

aggression pact; the Soviet Union assured Hitler that he would not have to fight on two fronts, east as well as west.

How different would be our world today if Stalin had followed the example of, say, Winston Churchill! How many lives would have been saved if, instead of cooperating

with Hitler, instead of invading gallant Finland, the Soviet Union had cooperated with France, Britain, and Poland. Among other blessings, Poland might have been Poland today.

Mr. Chairman, the system that produced Hitler is dead. We can all be thankful for

that. But the system and ideology that produced Stalin is not dead; it has its representatives in this very room. This commission would be well-advised if it were to concern itself with this lively form of totalitarianism. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. □

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

## THE POLICY WIMP COMES OF AGE

He means no harm.

Why, inquired the curmudgeonly columnist over an elegant dinner, are so many "wimps" emerging from American high schools and colleges? Cultural decay, economic decline, political ennui, and social boredom will all deepen, he opined, if the younger generation continues to be colonized by diffident, inarticulate, non-committal individuals whose noblest characteristic is their inoffensiveness.\*

It set me to thinking. If wimpishness is on the increase among the products of our schools and colleges, could this have anything to do with the people who staff, run, and make policy for those institutions? Could this formulation help me, at least heuristically, to understand why it is that I have found much of the education profession to be so squooshy, bland, and saccharin as often to be downright annoying?

This turns out to be a useful insight, provided one distinguishes between wimpish people and wimpish ideas. My profession may not harbor a significantly greater proportion of individual wimps than most other fields of endeavor—more than Marine Corps drill instructors and disk jockeys, I suppose, but not more than accountants, morgue attendants, or keypunch operators—yet its mainstream ideology, its underlying beliefs, and its overriding objectives are indisputably on the wimpish side. It is a profession heavily populated by what I now think of as policy wimps.

\*My slang dictionary defines "wimp" as a "weak, ineffectual, or insipid person." My unwimpish research assistant adds that "'wimp' is usually applied to males, not females." But I forgive her. A wimp can also be a "Valley Girl" without the teeth or the tan.

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The policy wimp favors goodness and dislikes evil. He stands for decency, generosity, compassion, patience, understanding, tolerance, equality, and happiness. He opposes meanness, invidiousness, distinctions, envy, failure, pressure, discrimination, and unhappiness. But he does not oppose them with much vigor, certainly not to the point of discommoding anyone who may be evil, for that would not be nice, and the policy wimp seeks above all to be nice, to support things that are nice, and to be accommodating. With all the limited fervor at his command, he yearns to accommodate everyone.

This leads to policies that are generous in spirit and accommodating in execution, that seek to make life agreeable for as

many people as possible. The ideal policy is one that nobody finds objectionable, awkward, or unpleasant. Hence the first question the policy wimp asks about a proposal is who might suffer or be made unhappy as a result of it, particularly in the short run, the time frame he instinctively adopts. If a proposed policy or program makes everyone smile, so much the better. But the important point is that no one find it objectionable, else the proposal is instantly suspect.

Policy wimpishness in the education profession has become more visible of late, because of the drive by governors, legislatures, citizens groups, employers, and various task forces to raise educational standards. In the short run, higher standards predictably serve to identify more people and institutions that do not meet them. If high school graduation requirements are increased, the number of people who do not graduate from high school will increase. If the "cut-off" score on college entrance tests is boosted, fewer people will be able to enter. If new teachers are held to a higher intellectual standard, a smaller proportion of those who might wish to join the profession will be able to.

All such measures are apt to produce more short-run discontent than the lower (or nonexistent) standards that they replace. To the policy wimp, this is more telling than the potential long-term benefit to the society that may result from the loftier norms. The policy wimp is not satisfied with a utilitarian calculus that estimates the greatest good for the greatest number. Rather, he employs an index of social hedonism that gauges alternatives according to the immediate pleasure and pain they are likely to yield, and he employs it with considerable rigor. Any predictable pain at all is enough to invalidate a proposal.



The policy wimp even shies away from language that bites. He dotes on such words as "appropriate" and "relevant" and phrases such as "special needs," assiduously avoiding all terms that might alarm, upset, or give offense. He would never dream of describing a child as "retarded," a school as "inferior," a sub-population as "illiterate," or a government program as intended to pump money into lackluster colleges that cannot possibly attract enough students or resources to make it on their own but are beloved of some deserving or powerful group.

The denatured language of wimpish education policy eventually leads those using it to forget what is really meant, or never to understand it in the first place. Words can do that to you. As George Orwell put it, "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." Wimpish words and foolish thoughts can even redefine the essence of the goal or problem to which a policy is addressed. Orwell wrote of "political language [that] has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." Education policy is commonly written, and debated, in such language. A good example is bilingual education. The crucial problem for schools with immigrant children is how best to teach English—fast—to those youngsters whose parents do not speak it. But policy wimps cannot bring themselves to say that, for fear the children will get their feelings hurt or (more likely) the spokesmen for sundry ethnic and linguistic minorities will object. So we drift into variations on the theme of "multi-cultural" education and the problem we set out to solve gets replaced by quite a different one.

Policy wimps are vulnerable to individuals and groups who are prepared to state strong interests and to voice objections. They are easily manipulated by anyone who really knows what he wants, and are positively undone by anyone wily enough to protest a policy on grounds that it would harm, inconvenience, or upset himself, his community, or a group to which he belongs.

Policy wimps are reluctant to impose

their own ideas. They do not like to prescribe what others should learn or be able to do, what their values ought to be, or even how they ought to behave. Now, of course, writing and filling such prescriptions for children are the fundamental responsibilities that society has assigned to schools. Shirking them is tantamount to rejecting the ineluctable obligation of adult educators to mold the young students

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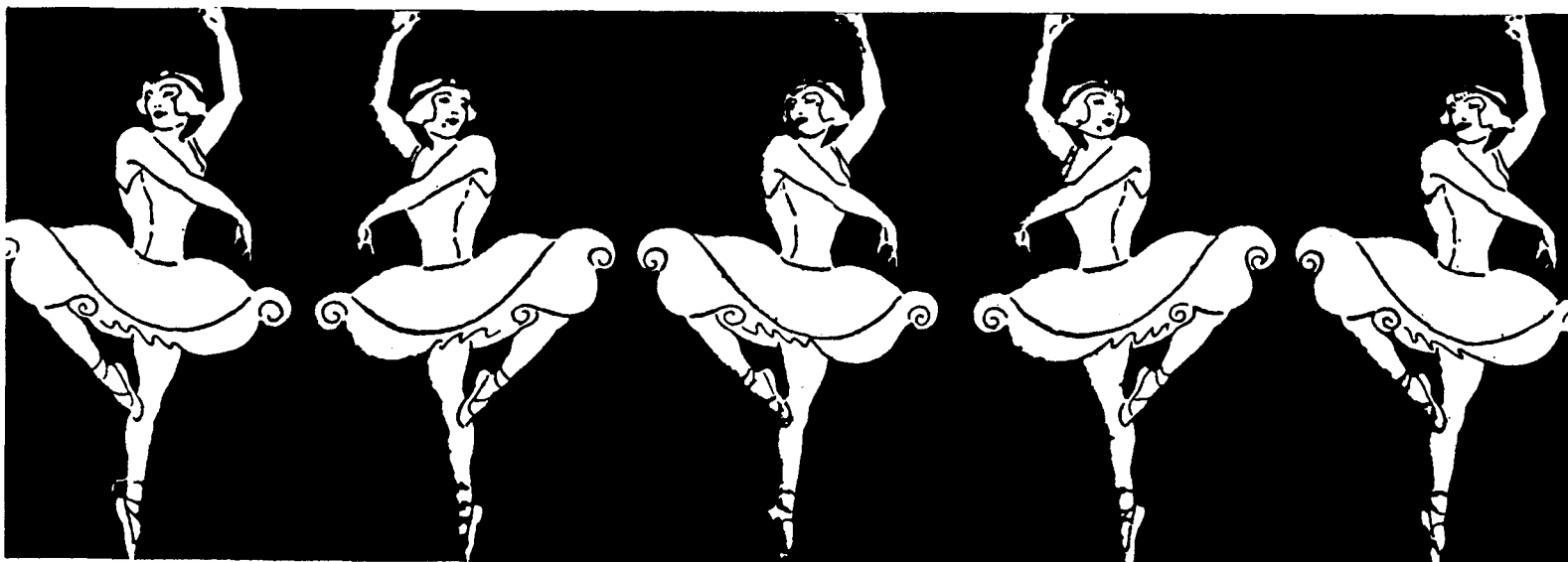
given to their charge. And it goes far to explain why so many parents, taxpayers, and voters are dismayed with the current condition of American education, and why governors, legislators, and citizens groups are now finally shouldering the burden of making such decisions.

But even as they decline to specify cognitive, ethical, and behavioral norms for children in schools, policy wimps also resist setting any limits for schooling. No matter how exotic or unrealistic the assignment, so long as someone feels strongly that schools should undertake it, the policy wimp does not demur. Avoiding confrontation at all costs, he amiably allows the formal education system to be charged with equalizing economic inequalities, healing emotional and psychological wounds, legitimating odd life-styles, fitting youngsters with job skills, and supplying any sort of instruction that someone thinks worthwhile, from energy conservation to human reproduction to the glories of the United Nations and the marvels of the metric system. Though unwilling to prescribe values, the policy wimp is only too willing to create circumstances in which

children are encouraged to "clarify" their own. Reluctant to throw chronically disruptive youngsters out of school, the policy wimp assents to guards in the corridors. Wary of discarding silly books from the curriculum and library shelves and replacing them with literature, the policy wimp all but invites the school board to host angry confrontations between censorious citizen groups of every ideological stripe.

The policy wimp is often conservative, not in his politics but in his devotion to established patterns, habits, and mind-sets. If teachers have always been paid according to seniority and graduate credit hours, the policy wimp is shaken by the suggestion that meritorious performance might be a better basis for salary determinations, and his anxiety is transformed into deep discomfort by the revelation that some constituency that he would like to accommodate—union leaders, for example, teachers-college deans, or civil-rights groups—finds the proposed change objectionable. If the town or state is accustomed to promoting every child from fourth to fifth grade on the basis of "seat time," the policy wimp is discomfited by any proposal to make intellectual attainment a condition for future promotions, and discomfiture turns to anguish in the presence of parents whose children actually have to repeat fourth grade. If the state university has traditionally stressed the "affective domain" in its curriculum for future teachers, and if the faculty likes it that way, the policy wimp is reluctant to create a stir by insisting on greater attention to cognitive learning.

The policy wimp does not necessarily oppose change. Indeed, steadfast devotion to the idea of "innovation" is apt to be part of his intellectual make-up. What he resists is unhappiness, particularly when it can be attributed to policy changes to which he may be party, and especially when the unhappiness is felt—and voiced—by individuals or constituencies whose happiness is important to his own. He may suspect that the change would be good for those who assert the contrary, but he does not have it in him to look them in the eyes and say so. This timidity parallels his



diffidence with respect to prescribing content, standards, and behavior for students. If he cannot bring himself to stipulate that every high school pupil must study chemistry or learn a foreign language (or salute the flag, or shave, or treat fellow students with respect), it is certainly unrealistic to expect the policy wimp to take on organized groups of adults with loud voices, media access, and political clout.

Avoidance of confrontation is part of the policy wimp's public make-up. That does not mean all soft-spoken, mild-mannered, outwardly easy-going people espouse wimpish policies, any more than all vigorous orators and hearty back-slappers are given to education policies with teeth. Wimpishness is not, in its essence, a behavioral trait. It is intellectual and ideological.

**I**n education policy, wimpishness has several origins. It derives partly from pedocentrism—the notion that the school ought to be tailored to the needs of the individual child, rather than the child obliged to adjust to the school—a notion that has dominated American educational thought for most of this century. Partly

from the cultural and social relativism dwelling in the liberal elites that have long played leading roles in education policy formation. Partly from the “do-your-own-thing” libertarianism imbibed on university campuses in the sixties and seventies. Partly from the exquisite group sensitivities of the “new politics.” Partly from revulsion at anything that anyone could think of as discrimination. Partly, no doubt, from heartfelt love for one's fellow men. And partly, I believe, from plain old-fashioned confusion about what is right and what is wrong and who is to say.

Whatever its origins, wimpishness involves the lack of resolute convictions save at the vaguest and most general level, a dearth of clearly perceived standards and norms, and an unwillingness (or inability) to make choices about which there is no consensus or decisions that are other than the lowest common denominator. Perversely, this leads to mistrust of democratic political processes, for true wimpishness does not permit one to take comfort from decisions that aggrieve any minority, however small or selfish.

The policy wimp may be feckless but he is not evil. He is accommodating. He is outwardly tolerant. He is generally kindly.

He is indisputably well-meaning. He may not be boring—many policy wimps are good company—and in private he may even be an opinionated opera critic, a daring rock climber, or a tyrannical Little League coach. But his “policy persona,” which is the aspect of him that influences what goes on in schools and colleges, can be described in terms akin to those a restaurant reviewer recently used to evoke a bowl of soup she had consumed: “vague and sweet and starchy.”

If one believes that education should have tang and savor, that schooling should be flavorful as well as nutritious, and that public policies shaping it should hew to standards and expectations at least as demanding as those we apply to eating places, then wimpishness will not suffice. It is not, in itself, bad. Rather, it suffers from a surfeit of good intentions. But it is vulnerable to manipulation by those whose intentions are not good. It does violence to the language. It saps the vitality of the culture. And it fosters the formation of more and more young Americans who replicate in their personal style and intellectual orientation the characteristics of the policies that guide their education. My dinner companion called them wimps. □

Herb Greer

## MODERN ARABIAN NIGHTS

Israel, the CIA, and two new thrillers from  
Richard Grenier and John Le Carré.

**T**here was once a time when a certain sort of bright and decent person refused on principle to believe in God, because God was an excuse for oppression. In our less palmy days this type is apt to deny on principle that there is any such thing as an enemy, especially on the international scene. This person's heart *knows* that no one wants to harm us, or oppose us except in the way of friendly competition; if enemies do exist, they are the paranoid elements of our own government and their conspiratorial backers, employees, and client states. These sinister forces talk about nuclear weapons in an aggressive way and affright big nations like Russia and China; they exploit, corrupt, starve,

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and generally oppress smaller countries whose poor people only want to be left alone so they can make a better life for themselves (with lots of no-strings aid from the West). If it were not for *our* primary bad guys there would be no Cold War, no subversion, no spies, terrorists, hostage-taking, revolutions, anti-American propaganda, or foreigners who hate us. Only friendly competition. The world would be organized by chummy nations who could settle down and live happily ever after, secure in the knowledge that we are all the same, really—brothers and sisters under the skin, no less.

The broad axiom which arises from all this is that if anything ugly happens anywhere in the world and involves us or our interests (say the bombing of our Beirut Embassy), it is necessarily our fault,

because we employ and/or support the primary bad guys. The closer to the United States the trouble comes, the more culpable we are. Any proof to the contrary is forged by the bad guys, so forget all that. This American corner on the ultimate causes of political evil is a species of fancy which never seems to go away for long. Early in the century Bernard Shaw and his coterie were putting it about that the real cause of wars was the greed of armaments manufacturers. Not long before that, a fertile imagination had given birth to the Elders of Zion, a kind of malignant, invisible, world-sized organizational squid, whose tentacles were sapping the Christian moral fiber and precious bodily fluids so that the Jews could take over.

Now the Americans, who (as everybody knows) have everything these days,