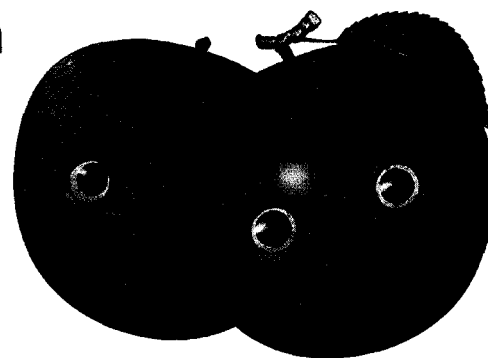


Forward Observer

JAMES GLASSMAN



The Right Campaign Issue: Education

Most presidential campaigns aren't very edifying. The current one threatens to be typical, with Vice President Al Gore attacking Texas Gov. George Bush on guns, abortion, and "risky tax cuts," and Bush trying to link Gore to campaign finance excesses and the character deficiencies of Bill Clinton.

But it doesn't have to be that way. The campaign could turn out to be the best in two decades if it concentrates on a single issue that clearly distinguishes the two candidates in principled and practical ways. That issue is education.

A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in early March found that Americans rank education as "the most important problem facing the country today"—far ahead of taxes, Medicare, Social Security, health care, and guns. It's the hottest public policy issue in Silicon Valley, where entrepreneurs despair of finding enough smart folks to staff their new companies. It's also the top worry of African Americans, who now support education vouchers 60 percent to 33 percent.

From a partisan perspective, I find it hard to see how Bush can win the election on any issue other than education. It's tough to run against an administration that has presided over the longest period of growth in U.S. history—whether Clinton and Gore really deserve the credit or not. If Bush is hoping for a recession, he can forget it.

The good news is that Bush seems to understand the power of the education issue. Shortly after he won the nomination, he began running TV ads pointing out that, "under Al Gore and Bill Clinton, national reading scores stagnated.... The achievement gap between poor and non-poor students remains wide. Gore and Clinton had eight years, but they've

failed." Bush also highlights his own successes in Texas.

But he will have to do more. What truly divides the two candidates is that Bush believes the way to find solutions in education is through the same means the market uses to find solutions elsewhere. "Only the pressure of competition—and the power of parental choice—can change the status quo," he says.

Currently, 31 states plus the District of Columbia are operating a total of 1,682 charter schools (one-tenth of them in Texas). Charter schools are public schools established outside the conventional system, more and more by for-profit companies that operate without the restrictions unions impose.

Meanwhile, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida have enacted voucher programs that let low-income parents or parents of children in failing schools get tax dollars to send their kids to private schools.

Bush's platform calls for "allowing federal funds to be used for public and private school choice," and for setting up a \$3 billion fund of loan guarantees to help "establish or improve 2,000 charter schools nationwide in two years."

Gore's platform stresses technology: wiring schools to the Internet and improving teacher training in computers. He also wants to fund pre-school education for every child, to pay college students bonuses for becoming teachers, and to set up smaller "schools within schools."

Some of these ideas are fine, but, ultimately, Gore has a burden that prevents him from advocating real reform. He's allied with the powerful teachers' unions, and so can't support vouchers or even truly independent charter schools that would provide non-union competition—and thus, real innovation—to the established

system. "We must reject the false promise of siphoning public school funding away to private schools," he said in a recent interview.

The irony here is practically unbearable. Gore himself is a graduate of St. Albans, a tony Washington prep school, and his kids attended private schools as well. As for "siphoning": What is a college Pell Grant if not a tuition voucher? Recipients can use such public grants at private universities ranging from Holy Cross to Brandeis.

There is a clear line dividing the education policies of the two candidates. Gore believes we can get better schools using a top-down command-and-control system. Come up with ideas like smaller classes and better testing, and use federal cash to get local schools to accept them.

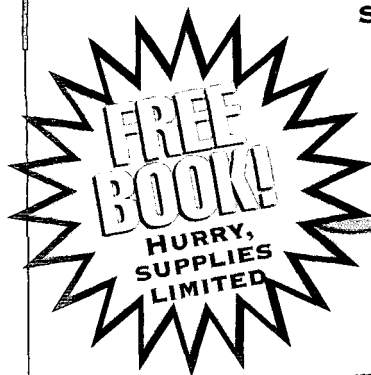
Bush is saying—or *should* say: "We get better education the same way we get better computers—through competition. Let's end the worst monopoly this country has seen: state-run schools. It is a crime that so many kids, especially poor kids, are locked in schools that will never improve. Allow their parents more choice, and new schools will spring up to meet their needs. Then the old schools will reform themselves, or die."

This difference between Gore and Bush on schools mirrors their differences on other policies. The Democrat is an advocate of reform generated by smart bosses. The Republican says the only way to find solutions to many public-policy problems is through market competition and consumer choice.

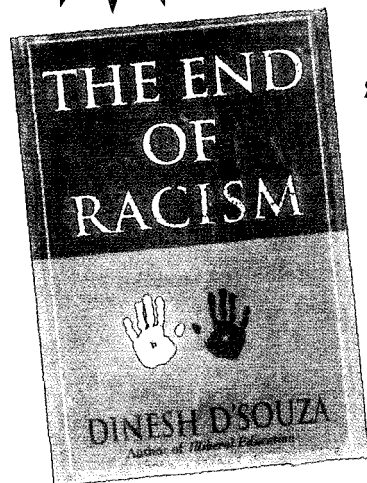
Slug it out over education, guys, and this will be a great campaign—and, coincidentally, one that Bush could actually win.



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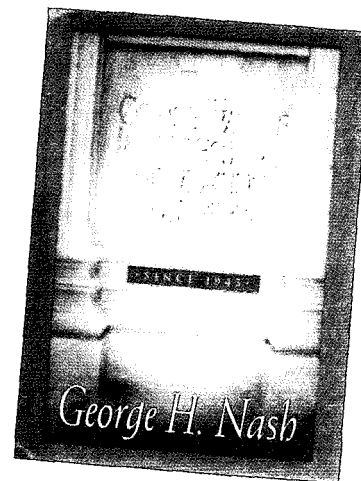


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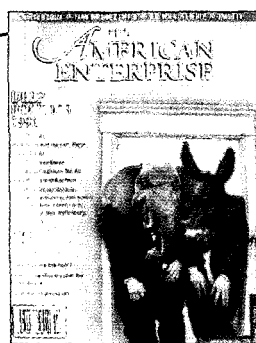
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Bob Costas

Despite his perennially boyish appearance, Bob Costas of NBC has become the dean of American sports broadcasters. An articulate traditionalist on baseball matters, he is a leading critic of the greed and gimmickry that have, for many young fans, reduced the national pastime to the status of tedious interlude between the NBA and NFL seasons. With a fresh major league season underway and his new book (Fair Ball: A Fan's Case for Baseball) on store shelves, Costas chatted with TAE's Curt Smith, a former presidential speechwriter and author of the classic study of baseball broadcasters, Voices of the Game.

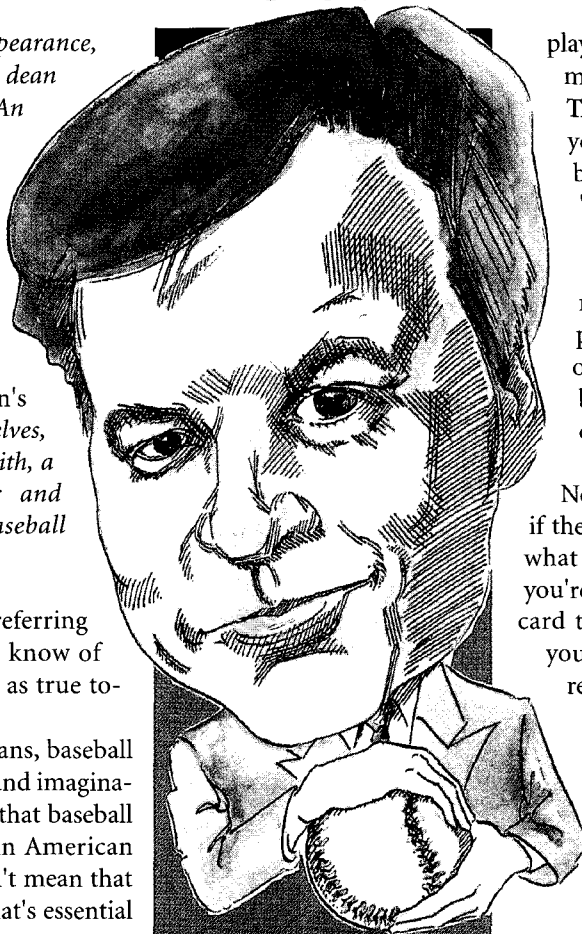
TAE: Thomas Wolfe once wrote, referring to baseball, "Almost everything I know of spring is in it." That is not nearly as true today. Why?

COSTAS: For millions of Americans, baseball still has a real hold on their hearts and imagination, but it's unrealistic to assume that baseball is going to hold quite the place in American culture that it used to. That doesn't mean that it needs to surrender everything that's essential about it.

What disturbs me is that baseball in recent years has seemed to be panic-stricken, so intent on catching the shifting winds of pop culture that it's willing to distort the essence of the game.

Baseball's best bet is to accentuate the differences between it and other sports, and the greatest strength of baseball is its timelessness. Modern proof of that is the success of all the new retro ballparks: these throwbacks to old feelings are the closest thing to an unmitigated success that baseball has experienced over the last 10 years.

The results of other supposedly inspired changes—divisional realignments, expanded



The great strength of baseball is its timelessness. The success of all the retro ballparks—throwbacks to old feelings—proves that.

playoffs, the wild card, inter-league play—are mixed at best and disastrous at worst.

TAE: In *Fair Ball: A Fan's Case for Baseball*, you talk about the distinction—which baseball has failed to recognize—between "mere change and real progress."

COSTAS: Baseball has changed willy-nilly over the past several years and has managed, with the help of a compliant press, to frame the argument as a question of whether you're a progressive or a baseball conservative; whether you embrace change or you're resistant to change.

These are just mindless buzzwords. No intelligent person isn't willing to change if the change represents an improvement over what went before. But in baseball's case, if you're going to expand the playoffs, is the wild card the best way to do it—if in the process you destroy the meaning and drama of the regular season?

If you're going to play inter-league games, and I have no problem with that in concept, is it right to have the same divisions constantly match up against each other so that Mark McGwire and the Cardinals never come to Fenway Park? Derek Jeter and the Yankees never come to Cincinnati?

Or would it be better to rotate the inter-league games so that they felt more special? So that Ken Griffey, Jr., now in the National League, came to an American League city only once every three years; so that the games between the Yankees and Mets, instead of becoming annual affairs, were really something that was anticipated; so that the distinction between the leagues was maintained, but at the same time the novelty and appeal of inter-league games was also highlighted?

TAE: Does the record not show that when it comes to baseball, tradition sells?

COSTAS: Tradition does sell when it comes to baseball, and tradition should be respected in