Forces Affecting American Education*, is a point in fact. This publication brought together the contributions of several educators each with his own style and

technique, and each with a desire to analyze those "forces affecting education." The yearbook "writing" committee consisted of Harold Benjamin, Willard Goslin, Charles Johnson, Robert A. Skaife, and William Van Til.

The foreword of the yearbook stated:

The yearbook had its origin in the late nineteen-forties when William H. Burton of Harvard University tirelessly attempted to rouse the concern of the educational profession over new developments in forces affecting education. Few heeded him until the nineteen-fifties when criticism of outstanding school systems attracted nation-wide attention through newspaper, radio, magazine and book coverage.¹⁰

The chapters of *Forces Affecting American Education*, each written by a separate educator, discussed and described broadly the cultural climate in which the schools of the early 1950s needed to operate and proceed in order to attain a cohesiveness in the development and improvement of free public education.

It is important to note, however, that prior to the awakening of educators and the public-at-large to the national scope of the problem, the inclination seems to have been simply to ignore unfair criticisms as unworthy of reply. Except in those locales where attacks assumed full-blown proportions, the policy of refusing to answer what was patently unjust seemed to represent the reaction of many educators and educational publications. Counting on a public awareness and support which, unfortunately, was all too often nonexistent, educators tended to pursue their usual tasks without interruption. Many simply held that a rebuttal would give even further publicity to the charges, and that silence was thus a more effective means of dealing with the critics and their criticism.

Right Wing Activities Today

Just as the critics of education during the McCarthy era varied widely on their "attacks" of public education, so today do the critics of our schools vary in their "criticisms." During the late 1940s and early 1950s, certain individuals and

⁹ Allen A. Zoll. *Our American Heritage*. New York: Council for American Education, 1950. p. 12.

¹⁰ William Van Til, editor. *Forces Affecting American Education*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1953. p. ix.

groups adopted demagogic and propagandistic methods, charging that educators had become "victims" of foreign ideologies and were engaged in attempts to subvert American youth to communistic and collectivistic ideas by means of new courses of study and group methods of instruction. Other critics of the day decried the "godless" schools, substandard education, educational frills, and socialistic if not communistic educational philosophy.¹¹ Fault was found with both primary and secondary schools, with teachers, administrators, and finally with the archdemons of society, the professors of education. The chant went up that the schools were not doing their job.

The allegations made by today's critics are quite similar to those earlier ones. The charges of obscenity, immorality, godlessness, and/or otherwise subversive nature in our schools' textbooks indicate a pattern not unlike the above-mentioned. These present day critics point to the quality of books read by the public, the prevalence of comic books as reading matter of the younger generation, corruption in Washington, athletic scandals, the high crime rate, the divorce situation, communism in government, and the poor intellectual quality of secondary and college students.

It is quite apparent that today's critics, such as the "back to basics" proponents and the Kanawha County, West Virginia, textbook censors, sincerely believe that public education is the cause of every social ill that has ever befallen man. Education, the universal panacea, has failed to work its miracles, yet the modern critic tenaciously clings to the vision of education as a cure-all. If religion were only introduced into the schools, Americans would begin to raise their moral standards; if the schools taught more history and English grammar, quality of thought would become the property of all who were graduated from high schools; if Americanism could be taught early enough in the schools, the country would never go down the socialist road. As a rule, the contemporary critic has accepted this rather naive premise, and in so doing has overestimated the influence exerted by the public school in shaping the moral and intellectual character of the young. That the schools do shape the character of the young is not to be denied. That the schools can completely shape the intellectual and moral character of the young cannot, however, be supported

in the face of known and established sociological and psychological evidence.

Stung by criticisms, some schools and colleges are discarding innovations in favor of traditional goals and techniques. As a result, educators find themselves caught up in a chaotic swirl of pressures and trends.

A consequence of this type of criticism is that educators are not sure what direction to take, and colleges and high schools many times appear to "let" students do their own thing from a large array of electives. A sizeable number of public schools, on the other hand, are reinstating firm discipline, course requirements, and grading standards. A few, to the joy of parental backers, are even going to the "McGuffey Readers" of a century ago in quest of the three R's and simple virtues.

Our hope, with a note of caution to past experiences with right-wing criticisms of education, is that we educators continually attempt to understand and cope with the numerous criticisms lodged against our schools. The highly questionable "head-in-the-sand" theory of dispensing with the unpleasant is a tactic of the past. The "RIGHT" will continually make itself a nuisance, not as a wave of the future, but as a voice of frustration and despair, a wail from an irrecoverable past. ¹²

¹¹ For a detailed view of various brands of educational criticism, see: A. Lynd. "Quackery in the Public Schools." *Atlantic Monthly* 85: 33-38; March 1950; B. I. Bell. *Crisis in Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1949; H. Fuller. "The Emperor's New Clothes or Prius Dementat." *The Scientific Monthly*, 72: 32-41; January 1951.



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