
THE PUBLIC POLICY



EDUCATION: THE DUD OF CAMPAIGN '88

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

If education never really quickens as an election issue this year, despite the deep concern and boundless enthusiasm voiced by the candidates, it won't be for lack of public interest. In a recent Gallup poll, for example, 78 percent of those surveyed indicated worry over "the quality of U.S. education." Yet which of the candidates has rushed forward with his diagnosis of the problems of American education much less offered his proposals to solve them? Here we have an authentic nationwide issue, an area in which ideas matter and where leadership counts—a topic that for all its portentousness does not have to be boring, as William Bennett has shown. Yet it's turning out to be the biggest dud of Campaign '88.

Some obvious reasons suggest themselves. First, no matter what their party platforms say, Messrs. Bush and Dukakis have not revealed great differences in *their* thinking. Most of what they've had to say has either been pure rhetoric (wanting to be an "education President") or predictable calls for new federal programs. Indeed, the candidates' failure is nowhere more evident than in their tendency to "federalize" education.

Just as importantly, both candidates are handling the education establishment, especially the two major teacher unions, with kid gloves. This might be expected from Governor Dukakis, but why has George Bush opted to placate the educationists? Bush aides make no bones about it. "I think you would find [that] Mr. Bush and a Bush Administration would not blast the education community for failures," one notes, "but rather would look for ways to try to help it to do better."

Yet that self-same education establishment is now moving to regain control of key education decisions, after half a decade in which the impetus for

reform has come from elected officials, business leaders, and other laymen against strong professional resistance. In recent months the leaders of the profession have done a turnaround and are now trying to pass themselves off as sophisticated engineers of improvement. That is why the candidates' amiable credulity toward them poses acute risks to the quality of American education.

The major players, of course, are the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), led by Mary Futrell and Albert Shanker, respectively, who are spearheading what they term a "second reform movement" based on a pair of seductive half-truths: First, that effective schools cannot be created by "top down" stratagems such as executive edicts or legislative mandates, but must instead be cajoled into existence from the bottom up, by "empowering" those at the "building level" to make the crucial decisions about what will happen at that level.



Second, that little is known today about how to boost the skills and knowledge of school children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and accordingly a hundred different education bulbs should be planted in the hope that someday, somewhere, something will bloom.

For all their allure in stressing diversity and local control, the problem with those propositions is that, for one thing, much is already known about the basic elements of good schools. Instead of refining and making use of proven strategies, we are in effect told to bide our time while the newly empowered teachers conduct their experiments in self-government.

As for the proposition that true school reform comes from the grassroots and that governors and legislators should therefore butt out, this would mean abandoning the bold changes that no one but elected officials can make: abolishing tenure laws; paying principals and teachers according to their effectiveness; allowing families to choose their schools; and bringing moribund school districts to account.

What's more, the "grassroots" prescription will only work if the "building-level" educators to be empowered are able and eager. Of how many public schools can this honestly be said today? A few hundred perhaps, but what about the other seventy-odd thousand, many shackled by union contracts, mediocre faculties, omnipotent janitors, gross indiscipline, and former football coaches in the principal's office?

Though far less visible than the presidential contest, this campaign to return education to the educators is much more consequential for the future quality of education than are any federal programs the candidates may debate. These are the sorts of education issues that national leaders ought to address: who should be making the big decisions, governors and legislators or teachers and principals? Who in the education system is properly held accountable for results—and to

whom? Whose interests are at stake, anyway, those of the young people attending American schools and colleges or those of the institutions' employees and managers?

When national candidates shun such fundamental but politically tricky subjects and address themselves instead to banal generalizations and microscopic programs, they waste the potential of the education issue. Thanks to Ronald Reagan and Bennett and their well-publicized tussles with the education establishment, it has begun to dawn on most voters that what is good for the professionals is not necessarily good for the country. The point has been underlined by a dozen crusading governors whose boldest initiatives have not infrequently been done in by their states' teacher unions and other establishment forces.

The profession would naturally like to fuzz up the distinction once more, to depict itself as the guardian of the public's interest in quality education. To judge by this summer's NEA and AFT conventions, however, both of them held during the July 4 weekend, these people should not be allowed to get away with it.

The NEA surprised nobody when at its New Orleans convention it officially endorsed Michael Dukakis, no doubt responding to Futrell's witty line about "a President who will invest more to make every American child a star than he will to fill God's heaven with star wars." After savaging the Reagan Administration, she characterized the Massachusetts governor as the "most electable and desirable candidate," one who "understands and embodies the link between education and the American dream."

The national elections weren't the only matter preoccupying the NEA. Delegates took time to adopt dozens of resolutions on every sort of issue, from international interdependence and nuclear freezes to multilingualism, homelessness, and the death penalty. One resolution urged counseling for students concerning their "sexual orientation." Barely defeated (in a rare roll call vote) was a demand to free Elmer

Chester E. Finn, Jr. was assistant secretary of education until October 1, when he rejoined the faculty of Vanderbilt University as professor of education and public policy and director of the Educational Excellence Network.

"Geronimo" Pratt, a former Black Panther now serving a sentence in San Quentin for murder. "He is our Nelson Mandela," proponents said.

Also on the agenda was the much-publicized release of a public opinion poll on various education issues, the kind of poll in which careful phrasing of the questions and careless phrasing of the results produce findings that serve the interests of the sponsors. "Alternative certification," for example, was twisted into the hiring of untrained or unqualified teachers.

Recent state-mandated reforms, such as Arkansas's teacher competency test, New Jersey's alternate certification program, and Tennessee's teacher career ladder, were vigorously denounced by NEA executive director Don Cameron. Mrs. Futrell termed her union's success in stopping the move to require teachers to pass competency tests an "organizational slam dunk."

Given all this reform-bashing, how could the NEA still pass itself off as favoring excellence? By emphasizing such concerns as teacher empowerment, school restructuring, and experimentation. In other words, by endorsing the campaign to regain control. Accordingly, delegates agreed to Futrell's plan to create an "experimental district" in every state. These teacher-dominated "learning laboratories" are to be designed and developed by means of a "consensus among stakeholders" that is based on the principle of "bottom up" reform.

Half a continent away, in San Francisco, the AFT was doing practically the same thing. Indeed, the big news coming out of this summer's teacher conventions was the convergence of the two unions in most areas. Shanker calls his experimental plan "schools within schools," but it rests on the same principles: that true reform comes from empowerment of teachers, from a decentralized approach, and from trying a lot of different things.

AFT delegates also endorsed a new \$8 billion federal "urban school advancement" program. They voted to seek protection for gay and lesbian teachers. They heard Shanker discourse at considerable length on the failures of the "excellence movement." And while they did not formally endorse Dukakis—the AFT having agreed not to preempt its parent AFL-CIO's August 24 endorsement—they heard from him and Jesse Jackson by satellite hookup. They liked it when Dukakis said he favored an educational venture capital fund to improve teacher pay. But Jackson brought them to their feet when he said that teacher pay should be doubled.

There was an easy symbiosis between these two union conclaves

and the Democratic convention a few weeks later. "Education lobbyists swarm in Atlanta," reported one newspaper. Ten percent of all delegates and alternates were NEA or AFT members (with the unions covering their travel up to \$1,000 apiece). They were a "pervasive presence," the NEA's Howard Carroll boasted. These teachers weren't there merely as individuals, either. Their unions held daily rallies, briefings, and strategy sessions for delegates, furnished them with information kits, and, at least in the case of the AFT, equipped them with beepers so they could be contacted at their leaders' convenience. Said leaders also hosted posh receptions for delegates, candidates, and party bigshots.

Displaying what today passes for political acumen, the unions cooperated in a tactical decision to keep the Democratic platform short and general. This was done, explained Carroll, "so the party will not be identified with being run by special interest groups." Shanker was as blunt: when the platform ends up with lots of specific pledges, programs, and promises, he explained, "it allows the Republicans to say, 'Look what they promised to their groups.' You add it up and add it to the deficit and you come up with a loser."

But what made the Democratic plank truly remarkable is that it said *nothing* whatsoever about educational quality, standards, or content. It was as if the nation had never been declared "at risk."

At their convention in August, by contrast, the Republicans crafted an endless platform full of specifics. Quality, standards, accountability, choice, and other concepts familiar from the Reagan-Bennett years were reiterated. Rhetorical deference was given to the states, localities, and parents (though the detailed programmatic suggestions in the platform echoed the new federal initiatives that Bush had previously urged, including an experimental school district scheme much like the NEA's).

In his keynote address, New Jersey Governor Tom Kean—who has done noble battle against his state's education establishment—came down squarely on the side of the general public. So did the Vice President in his acceptance speech, in the few sentences he devoted to education. The few teacher unionists present were said to be grieved (the NEA fielded forty-three Republican delegates this year, the AFT eight), not so much by the platform as by the sense that they weren't being courted. Bush "should work with the NEA if he is going to be the education President," said Dukakis-backer Mary Futrell, but "to date he has not responded to any of our invitations."

It was a golden moment for Bush to

adopt language he's been using in other contexts and to say, "Damn right I haven't, and here's why." But the kid gloves stayed on. The Vice President dutifully completed the NEA's candidate questionnaire. A teacher-delegate from Utah told the press that Bush had agreed to meet with Futrell this fall. Meanwhile, convention planners did not allow Bennett's hard-hitting speech to be scheduled for prime time. An opportunity was thus missed to take up the big questions, to stress the central differences, and to make plain to the nation that the Republican party does not want the schools turned over to the employees.

Save for some impassioned lines about "values" education during the first debate, Bush has lately said practically nothing about education per se, though his staff has continued to flog the half-dozen new federal initiatives set forth earlier. Dukakis has been about as distant. Except for a weird new college loan scheme for middle-class students, the details of which his staff has been unable to explain, the Massachusetts governor has settled for blaming Bush for earlier (and largely unsuccessful) efforts by the Reagan Administration to reduce federal education spending. Bush, in turn, has shrewdly faulted Dukakis for the latter's now-notorious "pledge of allegiance veto," which is a sort of para-education issue—but which certainly helps document Dukakis's reluctance to act against the political preferences of teachers and their unions even when a larger public interest is at stake.

As President, Michael Dukakis would go along with the education establishment's new campaign to regain control of education reform. We cannot yet be sure whether George Bush would resist. This remains, nonetheless, a campaign to beware. The establishment's effort includes the possibility of radical modification or repeal of the boldest reforms that states have undertaken in the past five years. This campaign would wrest authority from lay policy-makers and hand it to educationists, boost education spending without increasing accountability, and thrust many more substantive decisions into the domain of collective bargaining. This is, moreover, a curiously anti-intellectual campaign, one that spurns clear evidence from research and experience in favor of trial-and-error. And it is surprisingly romantic, full of late-sixties talk of power-sharing, autonomy, self-determination, and group decision-making and just as full of that era's contempt for authority, standards, and majoritarian politics.

It is, in short, a campaign that deserves to be quashed. At the very least, it needs to be exposed. One would suppose that any national candidate fancying himself the "education President" would see that. But nothing of the sort has happened. Instead, the nation finds itself this fall with the educationists' stealthy quest for control going unremarked, while the highly visible presidential contest, on those rare occasions when it pays any attention to education, settles for side-issues, federal gimmicks, and hot air. □

AMERICA AT YOUR FINGERTIPS!

Metro File

America At Your Fingertips

The Metro File™ is an indispensable executive directory of resources in 20 major U.S. cities. 6,000 listings of airlines, nightlife, restaurants, business services and more. Instant access to essential information! \$39.95

1-800-426-5564

Dealer Inquiries Invited

Metro File™ is published by Metro Files Inc., a subsidiary of Rolodex Corporation
1963 Palmer Avenue, Larchmont, NY 10538

©Rolodex is a registered trademark of Rolodex Corporation



THE TALKIES



ON *THE LAST TEMPTATION*

by Bruce Bawer

Given all the furor, it seemed a sure bet that *The Last Temptation of Christ* would at least be interesting to watch. Wrong. It's sheer torture—one of those deadly boring films, like Barbra Streisand's *A Star is Born*, that drag along so numbingly that you get the feeling they want you to walk out. And believe me, I would've cleared out of *The Last Temptation* after twenty minutes or so if I hadn't already decided to write about it.

Fundamentalists who are lucky enough not to have seen this picture decry it as a willful, indeed cynical, act of sacrilege, a crass exploitation of Christianity. Not at all. Sacrilegious this film may be, but not intentionally so: on the contrary, it's the work of people who plainly thought they were doing something devout. After all, when competent movie people set out to make a few bucks off of Christianity, they don't turn out a picture like *The Last Temptation*; they give us crowd-pleasers like *The Robe*, *Quo Vadis*, *Ben Hur*—glossy platitudinous spectacles marked by stilted dialogue, excellent posture, syrupy musical scores, and a thoroughgoing (if thoroughly fake) reverence toward Holy Writ (or, more accurately, toward the crudest popular twentieth-century American conceptions thereof).

No, *The Last Temptation* seeks not to exploit Jesus but to know him, to understand him; if those old Hollywood Biblical movies held Christ at arm's length, this film—based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, and directed by Martin Scorsese from a script by Paul Schrader (his collaborator on *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*)—tries to climb into Christ's skin, to get inside his head. This is a noble motive, perhaps; but it's also an exceedingly dangerous one, for to break down the barriers that those vulgar old Hollywood epics tacitly observed is to risk a degree of vulgarity—and, yes, a degree of profanity—that even Cecil B.

DeMille never approached. So it is that *The Last Temptation*, whose advertising would lead us to believe that it manifests a dignity, intelligence, and even godliness unprecedented in Jesus movies, in fact takes the genre to new depths of bad taste, fatuity, and moral offensiveness.

Willem Dafoe, who will be remembered for his portrayal of the Christ figure Sergeant Elias in *Platoon*, plays the Nazarene as a high-strung hippie—an oversensitive Haight-Ashbury type who spends most of his time whining to his apostles about his inner conflicts, confusions, doubts, and longings, and having impromptu rap sessions with them about such things as the relative importance of the soul and the body. (You keep expecting the boys to pass around a joint.) He's Jesus as seen through the filter of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, of est and Transcendental Meditation, of Jim Morrison and John Lennon. When he's not whining he alternates between crying jags and shrill pronouncements about sin and death and the hereafter—none of which is in the least inspiring, for the script deliberately robs the Gospel of its poetry. When some men attempt to stone an adulteress to death, Christ doesn't say, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her"; no, he picks up a stone and says: "Who has never sinned? Who? Whoever that is, come here, and throw these." In the Sermon on the Mount, he doesn't say, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." No, he says, "The

meek will be blessed. And the righteous will be blessed too." With an act like this, the real Jesus would never have made it to the big time. (This Jesus doesn't even know his grammar: he says "if I was" instead of "if I were," uses *like* for *as*, and announces that "it's me the prophets preached about.")

The idea here is clearly to remove Christ from the pages of Scripture, to make him more human. (The film shows him, for example, dancing at a wedding: Jesus as regular guy.) But what results is one of the most inarticulate protagonists ever to fill a movie screen. Lack of eloquence, you see, equals sincerity. This is a Lite Jesus—a timid, sniveling, banal, seedy-looking, not particularly bright Saviour who's utterly without majesty or depth or what junior high school teachers used to call "leadership qualities." There's no sense of profound love or goodness here, no sense of a huge soul in torment. There's not even any *warmth*. We're supposed to see him struggling with temptation, struggling against the necessity of his final sacrifice ("Do I really have to die?" he whimpers. "Is there any other way?"); yet he's not only tempted but weak, surly, vacillating, and impotent: a hollow vessel who occasionally has delusions, hears "voices," and acts like a guy on acid at the Port Authority in New York. Speaking in public, he usually doesn't even know what he's saying: "When those soldiers were torturing Magdalene I wanted to kill them and then I open my mouth and out comes the word love. . . . I don't understand."

When he's with Mary Magdalene (who is played by the lovely and gifted, but ever-spacey, Barbara Hershey), the two of them look and behave like one of those aging flower-child couples who live in Topanga Canyon, drive around in pick-up trucks, and analyze each other in pop-psych fashion ("You were hanging onto your mother," Mary Magdalene tells Christ, "then you were hanging onto me, now you're hanging onto God").

You get the feeling that Dafoe and Hershey's way of getting into the characters was to decide that Christ and Mary Magdalene must have been pretty much like George Harrison and Mia Farrow after a visit to their Indian guru. Lennon-style homilies abound: preaching his New Order, Jesus says, "All I'm saying is the change will happen with love, not with killing." And sex figures importantly; to Scorsese and company, the interesting thing about Jesus is that he was *human*, and to be human, in their view, is to be preoccupied with sex and self-gratification. Thus, in the course of his fantasy marriage to Mary, sister of Lazarus, Jesus tells her: "Don't ever leave me. I'm happy." And having reached (in that fantasy) a ripe old age, he tells a cantankerous St. Paul: "I enjoy my life—for the first time I'm enjoying it." (Jesus as "Tonight Show" guest!)

The Last Temptation is overacted throughout; Dafoe and Hershey in particular seem incapable of saying hello without putting on an intense Actors Studio expression. The portrayal of Christ's followers is strictly revisionistic: where the old Biblical movies presented them as gentle and soft-spoken, possessed of an inner peace, all the adherents of Christ in this film—John the Baptist, the disciples, St. Paul—are loud and pushy and obnoxious, selling salvation as if it were a cheap suit. The film is freighted with obtrusive dissolves, excessive atmosphere (camels, turbans, sand), and a musical score that relies too heavily on ditsy recorder music and a hard-rock African drumbeat; it contains too much talk and too little narrative drive;



Bruce Bawer, TAS's regular movie critic, is the author of *Diminishing Fictions* (Graywolf Press).