

Snakes, Snails, and Puppy-Dog Tails

Hands are gnashed and teeth wrung over the current superiority of girls over boys in school. The probable consequences, both economic and social, are grave,

going far beyond cutesy gender-wars sparring. Why are boys crashing?

Some writers imply that boys are just, well, doltish and can't keep up. The evidence doesn't support the idea. In 1999—I pick that year because I then wrote a column on the question—the average math SAT score for boys was 531; for girls, 495. The respective verbal scores were 509 and 502. The number of boys scoring 800 in math, the highest possible score, was 4,815; of girls, 1,611. Girls with 800 verbal scores, 2,828; boys, 3,087. The disparity cannot well be explained by stupidity.

Nor is it that girls have gotten better. They have always done well in school. Yet boys are now doing much worse. Why? Perhaps because schools refuse to recognize that boys and girls are very different animals.

Girls co-operate; boys compete. Girls like order; boys, disorder. Girls like security; boys, adventure. Girls are not particularly physical; boys, relentlessly so.

I don't argue that either is better, only that the differences exist. Ignore them, and you get what we've got.

The schools today promote everything that boys aren't, don't want, and can't be. Boys are churning energy wads. They usually hate school. Girls, I think, do not. For boys the routine is horrible, the material boring, the enforced confinement to desks almost physically painful.

When I was in high school in King George County, Virginia, boys played

football at school, three hours of (full-contact) fast-break pickup basketball at the gym after school, and spent long afternoons swimming and canoeing in the river. We needed to burn off energy. It was a requirement for well being. The girls, by choice, did none of this.

Boys like to take chances, valuing freedom over security. My friends and I canoed into the Potomac in high waves with storm warnings out because it was fun, exciting, uncontrolled. Girls didn't. They could have, there being no restrictions on sales of canoes to girls, but they by choice did other things. Different animals.

Put boys in suburban moors where there is little physical to do; enact rules against hazardous sports such as tag and dodgeball; outlaw competition; tell them that everything they want to do is violent and evil; forbid them to swim without two lifeguards, a Coast Guard-approved life preserver, and sunblock—and you get miserable, frustrated boys who are likely to say the hell with it.

Today's schools are so heavily feminized that a boy feels as if he were in a convent. When I was in high school, roughly half of the teachers were men. Both sexes had teachers who understood them. It worked. Female teachers today, having little idea what makes boys tick, try to fit all into female roles. It doesn't work.

Further, boys suffer to the extent that schools value form over substance, neatness over knowledge, political correctness over thought, safety over every-

thing, and niceness, niceness, niceness. They have little patience with make-work projects that require cutting pictures from magazines. Their handwriting is typically poor. They aren't too good about getting homework in on time. Bright boys can deploy great intellectual intensity—watch one take apart his computer's motherboard—but they bore easily.

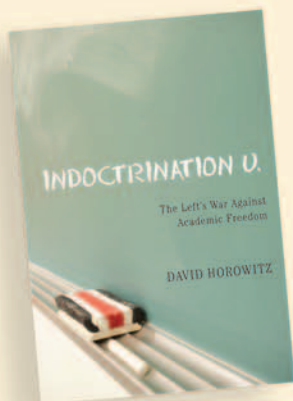
Remember that the dice are loaded against the highly intelligent, girls as well as boys. The teachers colleges get the dregs of the collegiate world, as has been shown time and again. When a teacher with an IQ of 95 faces a student at 150, they are virtually of different species. But girls are more—what is the word? Patient? Dutiful? Practical? Sally is likely to put up with a teacher she fully recognizes as an idiot and get a good grade. Billy is likely to bail.

A girl with high test scores will generally have good grades. A boy with high scores may come close to flunking out. (Guilty, your honor.) Different animals.

When boys do well on objective tests—IQ, SATs, GREs, National Merit, what have you—and also as engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and system programmers, but fail miserably in school, one might reasonably suspect that the problem is not boys but the schools.

If the schools want to teach boys (I don't think they do), they need to recognize that people come in two sexes; we might even value the difference. Let girls be girls and boys be boys. Hire staff evenly divided between the sexes. Don't impose on either sex behavior that is unnatural to it. Who knows? We could even essay common sense.

Nah, never happen. ■



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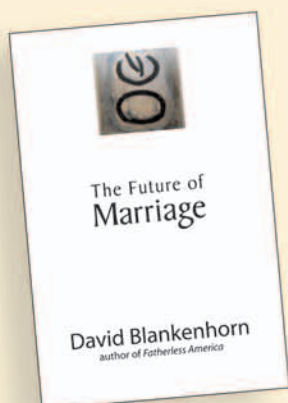
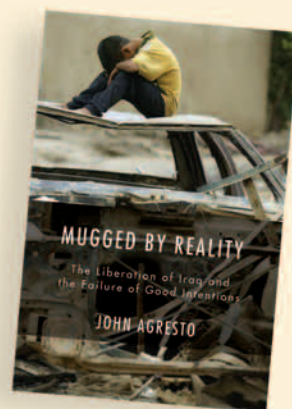
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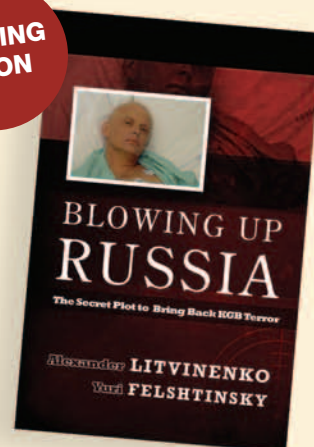
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