



"A Nation at Risk": An Eyewitness Account of its Genesis, Fate, and Lesson for Today

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**"A Nation at Risk":
An Eyewitness Account of its Genesis, Fate, and Lesson for Today**

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This is the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the A Nation at Risk report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a document that is still being referred to, while so many other national reports tend to disappear quickly from view. The anniversary comes at a time when the White House claims it will "leave no child behind," even while the typical school house, in much of the country, is forced to cancel classes, lay off teachers, and cut salaries. The disjunction between rhetoric and reality has an uncanny resemblance to the situation twenty years ago. That alone makes it worthwhile to provide an eyewitness view of the genesis and fate of the Nation at Risk report, both to learn from it for educational reform today, including the roles higher-education institutions should play, and to correct some of the misconceptions and ahistorical analyses of the Report that have surfaced from time to time.

I

The National Commission on Excellence in Education was created in August 1981 by the Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, "to present a report on the quality of education in America," and, in response to "what many consider to be a long and continuing decline in the quality of American education," to make recommendations that would ameliorate deficiencies that might be found during nineteen months of intense research.

When first asked to join seventeen others on the Commission being formed, we were expected to spend a good part of two years, some two dozen meetings, hearings, panel discussions, and symposia in various parts of the United States, and finally to issue a report on the state and needs of education in the U.S., especially in secondary education (the critical preparation for success in higher education). I firmly refused. I had three compelling reasons. First, the summer of 1981 was the high tide of Ronald Reagan's triumphant first year of his Presidency. His Administration and a subservient Congress appeared intent on dismantling systematically many of what to me were important programs, not least in the support of education and science. For example, already during the transition period after Reagan's election in 1980, the Department of Education had been targeted for elimination. Some of that hostility was apparently a revenge for the endorsement of Jimmy Carter's candidacy by the NEA and by a large share of the nation's teachers. To this was added a narrow reading by the Administration of the Constitution and the Tenth Amendment, as leaving the support of education entirely in the hands of states and localities. I thought this was a tide not likely to be reversed by any report.

Second, improving education was not on the nation's front burner, despite what people might have said to Gallup pollsters. True, there had been earlier reports on improving education, and there were yet other commissions at work on education; and in retrospect one could identify that, particularly by Governors in a few Southern states, serious improvements were being attempted. But a look at the newspapers of the time, for example, or at the abandonment of teacher training by many Schools of Education, will assure one that in the summer of 1981 the conversation of the nation was not preoccupied with educational improvement. And when a member of the National Science Board was asked, after his talk at the first meeting of the Commission, why the NSF had so severely truncated its support of science education, cutting it by 67% that fiscal year, and wiping out all but one small education program, he simply answered, "Education is not on the nation's agenda."

He was immediately followed on the program by a consultant for the Department of Education who assured the Commission its work would be easily accomplished if all it proposed were annual prizes to make excellent model

schools visible; this would provide examples for the rest to follow. And the whole thing, the Commission was assured, could be done for under \$200,000 a year. Such a plan merely exhibited the absurd but inexpensive Exemplenarian Solution favored by the Administration, rather than the Systemic Reform needed.

A third reason for my not wanting to join was the makeup of the proposed Commission; as presented to me, it seemed completely puzzling. There were to be fine people on it. But there was not *one* national, prominent, professional expert on education, such as Ted Sizer, Patricia Graham, Ed Boyer, Harold Howe II, Frederick Mosteller, Lawrence Cremin, Fred Hechinger, Al Shanker, John Goodlad, etc. I thought these blatant omissions were intellectually and politically dangerous, and in fact they came back to haunt the Report immediately on its release.

Three good reasons for me to have said no, but also for judging the Nation at Risk report now in the context of its own era. Yet, I soon I received a phone call from an admired friend who argued I had a duty to serve, not least because I was the only one on the list who had hands-on experience in seeking to improve secondary education on a national scale, through having initiated and co-directed the national curriculum project, Project Physics Course. In the end I accepted on one condition: that if necessary I would be allowed to write a minority report.

II

Part of the first day of our group was a meeting with President Reagan at the White House. At first jovial, charming, full of funny stories, he turned serious when he gave us our marching orders. He told us our report should focus on five fundamental points that would bring excellence to education (they were all to be expressed again later, e.g., in his State of the Union messages of January '83 and January '84): Bring God back into the classroom. Tuition tax credits for families using private schools. Vouchers. Leave the primary responsibility for education to parents. And please abolish that abomination, the Department of Education. In any case, don't ask to waste more federal money on education—we have put in more, "only to wind up with less." Just discover excellent schools, to serve as models for all the others. After we left, I detected no visible dismay in our group. I wondered if we were all equally stunned.

For the Commission, most of whom also had to continue their regular full-time duties back home, hard work followed, lengthy meetings, site visits and hearings in many States, reading and discussing numerous and extensive reports prepared by a large staff provided by the Department of Education, and forty more reports commissioned by a great variety of consultants, many distinguished ones such as Alexander Astin, Paul Hurd, and Thorsten Husen. As a result, the Commission began to sense the poor state of secondary education in the U.S., although of course there also were some bright spots. A tiny fraction of the more dismal findings is listed in the Report—such as the migration of students from vocational and college preparation programs to general track courses that led nowhere; 12% had taken general track courses in 1964, but 42% had done so in 1979, as the schools had changed and added much to their missions. As one of the school superintendents said, in 1981 schools on the whole were run as social welfare institutions, not academic ones.

Among other findings presented to us in direct testimony and reports: 23 million Americans were illiterate, only a fifth of 17-year-olds could write a persuasive essay, only a few more could do a simple two-step math problem, and only half of them could find the area of a square, given the length of one side. About 2/3s of high school seniors spent less than one hour a night on homework. Compared to other industrial nations, there was much lower attendance in science courses in this technological age. In the constant dumbing down of textbooks, those had become unchallenging and repetitious, so that in some courses the majority of academic-track students had already encountered 80% of the material of their subject matter in a previous course.

There was also the unsurprising fact that under all these unfavorable conditions in those years, "too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students," with low levels of preparation and little retraining in the subject matter, low pay on the average (\$17,000 p.a. after 12 years in the system), severe shortages of teachers in math and science, with a large fraction unqualified by preparation or license; etc. Anyone doubting today that the nation's educational system at the secondary level was not at risk discounts the record of the hearings and the Education

Department's research and commissioned papers, the total data made available to us.

III

The somber facts were slowly driving the large majority of the Commission toward a consensus. But now it was up to the hard-working staff of the Department of Education (headed by Milton Goldberg); for from the start the staff was supposed to draft the final report. However, the Commission found those drafts on the whole tedious, uninspired, lengthy, and bureaucratic. As one of the Commissioners remarked: "This is no clarion call, it is a sparrow's chirp." Another agreed, "This is milk toast."

For my part, I saw the whole effort sinking into the oblivion I had expected--except for one small chance: that we could somehow guide the staff to write a report that would impress the President and some in his Administration and in Congress to change their minds. I argued at least for a short report in clear, compelling language, only some thirty-odd pages, in big print, with the rest in appendices even if these were unlikely to be read by many. In the present state of disinterest in educational improvement in general, we might at best have *one* influential reader, namely President Reagan himself. After all, he was the Commander in Chief. So the language used in the title of the Report, and in the first pages warning about the dangers to a poorly educated nation, should be calculated to induce him to read the rest of the Report, including the all-important Recommendations at the end, most of which would take real courage to write in the political climate of the day. And we should not even mention any of the five cardinal points of Reagan's initial marching orders.

Several Commissioners strongly supported this approach; but the consensus in the Commission was that at least one of the boundary conditions could not be changed; that we should not try to provide an estimate of the needed additional expense to implement the Recommendations. I greatly regretted that, but consoled myself with the rumor that in an NSF report, being readied at about the same time, there would be a discussion of the funding needs, at least for science education.

The hardworking staff went back to the drawing board. But the result was still regarded as a pallid and bureaucratic product.

It was now March 1983. We were at a breaking point, with only a few weeks left by which time we had promised Bell to hand in our report. I quietly decided to write my minority report.

IV

Then something unexpected happened. As we were leaving the meeting, I found that two of the most distinguished Commissioners were walking closely by me, one on each side. They said, "We'd like to talk to you," and guided me to a place out of hearing of the others. There I was told that they had despaired of having the staff of the Department write the report, and had decided I had to do a draft of it. It was a Thursday, so I would have a long weekend, Friday to Monday, to do it at home.

Despite a sense of utter futility—and of course unaware of the Machiavellian use the Administration would ultimately make of the Report—I felt it my duty to try this. On arrival home, I went to work, building on whatever I found usable in the large amount of material prepared by the staff. A copy my own first-draft handwritten pages, starts with: "America is at risk. If a hostile and wily foreign power had somehow imposed on America the pervasively mediocre educational performance that exists today, we would have declared war on it," and so forth. Perhaps our Commander in Chief might take notice, not least because of the strong language; would read on; would encounter two useful quotations from his own speeches; and the rest might appeal to his better instincts.

Many of the later commentators seem not to have read much beyond those first wake-up pages, and so missed the meat of the Report, which is in its five main Recommendations at the end, practically all of them quite contrary to the then current views, certainly in the White House. We asked for the five New Basics during the four years of high school (4 years of English, 3 years of Math, 3 years of Science, 3 years of Social Studies, ½ year of Computer Science, and 2 years of foreign language for the college bound, with suggestions for other courses and how to implement all these). We called for more rigorous and measurable standards; higher expectations for academic performance and conduct; more time to learn the Basics; raising requirements of admission among four-year colleges and universities; and in all these ways preparing young

Americans for safe landing fields in a "Learning Society," one that requires ever new competences throughout one's career path.

Also, importantly: making teaching a more rewarding and respected, true profession—a Recommendation consisting of seven explicit separate ones. A definition of excellence that was not elitist but a continuum, to stretch each student, privileged or not, to his or her best accomplishments. And, last but not least, a strong Recommendation on Leadership and Fiscal Support, in italics, calling on citizens to "*hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms,*" and "*providing the fiscal support and stability.*" We added that the federal government has "*the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest...[and] provide the national leadership*"—all this, so to speak, right in the face of the official attitude in the White House. Ted Bell was delighted with the final product, writing later in his book, The Thirteenth Man: A Reagan Cabinet Memoir (New York: Free Press, 1988), "I had never seen so much substance in so brief a span" (p.126).

The head of our Commission, David Gardner, took over the draft. He was revealed to be a master negotiator. Mostly by telephone, he brought us to an agreement on a final Report, having received from Bell some extra days for delivering it. I regretted some of the changes; but in return we did come out with a unanimous report, having been pushed, as noted, chiefly by the data presented to us.

V

The next drama came when the President invited the whole Commission back to the White House on the day of the Report's public release. On April 26, 1983, in the State Dining Room, the Commissioners were seated in several rows in front. Distinguished invited guests as well as numerous reporters and TV cameras were behind us. We had all been waiting for a long time for the President. One of the Commissioners who knew his way in the White House, remarked that Reagan was still deciding which of two speeches to give, one prepared by his Chief of Staff Jim Baker with Mike Deaver, who were on the

whole for the Report, the other by Ed Meese, counsel to the President, who was virulently against it.

At last, Reagan bounded into the room. He thanked us for our work in his charming way. Ever the great communicator, he lifted a copy of the newly printed, blue-covered Report booklet high up. He was glad to have received it; indeed, he went on, the Report was fully in accord with his own ideas on retrieving excellence in education--namely by bringing God back into the classroom, by tuition tax credits, by vouchers, and—pointing to Secretary Bell—by abolishing the Department of Education. As Ted Bell recorded later in his unfortunately much-unread book, he saw Ed Meese standing in the wings, a big smile on his face.

Two thoughts flashed through my mind. My *one* hoped-for, important reader of the Report had not read it after all (although Bell claimed later that he had, which would make it worse). And given Reagan's implied description of our work, for the reporters who had heard all this before from Reagan for several years, there was here not even any news to write about. It was all over.

But then something happened to change everything. The Commissioners, still sitting there together, were of course looking at one another in dismay, and whispering in astonishment. And at that point, one them, in a stage whisper loud enough to be heard by reporters in back, said simply, "We have been had."

For the reporters, this sentence was like blood before sharks. Sensing the conflict between Reagan's words and what the Commission's Report might contain seemed the stuff of scandal, the favorite subject of most media. As the meeting broke up, many of us were cornered by one or more reporters, who asked for interviews—and now they pounced on the blue pamphlets, too.

The next days and weeks saw an unbelievable flood of published discussions on the Report—front-page material in virtually every major newspaper in the country, reportedly over half a million copies given away or sold at \$4.50, and reprinting, in full, in places such as in Sunday supplements and the Chronicle of Higher Education. The final distribution of the Report, according to the Department of Education, was over six million. Chiefly because of the sentence "We have been had," we had not been.

Or had we, after all? We soon found out.

VI

Reagan, seeing this favorable national response, skillfully associated himself now with the Report in TV and radio appearances—though often sneaking in his hope for prayer in the classroom. Ted Bell quickly held twelve regional dissemination conferences all over the U.S., before large crowds, often with Reagan and Governors present, part of what Bell called "a long campaign to disseminate A Nation at Risk" (p.133 in Bell's book). The Administration, which was now gearing up for the 1984 election, found that polls showed that the public was pleased with all this; so Reagan gave a total of 51 speeches on the need for educational reform (p.161), wanting, in Bell's words, "to get the greatest possible mileage from the Commission report" (p.155).

It produced a high "political pay-off," and Bell added, thereby Reagan "stole the issue from Walter Mondale [a true friend of education]—and it cost us nothing...." In all his previous years, Reagan had slashed the budget for education. Now the Education Department was for the moment saved from elimination, and in the 1984 cycle was exempted from the brutal cuts imposed on other social programs. The hoopla about caring for education, Bell wrote, "obscured concerns about cuts in welfare, aid to dependent children, Medicaid, and other social programs" (p.155).

In short, the betrayal was gearing up, using A Nation at Risk so to speak as a Trojan Horse. For soon after Reagan was re-elected in 1984, the Education Department's budget was again sharply cut, and educational improvement disappeared from the Administration's agenda. As Ted Bell put it, "A Nation at Risk had served its purpose....[it] helped in the campaign for re-election" (p.158). Seeing now no commitment at the federal level to implementing the Recommendations of A Nation at Risk, Bell resigned in late 1984, citing Voltaire: "Every success sharpens the sting of later defeat."

VII

The national attention given to the Report was particularly positive with some Governors who eventually adopted some of the Recommendations, if not to the letter, at least in spirit. Within about a year of the Report—and of others that followed, especially the May 1984 National Academy of Sciences report by business and education leaders—an increase in the number of academic courses for high school graduation was approved in 35 states, some of them having begun to discuss this possibility before the release of this Report and others at the time. The voluntary Standards released by the National Academy of Sciences in December 1996, after a long gestation period, also helped to improve curricula.

But there was also a group that reacted against the Report, sometimes violently. As I had feared at the beginning, some of the professional educators (with the striking exception of Al Shanker¹) and columnists who had been left out from membership on the Commission were now outraged. For example, Ed Boyer went at length on the warpath against it, saying the schools only suffered from a case of the flu. His colleague, the New York Times Education columnist, Fred Hechinger, devoted his weekly column for nearly a year to attacking the Report; his main complaint was, week after week, that it was intended to make schools tough rather than better. Chester Finn, Jr., wrote an article entitled "The Excellence Backlash." Others, such as D. C. Berliner and B. J. Biddle, in their 1995 book The Manufactured Crisis: Myth, Fraud, and the Attacks on America's Public Schools, claimed the crisis was a right-wing fabrication; there never had been a decline in test scores, and U. S. students "stacked up very well" in international assessments. (But see the reviews, e.g., by Lawrence C. Stedman in Education Policy Analysis Archives, Jan. 23, 1996.) Another dismissal read "the report itself is a good example of old-style policy-as-usual—broad language carrying no specific proposals...."

One repeated charge by educators was that the main danger the Report saw to the nation was only economic competition from abroad. But in the Nation

¹ See his essay "A Landmark revisited," May 9, 1993, on the Web at <http://www.aft.org/stand/previous/1993/050993.html>.

at Risk Report, such considerations were minor and limited. Doubters should reread the section on "The Risk," pages 6-8, which has passages such as "Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society.... A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society, and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom." And so forth.

From the other end of the spectrum, we also got a spanking. Just as we were leaving the White House after that last meeting, in came William F. Buckley, Jr., with his White House pass. Sure enough, soon afterwards he published an elegant column in a newspaper, proclaiming the Commission "didn't say what is most needed. That, of course, is tuition tax credits....The only obstacle that stands in the way of the substantial privatization of the school system is ideology." Indeed, privatization of many functions of government was part of the ideology then, as it is for the sons of Reagan to this day.

By its charter, the Commission had in fact several more months left, in which to respond to issues raised, make more implementing recommendations, perhaps try to unify the different parties that agreed on the facts but fought over solutions. But Ted Bell was told to fold our tents immediately.

VIII

In hindsight, and particularly if we had known about the large though accidentally produced national interest, we might have made more observations and Recommendations in our Report—and they alert us also to the persisting needs of education reform to this day: better attention to the pre-high school years; a careful review of the course content; tests to be based on the curriculum; insisting on the duty of higher-education institutions to reach out to existing teachers as well as dedicating themselves seriously to the preparation of future ones; repairing the often disgraceful physical condition of schools.

We might also have dealt—and still must—with an extremely difficult and important point—even though not given to us as a task in our charter--i.e., the interdependence between home, school and society at large in the performance

of individual students, especially the underprivileged ones. And a more detailed and eloquent discussion was and is needed about the danger to a cohesive, healthy American society if the public school system is undermined rather than substantially improved. But twenty years ago it was thought wiser, in a short Report, to zero in on a relatively few points, those which had been presented to us most frequently.

Within the boundary conditions put on the Commission and in the historic situation of its time, the Report was arguably far more than most could have expected. And if the Recommendations had, as was hoped, been implemented by caring governments at the federal, state and local levels, accepted and put into operation by the school systems and their professionals—as some indeed have been—a good deal more of what was needed then might have been achieved.

Looking at the matter twenty years later, but keeping in mind the situation the Commission and the country faced, perhaps the Report might best be used now as material from which to select parts that are still useful, shaping other parts to current conditions, adding others, and so fashion a new and updated report to the nation—as the ancient builders took pieces of earlier monuments to erect their own, new ones. I hope that any new Commission, perhaps on the model of the Flexner Report that transformed Medical School education, would have the courage to point to what is clearly the basic flaw in the structure on which the educational system in this country is built: that apart from their own parents' sympathy and politicians' sentimental pronouncements, children of America are the most disenfranchised members of society. They do not vote, they do not contribute to election funds, they have no ownership in the media, they do not count when budget wars are waged against their schools.

Thomas Jefferson asked Congress for what would be a good part of the remedy even today: "An amendment of the Constitution must here come in aid of the public education. The influence on government must be shared by all people." That did not happen then, and won't now. But without something like the moral equivalent of a "right-to-proper-education" commitment by our society and its governors, progress will be slow and sporadic at best.

The nation could indeed use a new report. For it is still at risk.

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For additional points, see "'A Nation at Risk' Revisited," chapter 13, in G. Holton, The Advancement of Science, and its Burdens (Harvard University Press, 1998; also in Daedalus, v. 113, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 1-27); and Gerald Holton and Daniel Goroff (eds.), "American Education: Still Separate, Still Unequal," Daedalus, v. 124, no. 4 (Fall 1995).