
Prologue

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I first learned of Diane Ravitch when she was profiled in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in the late 1970s, when I was a doctoral student in education at the University of Minnesota. The article, I believe, led me to read her just-released second book, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools*, a study I still cite on a regular basis.

The Revisionists Revised made mincemeat out of the arguments of a noisy and irritating band of Marxist and other radical scholars who contended that not only did American public education work to the disadvantage of poor and minority children, but that that was the very purpose of American elementary and secondary schools.

Such claims were on the other side of absurd, of course. Yet also, of course, most mainstream academics chose not to challenge them (at least not aloud) for fear of being slandered by all the fair and progressive types who were only then putting the final touches on modern-day political correctness.

It was into this breach that Diane Ravitch jumped, damning torpedoes, and—not for the last time—contribut-

ing as much courage, scholarship, and common sense to education debates as anyone in our country.

Current exhibit A is her newest book, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, in which she makes clear that holding all students to genuinely high and rigorous standards is the most equitable course that educators and policy makers can pursue for all boys and girls. Using *Left Back* as backdrop, she focused on Minnesota's idiosyncratic (which is to say, very bad) stab at high academic standards, the Profile of Learning, at a center forum last January. She concluded with bull's-eyes like these:

Make no mistake. Minnesota is engaged in a peculiar, a radical experiment, to see whether it is possible to educate an entire generation that knows next to nothing about history, next to nothing about literature, and that has only the scantiest, most episodic knowledge of mathematics and science. Is this [the Profile of Learning] education? I think not. . . .

I suggest that it is time to stop describing the Profile of Learning, this current hodgepodge, as “high standards” when no external reviewer

thinks that they are. It is time for the people of Minnesota to decide whether or not they want standards. If they do not, then so be it. If they do, then it is time to go back to the drawing board.

The next essay in this issue of *American Experiment Quarterly* also deals with children, though more to the contentious point, primarily male ones.

If my memory is on target this time around, I first became familiar with Christina Hoff Sommers early last decade when other academics and seekers of the truth found it necessary, perhaps even sporting, to accuse her of the full mantra of isms: sexism, racism, probably ageism, and a splash of homophobia for spice. I don't recall exactly what she did to provoke such feverish attacks, but I do remember hearing her speak back then at a meeting of the Minnesota Association of Scholars and finding her to be a perfectly nice and fair-minded person—the only kind we invite to lead forums or write for us.

In her newest book, *The War Against Boys*, she once again (like Ravitch) does a terrific job of pulverizing both cant and very bad research. Of course, our very own eyes and ears tell us that American boys are *not* doing splendidly compared to their allegedly disenfranchised sisters; it's obvious that boys are doing very poorly on a rash of measures. But, I'm afraid, one of the stranger features of the continuing moment is that it takes a scholar, not just of first-rate skill, but also of world-class courage, to make such a case.

All of which is to say, my thanks to Professor Sommers for her continuing

acuity and fortitude. It was a pleasure to host her in October when she said snappy things like this:

There is a surprising amount of hostility toward boys in this country. To put it bluntly: boys are politically incorrect. We may in fact be on the way to becoming perhaps the first society in history to turn against its male children. . . .

Do American boys need to be saved? Do they need to be rescued from their masculinity? I do not think so. . . . Some boys, of course, are in serious trouble. So too are some girls. A small percentage of boys are antisocial and violent. But when you look at genuine social science research, you find that a vast majority of boys are mentally healthy. Being a boy is not a defect. It is not a disorder. It is not something you need to recover from.

And because Professor Sommers is evidently a habitual glutton for punishment by those who think that women are from Venus but men are from hell, this is how she concludes: "It is unfashionable to say so, but I will say it anyway: the energy, adventurousness, stoicism, and competitiveness of normal, decent males are responsible for much of what is right in the world."

Speaking about getting in the face of prevailing orthodoxies, my colleagues and I were honored to host ABC's John Stossel, a regular for twenty years on the newsmagazine *20/20*. Consider the topics of some of his one-hour specials for the network:

In "The Blame Game," he looked at the growing tendency of Americans to blame their misfortunes on others.

He cross-examined bogus lawsuits in “The Trouble with Lawyers” and bogus scientific claims in “Junk Science: What You Know That May Not Be So.”

In “Freeloaders,” he focused on how getting something for nothing appeals to lots of people, including rich ones, who use the power of government to help themselves.

And in a program titled “Greed,” he offered a positive take on enlightened self-interest, challenging conventional wisdom on how we view businessmen, philanthropy, and the social impact of such individuals as Michael Milken and even Mother Teresa.

At a December American Experiment forum, in a speech titled “Freedom and Its Enemies,” he argued thus:

Something is horribly off in the media coverage, because all we hear are the scare stories, about how we’re exposed to all this horrible stuff: scary-sounding new things, invisible chemicals, deadly radiation, food additives. Stuff humans have never been exposed to until the last forty years. And it’s true, we are. But what’s the result? We’re living longer than ever. Our sense of history is so bad that we forget that at the turn of the last century, most people my age were dead. The very technology that we now fear so much has extended our lives. What gave us that innovative technology is not government regulation; it’s freedom.

Talking about sense and history, Patrick Henry almost certainly never said, “Give me *absolute safety* or give me death.” According to Mr. Stossel, “It’s supposed to be about liberty.”

Next up is the second installment in a once-every-eight-years series of uncommonly insightful and frank presentations on the future of conservatism in Minnesota and the nation by former congressman Vin Weber. He delivered it last November when things were as electorally confused as they’ve ever been within our formerly saner shores.

Vin’s remarks—“What’s Next for Conservatism?”—were the latest in a line of irregularly scheduled programs over the years in which we have posed hard questions regarding our movement’s designs and dilemmas. Other distinguished speakers have included Fred Barnes, Kate O’Beirne, Bill Bennett, and the Novak boys, Michael and Robert. We also published a superb package in the Summer 2000 AEQ, involving thirty writers, on the subject “Heart and Soul: A Symposium on Aim and Tone in American Conservatism.”

Vin’s 1992 speech, immediately following Bill Clinton’s victory, has stood the test of time brilliantly well. This is some of what he had to say and sooth-say this time around:

The Democrats and Republicans disagree on a lot of things, but on important issues they have converged around a set of fairly conservative values: essentially committed to market forces, to decentralization in terms of policy, to strengthening values such as work and family in social services. Those are great triumphs for conservatives.

But there is a qualifier, and it is something that is hard for at least some of my old friends in the Congress to live with: the traditional conservative position of questioning the role of

government in a whole range of areas is essentially off the table. . . . We may argue about how we're going to deliver health care to poor people and how we're going to pay for prescription drugs for senior citizens, but we're going to do it. We may argue about whether or not the proper means of dealing with the problems of poor people is the old-style welfare system or the new systems of earned income tax credits and maybe child care and that sort of thing, but we're going to provide support for those people.

I agree with Vin's argument, and not just because the handwriting of a clear majority of Americans is clearly on the wall.

If we are insistent (as we should be) that welfare recipients hold jobs unless they really can't, then we have no choice but to have different levels of government more involved than some conservatives might like; for example, in assuring child care and medical assistance. But as a veteran of the U.S. Department of Education, I also emphatically agree with him when he notes that "the federal role in education can be as destructive as it can be helpful." He makes this understated point in discussing President Bush's expanded plans for the department in contrast to those of President Reagan, who wanted to delete the whole place.

James Dueholm, a partner in the Minneapolis law firm of Faegre & Benson, also has given serious thought to the recent presidential election. In "Bush and Gore in Florida: The U.S. Supreme Court Got It Right," he argues more effectively than anyone

I've read or heard that the U.S. Supreme Court was perfectly right to involve itself in the Florida case and then to rule the way it did, effectively persuading Al Gore to concede.

He points out, for example, that "despite the contention and the occasional sound and fury" in their several opinions, seven of the nine justices agreed that the "standardless" recount ordered by the Florida Supreme Court deprived George W. Bush of equal protection of the laws. The clear majority, he writes, disagreed only on the deadline for resolving the dispute. About Florida voters themselves, Mr. Dueholm has this to say:

The right to vote is a fundamental right, and a voter is entitled to have his or her vote counted if the vote is clear or can be determined with reasonable certainty. A voter who fails to follow simple and prominently displayed instructions is not entitled to have his uncertain vote counted by a process that can be manipulated, will produce an inaccurate count, and could well pick the wrong winner. The mistake in Florida lies not in failing to count all of the dimpled chads but in counting any at all.

George W. Bush, he concludes, was indeed "the legitimate winner in Florida and is our legitimate president."

We close this lucky thirteenth issue of *AEQ* with two bonus pieces: one on school choice from the Heritage Foundation and a second on the christening of the USS *Ronald Reagan* by the officially inaugurated and installed Mr. Bush.

“Does Choice Work?” is pulled from the “policy postscript” of a new book that focuses on the very personal side of school choice, *Trinnietta Gets a Chance: Six Families and Their School Choice Experience*, by Daniel McGroarty. Like everything Heritage does, *Trinnietta* deserves a wide reading, but as just teased, it does so for one reason in particular: in the often wonkish debate over school choice, it’s essential not to lose sight of the real kids whose lives can be immeasurably enriched by educational freedom.

Nevertheless—this being a mainly wonkish publication—the excerpt included here focuses on three policy questions: Does school choice, in fact, work? Is it constitutional? And who, exactly, chooses it? Mr. McGroarty draws well on the emerging research, and we’re pleased to extend the reach of his summaries. It’s also my pleasure to thank the Heritage Foundation (my *other* favorite think tank) for the latest of their many courtesies to American Experiment.

To enjoy all of what Mr. McGroarty has to say, readers can order a copy of *Trinnietta Gets a Chance*, for \$9.50, by calling Heritage at 800-544-4843. If you’re adept at higher tech, the price is \$7 at www.heritage.org/bookstore.

Finally, television networks and other media carried portions of President George W. Bush’s speech at the christening of USS *Ronald Reagan* in March, but I suspect not many people have heard or read the full text. We are pleased to include it here.

As a former speechwriter, I can’t begin to say how impressed I am with the sheer beauty of many of Mr. Bush’s early formal statements as president. Then again, I suspect it’s hard for lyrical juices not to flow when the subject is an increasingly respected and beloved former president and the occasion is the dedication of an aircraft carrier named after him that is “awesome” in the way grown-ups use the term. I’m thinking of ovely lines like “When we send her off to sea, it is certain that the *Ronald Reagan* will meet with rough waters, as well as smooth, and headwinds, as well as fair. But she will sail tall and strong, like the man we have known.”

With that said and declared, it’s time for *AEQ* to sail off, till the summer and a special issue on marriage and children, guest edited by historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and sociologist David Popenoe. As for spring, I urge everyone in these parts to enjoy it liberally, as nothing about hemispheric warming this time of year in Minnesota is either manmade, unnatural, or in violation of the Kyoto accords. ■