

Flashback

To know nothing of what happened before you were born
is to remain ever a child—Cicero



School's Out!

As the dog days of summer stretch out in all their yawning glory, you may be sure that somewhere, a man with an advanced degree and a mean streak is muttering under furrowed brow, “Why aren’t those kids in school?”

The average length of the American public school term is 180 days, not much more than the 173 days of the 1935-36 school year. Summer vacation remains the golden season of childhood, the mellow months when boys and girls store up memories and explore the fields and hills and streets where they live. But like the metric system and soccer, year-round schooling is a nuisance cause that busybodies will not give up.

Proponents of the August schoolday have frequently regarded children as the ductile means to some great national end, whether economic or military. In 1960, Grace and Fred M. Hechinger warned readers of the *New York Times*, “The Soviet pupil manages to spend about the same number of hours in school during his ten-year program as the American student does in twelve.” (These well-drilled pupils would go on to build the Mir space station and conquer Afghanistan.)

The Hechingers referred to American children as an “army of intellectual manpower.” In *A Nation at Risk*, the ballyhooed 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Americans were accused of committing “unilateral educational disarmament” because we permitted our kids to spend their Julys running through strawberry fields rather than sitting in a classroom under artificial light reading textbooks

about the environment.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed into its deserved junkheap, the summer-school scolds discovered the Japanese, who incarcerate their children in school for 240 days a year. The old bogeyboy of the regimented Russian, learning to design Sputniks while Johnny American wastes his summer catching frogs and playing baseball, gave way to the grim Asian youth mastering calculus before the onset of puberty. “International competition” became the rationale for year-round school.

Today, it is the alleged superiority of school to family that drives the summer-school bus. “Americans don’t even know what to do with their children during the summertime,” asserts the technocratic economist Lester Thurow.

A “significant learning loss” takes place in summer, or so we are told by the killjoys of the National Association for Year-Round Education. *Time* magazine, which can always be counted on to embrace the statist fad of 40 minutes ago, notes that “the case for the longer school year is particularly acute in the inner cities, where family ties are weak.” Minority parents are not to be trusted with their offspring, who are better off in the clutches of mother state. Or as the superintendent of schools in Newark, New Jersey said in 1917 after his district abolished summer vacation, “the ten weeks of summertime given over to idleness and unsupervised activities and associations involves great waste, if not positive peril.”

The two sides in this debate don’t even speak the same language. The year-round school advocates—credentialed “experts”

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—use the number-studded jargon of the bureaucrat, while the opponents speak in the language of family and love.

Of course there are practical objections to 12-month schooling: Custodians need unoccupied buildings for repairs and painting; air conditioning is prohibitively expensive in muggy climes; summer vacation is so embedded in the culture that only a totalitarian could root it out.

Defenders of the summer sun, of the family picnic, of innocent play, often wax poetic. In 1972, during a previous propaganda push for year-round school, Richard C. Whipple, a bank manager from Sprague, Washington wrote to *Nation's Business*: “Are we so old that we have forgotten the feeling on those warm days at the end of May when we were looking forward to the summer months? Let’s give these children time to be kids and be with their parents; to lie on the summer grass and watch the clouds drifting by; to think out their small problems and have time of their own. We push, push the younger generation and leave them no time.”

Laze on, August.

—Bill Kauffman

Working Lunch

Wisdom... is social. She seeks her fellows—Thomas Jefferson

Patriot Practitioner

World War II Navy veteran, scholar of Constitutional law and political philosophy, prolific author, patriot, and gentleman—those are just a few terms to describe AEI's old-school resident scholar Walter Berns. Mr. Berns sat down with TAE senior editors Karina Rollins and Eli Lehrer to discuss the past, present, and future of our union, which, as the author of Making Patriots explains, is far from certain.

TAE: What do you make of the recent ruling by California's Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance are un-Constitutional?

BERNS: The notion of extreme separation of church and state first gained real emphasis in the nineteenth century, fueled by anti-Catholicism. Hundreds of thousands of Roman Catholics immigrated here, and American Protestants felt threatened. But this idea of "separation" has no basis in the Constitution of the United States. We'll see what the Supreme Court has to say about the Ninth Circuit's ruling, because there will be an appeal.

Similar anti-religion suits have sprung from opposition to public display of the Ten Commandments. These are connected to a change in the practice of Constitutional law. It used to be that one had to show some particular interest in a law or practice before one could file a suit objecting to it. In legal jargon, one had to have legal "standing" on the issue. But then the courts relaxed the standing requirement, and made it easy for anybody to go to court to protest such things

on essentially political grounds.

TAE: Since September 11 you have been very optimistic about the state of patriotism in this country. You've said you were surprised, actually, at how this country came together, and how there is now real unity—on acts ranging from showing the flag to giving blood. Do you still feel that way?

BERNS: I have spent almost all of my adult life in the academic community, which is not noted for its public display of patriotic sentiments, so I was pleasantly surprised by the public response to 9/11, particularly the extent to which the flag was displayed. But a more severe test may come later, and one cannot be sure whether all the Americans who are now waving the flag will be willing to suffer more pain.

TAE: There has been criticism of President Bush for failing to emphasize the possible need for sacrifice in his rhetoric. Something more than flying to Disneyland may be needed to beat the terrorists, no?

BERNS: You know, there is not much that average citizens can do right now. We could return to celebrating Memorial Day and other holidays as actual holidays, not just as three-day weekends. More seriously, we might tie federal loans and grants for university education to required service for the country. The original GI Bill when I was a beneficiary gave you subsidies for university education in return for services the student had already provided. What might be done now is to offer the subsidy in return for the promise of future service. Make all these grants conditional on something



Walter Berns

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like 18 months service in the military.

The President might say more to persuade the American people that we are in a war that needs to be won. I never had any doubt, even after Pearl Harbor, that we would win World War II. But I'm not so sure now, as I look at some of the difficulties facing us, that we will win our current struggle easily. I at least think the war will go on for a long time, and we have to be prepared for that. The President has a responsibility to remind us of that, and of the sacrifices we may have to make. Up to this point, the main sacrifice most Americans have made is seeing a decline in the value of their investments in the stock market. I gather there has been no increase in military enlistments since 9/11.

World War II was so different from our situation now. Men were lining up to join the Army; people tried to conceal physical ailments in order to get in. The whole sentiment was to get in. Men walking around had to explain why they weren't in the service. There was concern about facing public censure. It's very different today.

