

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup
Senior Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Friday, February 25, 2005

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED APRIL 13, 1994

NATIONALIZING 'DUMBING DOWN' AMERICA

Mark L. Melcher

While most of the public has been concentrating on Whitewater and health care reform, Congress, with little fanfare, recently passed Bill Clinton's "Goals 2000" education bill. In my opinion, this measure virtually assures that the nation's public education system will never again produce, as a matter of course, what by traditional standards would be considered educated people. In fact, I think history will record that passage of "Goals 2000" was an important landmark on the long, but straight road toward societal rot in America.

I know this is a strong statement, but consider the following, and remember that "Goals 2000" is very probably the last major piece of educational "reform" legislation that Congress will consider for the next decade. In the vernacular, what you see here is what you're gonna get . . . for a very long time. Keep in mind also that this is a decade during which, according to experts on all sides, dire consequences await U.S. society unless "something is done" about an educational system, which by all accounts is crumbling.

For starters, "Goals 2000" does none of things that virtually every study of American education, except those conducted under the auspices of the teacher unions, has determined would be necessary to rescue the system. For example, the bill fails to address any of the following.

- an extremely high ratio of administrators to teachers
- school based management
- merit pay for teachers
- school choice
- teacher competency examinations

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum

8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
or visit us at www.thepoliticalforum.com

Ironically, the final two items were centerpieces in Bill and Hillary's much acclaimed plan to improve Arkansas' schools. It was during the battle for that education package that the Clintons faced down the teacher unions and gained much praise among proponents of educational reform.

In the long run, however, the unions won. The teacher tests established in Arkansas were so easy that 91% of teachers passed on the first try, and the Arkansas school choice provision was minimal. This weak follow-through assured that Arkansas' schools would remain in or near the cellar by most state-by-state measures and that Clinton would have strong teacher union support in the presidential election. All of this, in turn, assured that no such anti-union foolishness, even watered-down versions, would be in Clinton's "Goals 2000" effort.

So, what does the new law do? Well, judging from its name and from the speech Clinton delivered at the signing ceremony one would gain the impression that it is mostly about "goals." And indeed there are goals. Grand goals. "Grand and big and bully" goals, as Tom Sawyer would have said, or "grand and good and pious" goals as his friend Huck would have said. Both boys are now banned from many public schools, along with Glock 17s. Among other things, Congress has decreed that by the year 2000 the following will occur. It is the law, sir.

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
- Students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competence over challenging subject matter.
- Students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
- Every adult American will be literate and possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in the United states will be free of drugs, firearms, alcohol and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

These "goals," and other similar ones that I didn't list, are chimerical, of course. But their inclusion in the legislation serves an important purpose. By giving the Act a kind of silly, unrealistic bent, they draw attention away from the fact that "Goals 2000" is a very serious measure with at least one very serious goal, and that is to prompt a significant expansion of federal control over the nation's public schools.

At the heart of this effort, is a belief by the Clintons and many of their political soul mates that decisions affecting education are too important to be left to the states, to local governments, and yes, to the parents; that only through federal control of the nation's schools can they effectively defeat the multiple scourges they see everywhere: sexism, lookism, racism, Eurocentrism, and a host of other 'isms of which most ordinary people have never even heard or dreamed.

At the heart of this bill is the belief among many of its proponents that only through federal control can children be taught the joys of multiculturalism, the tragedy of Thanksgiving (we stole the land from the Indians), and be kept from hearing any mention of traditional religious beliefs within the school walls; that only through federal controls can our elementary and high school students learn about "safe sex" and condoms and, in the words of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, "what to do in the back seat of the car."

In short, "Goals 2000" represents an frontal attack on parents, such as those in Brooklyn who a few years ago outraged the nation's entire liberal educational establishment by ousting the Chancellor of their school district, Joseph Fernandez, because he highhandedly attempted to impose the radical "Children of The Rainbow" curriculum on the children of New York.

If "Goals 2000" works, the Fernandez' of the world, and his supporters, will never again lose such a fight against "unenlightened" parents, because they will be armed with federal "standards," and the full support of the federal government.

Indeed, the true centerpiece of "Goals 2000" is the creation of federal "opportunity to learn" standards. These will encompass such things as spending levels, material requirements in schools, instructional practices, certification for teachers and principals, class size and most importantly, curriculum.

Ostensibly, these "standards" will be voluntary. But in a litigious society such as ours, the "voluntary" designation is nonsense. After all, each state has a law requiring that an "adequate" education be provided. Most lawsuits over this requirement bog down over the definition of "adequate." "Voluntary" federal standards will solve this problem, thus making it quite certain that every state will eventually "volunteer." As an additional incentive, federal money will be withheld from states that don't.

To set these standards, the act calls for the establishment of layer upon Byzantine layer of new councils, panels, boards, institutes, and offices, most of which will, most assuredly, be controlled by the education establishment.

Among other things, we will have the National Education Goals Panel, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council, the National Skills Standards Board, the National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board, the National Research Institutes, the National Education Dissemination System, the National Library of Education, and the National Occupational Information Coordination Committee.

All of these organizations are entitled to hire research staffs, public relations staff, outside consultants, et cetera. They are also authorized to "detail government employees from throughout the executive branch." No doubt, before the decade is out, the ground will be broken on a brand new government office building to house all of these people.

In short, "Goals 200" establishes an immensely powerful propaganda machine aimed at the nation's most impressionable audience, namely its youth. And it will almost certainly place this mechanism in the hands of the most liberal profession in the nation, its teachers. Thus, from a conservative standpoint, there is a concern that these national advisory panels could become

launching pads for all sorts of fad-driven social experimentation on the nation's children; or worse, for the outright dissemination of left-wing political propaganda.

Materials now being circulated by the National Council for Geographic Education demonstrate that conservative concern over this is well warranted. Among other things, according to Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, the draft standards issued by this group observe that fourth graders "tend to ethnocentricity, due to an inability to understand or appreciate other cultures." To be "at standard," then, students should "have developed a world sense."

Twelfth graders are expected to examine the way in which "gender, class, ethnicity, values and belief systems" affect peoples' views of place and region. Maps should be adjusted to reflect "greater equity and less bias." "Cultural awareness" is a major concern. This in a nation where studies reveal that fewer than half of the high school pupils can locate New York on a blank map of the United States and only one in four can find Massachusetts.

Further evidence for concern can be found in a newly rewritten edition of a venerable old history textbook. Called Todd & Curti's *The American Nation* (published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston), it is enthusiastically supported by the educational establishment. Among other things, according to John Leo, writing in the *U.S. News & World Report*, the new text notes that that American independence "failed to benefit" women, blacks and American Indians.

The book contains "pictures of two Irish-American men (one ward boss and Jack Kennedy) and two of Italian descent (Sacco and Vanzetti). But there are 75 to 80 illustrations of Indians and Indian culture running through the book, about three times the pictorial treatment given to the Irish, Jews, Swedes, Italians, Poles, Germans and Arabs combined. The race and gender allocation of biographies in the back of the book is worth noting, too. By my count, of the nearly 200 Americans considered worthy of short biographies, 56 are white females, 71 are white males, and 68 are nonwhites. Of the white males, 41 served as president, so white American males who failed to become president account for about 15 percent of all the profiles."

Another portend of things to come can be found in an amendment that will be tacked on to the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by Ted Kennedy. This amendment is entitled, the "Gender Equity in Education Act." It is, Kennedy says, aimed at "curbing sexual harassment in schools." According to Kennedy, "you have first-, second-, and third-grade harassers. You have kindergarten harassers. We're reaching out and identifying them at the earliest grades, disciplining these individuals."

In closing, let me say that it is not only because "Goals 2000" promotes a vast expansion of federal control over education in America, and turns this control over to the liberal educational establishment, that I think it will go down in history as a landmark on the nation's road to social and cultural decay. I am concerned also because the Act seems destined to perpetuate, nay institutionalize, an idea that has slowly developed in this country during the past few decades, that our schools are not primarily intended to educate in the classical sense, but to prepare young people to make a living. The language of the bill, the congressional debate surrounding it, and Bill's constant harping on the fact that our schools are not preparing us to "be competitive" in the 20th century indicate this.

Thus, in my opinion, even if "Goals 2000" were to achieve its "goals," the nation's educational system would still be gravely deficient. There is in my opinion nothing more dangerous to the long-term health of American society than to forget, as proponents of this bill appear to have, that the first function of education is, as Russell Kirk points out "to impart a moral heritage: to teach that the virtues and the vices are real, and that the individual is not free to toy with the sins as he may choose. What true education transmits is not values, but instead a body of truth: that is, a pattern of meanings, perceived through certain disciplines of the intellect."

Throughout the congressional debate over "Goals 2000" no legislator on either side of the aisle, so far as I could find, expressed alarm that gradually, in the past few decades, our educational institutions, from elementary right up to the nation's best universities and law schools, have dropped all pretense of "educating" in the classical sense, and have been turned into trade schools and centers for the grossest forms of social experimentation.

Interestingly, a man of whom Little Rock, Arkansas can truly be proud, Pulitzer Prize winning poet and essayist John Gould Fletcher saw the beginning of this trend in the late 1940s. His essay in the extraordinary book about the South, "I'll Take My Stand," noted the following about our educational system that is even more true today than it was then.

We achieve character, personality, gentlemanliness in order to make our lives an art and to bring our souls into relation with the whole scheme of things, which is the divine nature. But the present-day system of American popular education exactly reverses this process. It puts that which is superior--learning, intelligence, scholarship--at the disposal of the inferior. It says in effect that if the pupil acquires an education, he will be better able to feed and clothe his body later. It destroys the intellectual self-reliance of character, and the charm of balanced personality, in order to stuff the mind with unrelated facts. Its goal is industry rather than harmonious living."

I shudder to think what Fletcher would say if he were alive today.

In the first chorus of T.S. Eliot's work, "The Rock," the great poet said it this way: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" And of course Aristotle argued that the first purpose of education is to prepare the pupil to understand ethics, since he said, "knowledge brings no benefit to the morally weak."

This is why an educational system which has as its goal to simply "make us competitive" is a prescription for decay. And speaking of decay, let it be said that the fact that conservatives mounted virtually no national outcry against "Goals 2000," as they did against Hillary's health care measure, is clear testimony to the near bankruptcy of the intellectual leadership of political right in this United States today.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2005. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.