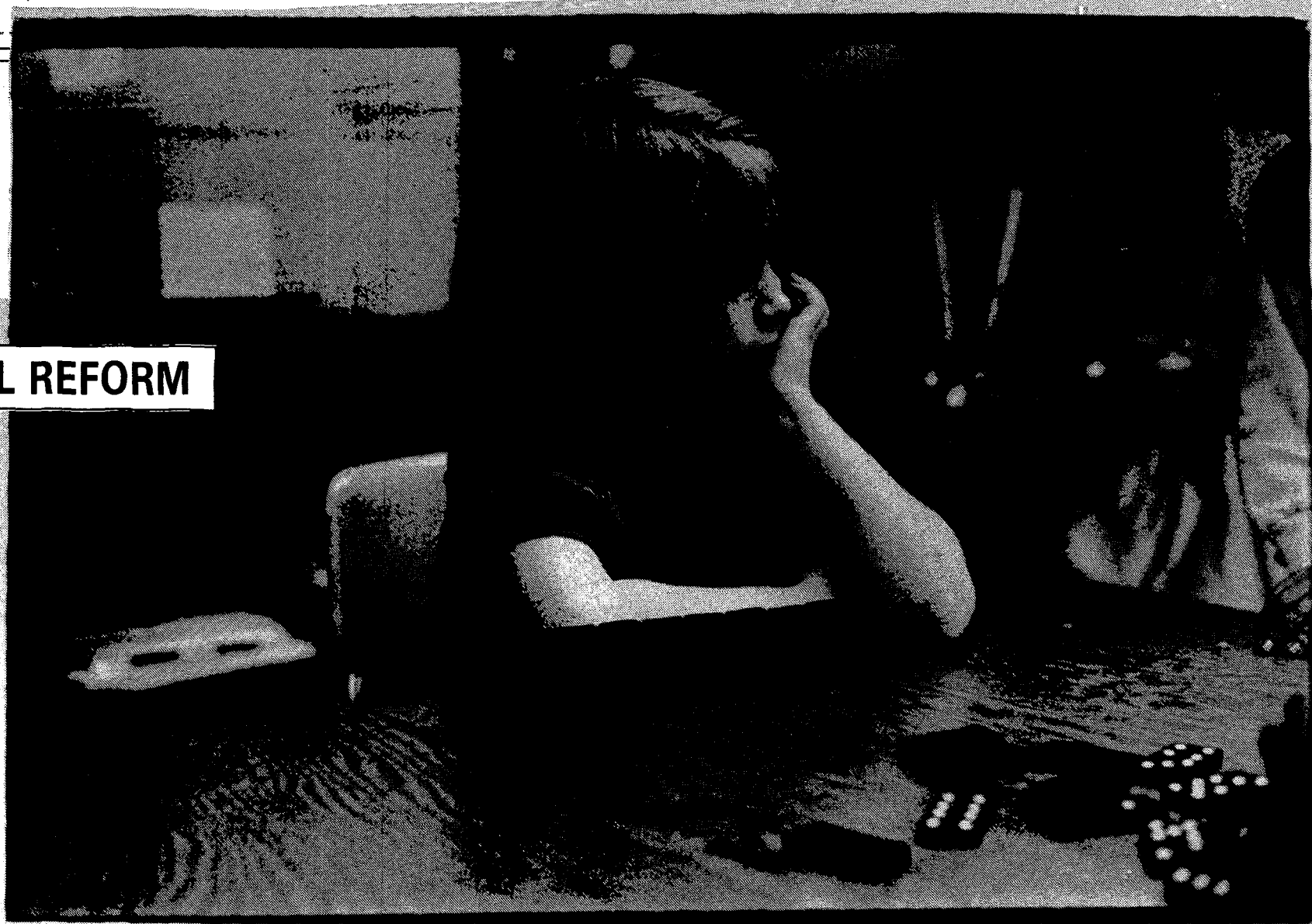


SCHOOL REFORM



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This is the second story in a three-part series on education reform.

By David Moberg

TALK OF "CHOICE" IN EDUCATION CONJURES up starkly contrasting images. Some see a wondrous free market in which good schools thrive and bad schools fail as each institution—led by its entrepreneur-principal—tries to satisfy the desires of client-parents liberated from the stifling bureaucracy of the public-school monopoly.

Others see free-market choice producing an educational system even more inequitable than today's—a system in which privileged families gain more privilege and the poor are more neglected, in which public responsibility for education dwindles and schools will more resemble Saturday morning kids' television (a prime example of free-market education) than a 21st century version of the romanticized little red schoolhouse.

Choice combination: Yet choice in education should be seen as neither panacea nor pariah. In combination with other reforms, aimed at promoting equity, democracy and a flowering of innovation, choice is rather a natural, constructive complement in the radical transformation that American schools need.

Early in our history as a nation, education was largely a matter of choice (and most kids had little schooling). Different models abounded, including paternalistic charities or academies controlled by a private elite, small districts under direct citizen control and the emerging bureaucracies under public school boards. But education increasingly tended toward "one best system" of public schools designed to educate (and properly Americanize) the entire population.

It was an educational vision that paralleled the emergence of large factories, of the burgeoning urban (and often immigrant) working class, and of both corporate and governmental bureaucracies. Early in this century, in the furthest elaboration of the "one

For better education, it's a choice combination

best system" ideal, Oregon mandated not only school attendance but enrollment in public schools. In response to this, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled parents could send children to schools of their choice, although the state could regulate educational standards.

The current movement toward choice in public schooling has several roots. Most prominently, there are the ideological enemies of public education: the tradition of laissez-faire education and the tradition of interested private and church-related schools. But some left advocates of educational innovation—dating back at least to the alternative-schools movement of the '60s—and of greater educational opportunity for the poor have also embraced choice.

Not surprisingly, the concept of "choice" covers a multitude of models whose differing details matter enormously. But, in general, choice plans permit students to use public money through vouchers, tax credits or other reimbursements to pay for any school they attend (often including private institutions), rather than having boards of education both provide money and assign students to public schools.

As choice has gained support, however, there has also been a growing movement toward giving greater "voice" in education either to parents, teachers, principals or citizens as opposed to school bureaucrats—students were more likely to have been included in the '60s. As social scientist Albert O. Hirschman argues, economists (and many conservatives) are prone to see "exit," such as quitting a job or not buying a product, as the main way to express opinion. Political scientists (and most believers in strong dem-

ocracy) view "voice" as the preferred solution.

But there is yet a third, less-defined camp that wants to redefine education. "The point of departure for me is that the way we run schools is old and full of tradition that doesn't make much sense," says TheodoreSizer, professor of education at Brown University and founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools. "It's a diversion to talk about forms of government and choice without addressing this fundamental problem, to wit, that schools are misdesigned to serve anybody very well. We will yap about forms of government rather than how to teach kids."

The pros and cons: Choice proponents argue that not only is freedom of choice the American way but that it will also pressure the public-school bureaucracies—responsible for 89 percent of the nation's students—to do a better job. Others supporters say choice programs would extend to the poor the privilege that better-off families already have to pick residence and school. But Deborah Meier, principal of the innovative Central Park East Secondary School in New York, makes the strongest educational argument for choice—yet one that conservatives rarely emphasize: "If you agree there's more than one definition of an educated person and more than one way to get there, you need choice."

There are four major criticisms of the conservative, free-market choice models: they would promote greater social inequity, undermine support for education, subvert democratic culture and public life and work ineffectively to improve schools.

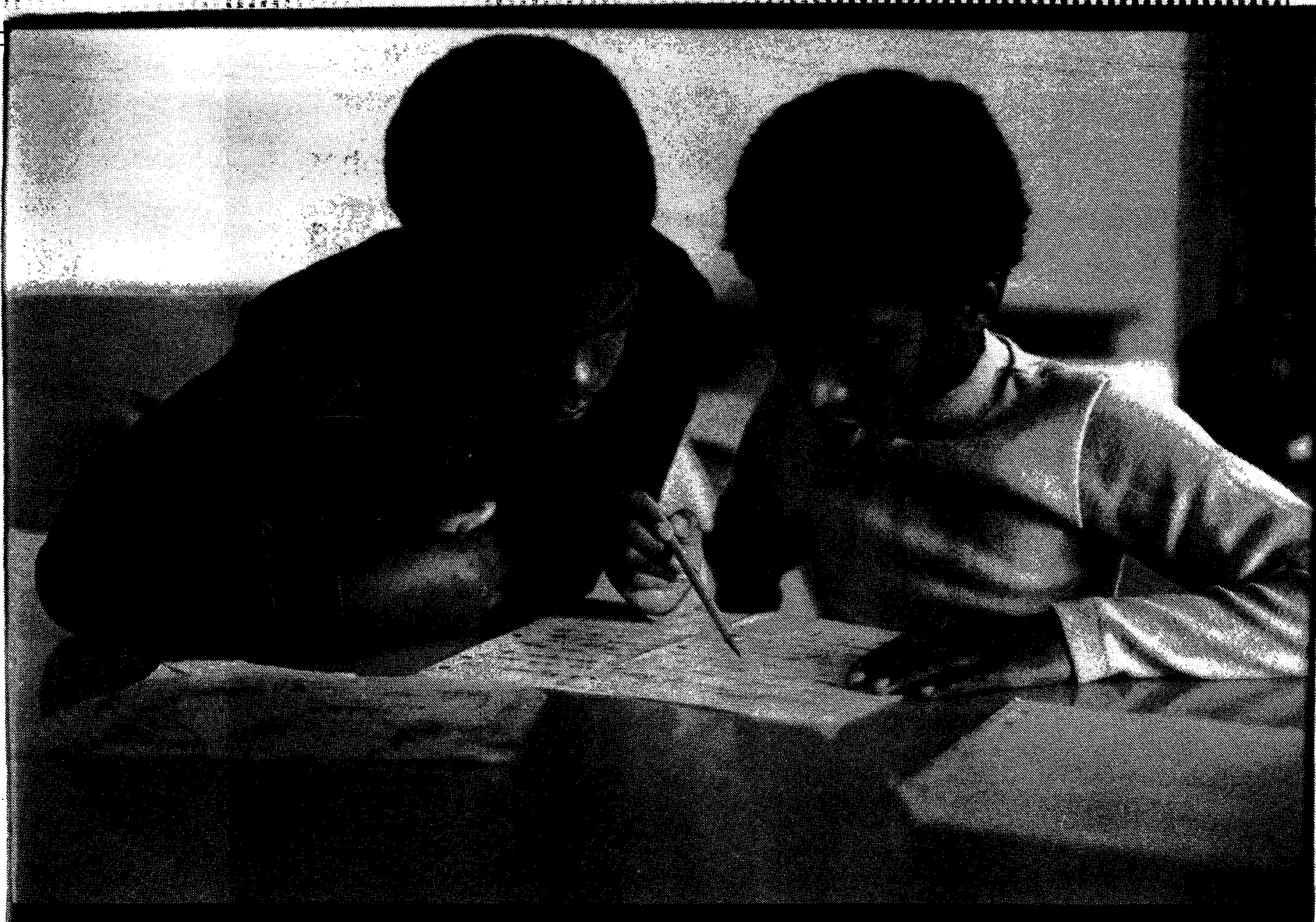
If families can take public money and send their children wherever they want, richer

families could simply pay extra to get their children into elite schools (as they do now but without the subsidies). Equally important, the schools in many cases will be making the choice of whom they want to admit rather than parents choosing where they want to send their children. The better schools will "cream" the easy-to-teach students (in many cases including the most promising youth from disadvantaged families). Parents with the necessary skills, connections, information and time will jump through the formal and informal hoops to get their kids into the prestigious schools. This will mean that the average neighborhood school will be a catch basin for the more difficult students, who will be harmfully stigmatized for not making it into prestige schools.

In their study of four big-city school systems, Donald Moore and Suzanne Davenport of Designs for Change, a Chicago-based school-reform group, show that existing magnet-school programs operate as "new improved sorting machines."

The magnet schools have been good for some students, but they have not solved—and may have worsened—the most profound crisis in American education: the failure to engage, inspire and educate most students from poor, black or Hispanic communities.

U.S. schools never have served the average student well. But when half of all students dropped out before graduating from high school in 1950, they could still find half-decent manufacturing jobs. By 1970, 75 percent of students graduated, but the schools did no better job teaching them. Average test scores—based on this expanded population—began their decline. Both dropouts and ill-prepared graduates faced a new, tougher job market. Conservative choice programs might help assertive poor and minority students but are unlikely to help those who need it most. "The real issue," argues Ann Bastian, co-author of *Choosing Equality*, "is how do we fix the mainstream."



Steve Cagan

Proponents of choice avoid addressing that directly, deferring to the invisible hand to make repairs.

Free-market folly: There are examples of schools that effectively teach poor kids who would otherwise be written off as impossible, but there are no easy answers about how to replicate their results on a mass scale. Creating innovative education for the disadvantaged through a free market in schools isn't promising. The free market hasn't performed very well for the poor in medicine, housing or even in providing fresh produce at fair prices. The poor are more easily victimized by scams: witness the proliferation of fraudulent private career-training institutes raking in federal subsidies. Poor, ill-educated or immigrant families find it more difficult to obtain relevant information or take advantage of choice (transportation costs in money or time could be prohibitive, for example).

Sophisticated economic analysis demonstrates that market signals of failure don't necessarily prompt firms to innovate or change their internal organization quickly or effectively. It's an especially appalling prospect to think of the millions of students trapped in worsening schools as society waits for the free market to work its magic.

To produce widespread improvements quickly, we should look less to the competitive marketplace model and more to cooperation among schools. That could include better systems of discussion among teachers about what works. Then the schools could allow innovations to percolate upward. Successful schools and groups of teachers should be given the freedom and money to replicate their work and start new schools, following the example of Meier's East Harlem schools.

To the extent that schooling is increasingly seen as a consumer choice and a family responsibility, the public is likely to feel even less of an obligation to provide good education. If private schools select the easier students, they will appear—as they do now—to

be intrinsically better. The public-school system, except in the rich suburbs, will be like indigent medical care under Medicaid—underfinanced, stigmatized, low quality.

For all of its faults and contradictory qualities, public education in the U.S. is expected to provide the basis of a common culture and prepare young people for democratic citizenship as well as for the job market. Marketplace choice reforms are likely not only to increase the already undesirable class and racial separations within schools but also to subordinate education even more to the dictates of business and the job market at the expense of democratic voice and a common public life beyond the marketplace. The schools may be failing their task now of strengthening democratic culture, but the mission should not be abandoned.

Some restrictions apply: There are important distinctions in choice plans that can address some of these issues. Excluding private schools as a subsidized option removes some tough issues—especially threats to the critical separation of church and state—but limits the choice of many good schools. Prohibiting supplementary payments by wealthier parents and providing more money for disadvantaged students would address some equity problems. Most important, schools could be required to award slots by lottery and not be selective. States could still impose regulations—desegregation guidelines, prohibitions on corporal punishment, requirements to include the handicapped. But the free-market choice advocates would

fight any of these restrictions.

"I strongly disagree with those who say the marketplace will transform education," says school-choice proponent Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. "I fear the conservative choice agenda and the liberal rejection of it equally."

Even if the marketplace model is deeply flawed, that does not mean choice is a bad idea. If there is no one best system that suits all children equally well, it is essential that there are alternatives. But as both choice supporter Nathan and choice critic Bastian agree, in an educationally equitable and effective system, the choice must be among a variety of types of schools, not between (a few) good and (many) bad schools.

"We should hold out the goal of choice within a revived public sphere," says University of Pennsylvania education historian Michael Katz. "But we should put our primary emphasis on improving all schools."

If choice is to work, it must operate on the supply side as well as the demand side, producing innovative new schools rather than simply offering those already existing. Teachers, working with principals, must have the freedom to innovate. Parents, citizens and even students must have a meaningful voice in defining their schools, along with professional educators.

When there is no uniform approach to education in all the schools, choice is the logical corollary. When there is an abundance of good but different schools, equity

problems diminish. In the interests of both greater democracy and better education, parents and community residents (as well as the educators) should feel that the schools belong to them. Choice can enhance that sense of ownership. If there are meaningful choices of small schools (or schools within schools), choice need not destroy links between communities and the schools within them. Indeed, many reformers argue that schools, especially in big-city neighborhoods, should serve more as full-time community centers and not just part-time holding pens for children.

With increasing innovation, diversity and choice, there are new problems: evaluation and establishment of a common culture. Standardized national testing would be even less appropriate or useful in a diverse system, but marketplace accountability is likely to be inadequate and slow. Brooklyn school board president and educational consultant Norm Fruchter argues for a broadbased outside accreditation of schools by professional inspectors.

Creating a common culture, which the schools do poorly now, is a legitimate democratic ideal. In this country of widely varied traditions with an, at best, fluid sense of national identity, the task requires acknowledging diversity as well. Choice and diversity complicate an already-difficult job of forging this common culture. But if schools are democratic, innovative and equitable, they will provide a better foundation of civic values than today's regimented factory schools.

Given the alternatives, democratic voice rather than marketplace choice should guide the schools. But one of the implications of strong democracy is that teachers, parents and students must have much greater choice in the kinds of schools for the sake of both education and a fuller democracy. But the ultimate, toughest question is not how to govern the schools but how to teach all children in those schools so they can fulfill their potential. □

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Gun control

Continued from page 3

have to be addressed, especially poverty, lack of opportunity, lack of jobs, drugs and a culture that promotes and glamorizes violence as the easiest solution to personal problems. Congress, however, mired in a budget crunch and dominated by interests that benefit from the increasing maldistribution of American wealth, is years from attacking these problems. "Part of our problem with the Democrats," adds Boucher, "is that they have really given in on root causes of crime."

Calling it another case of "picking out trivial solutions to serious problems," Boucher compares the Brady bill to President Bush's recent suggestion that health-care costs would be reduced by lessening malpractice liability. As freshmen, Peterson and Sanders

have not fought in the notorious gun-control wars on Capitol Hill and thus seem immune to the current general sense of euphoria. The rest of the House is willing to settle for a symbolic victory over the power of the NRA.

The politics of guns: While heavy-handed lobbying and generous donations to campaign war chests have given the NRA an aura of lobbying invincibility, they have also sown a good bit of personal enmity on Capitol Hill. The NRA used all its familiar tactics to defeat Brady, flooding Congress with mail and twisting arms. Gun lobbyists reportedly walked into congressional offices with videotapes of ready-made campaign commercials attacking members. The lobbyists threatened to run the commercials in the members' districts in the event of an unfavorable vote. The vitriolic NRA tactics proved somewhat counterproductive on the Brady vote, but the gun lobby's power has never rested in the hands of its

Washington lobbyists.

The real power of the NRA lies in the fact that more than any other grass-roots organization, its members write letters, make phone calls and vote, vote, vote. NRA follows every legislative vote with a direct mailing to its members informing them of their representative's position and urging them to vote accordingly. Ten days before elections, NRA members receive reminders encouraging them to get out and vote the NRA line. And they do. Members of Congress who vote with the NRA can count on gratitude measured in the only commodity more precious than campaign cash—ballots.

However, the very public opinion and activism that has been the NRA's strength appears to have backfired this time. The NRA has always attempted to portray any attempt to restrict access to firearms as the first step down a slippery slope to confiscation of all

firearms and the imposition of communist tyranny on a defenseless populace.

But such hysteria is rapidly losing its power. Anti-gun groups insist that many hunters are becoming disenchanted with the NRA's political tactics. "The NRA doesn't distinguish between its hunting and handgun constituencies," says Beard of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. "We find that hunters and sports people are not concerned about waiting periods. They see themselves as law-abiding citizens who have nothing to fear from waiting seven days for a gun. They do know, however, that urban folks who never owned a gun and shoot someone are giving decent, law-abiding gun-owners a bad name."

Anti-gun activists have been wishing for such a split for years. And that wish may be coming true. Consider the vote of Rep. Earl Hutto (D-FL): a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, Hutto was one of 17 members to vote for both the Staggers and the Brady bills. Hutto is the archetypal friend of the NRA. One of the most conservative Democrats in Congress, Hutto represents the Florida panhandle. His district is very much a part of the Deep South—conservative, rural, home to many retirees and a populace that believes zealously in the constitutional sanctity of the right to bear arms.

In this bastion of NRA support, few people are threatened by a waiting period or a background check. In fact, according to Hutto press secretary Brian Keeter, a 1989 poll of the panhandle found that 80 percent of residents supported a seven-day waiting period. Indeed, 71 percent of Hutto's constituents voted for a 1990 constitutional amendment to create a statewide three-day waiting period and mandatory background check in Florida. So when the Brady bill reached the House floor, Hutto found himself with a gun-owning constituency strongly supportive of both waiting periods and background checks.

This bodes well for the Brady bill's passage in the Senate. The politics of guns fracture primarily along urban vs. rural lines rather than party or political affiliation. Brady's fate in the Senate, where lightly populated rural states wield disproportionate power, may well depend on the degree to which Western and Southern senators can be convinced that their gun-owning citizens are willing to accept a waiting period. If the Senate is so persuaded, Americans will have to wait a whole seven days before they can legally buy a handgun. □

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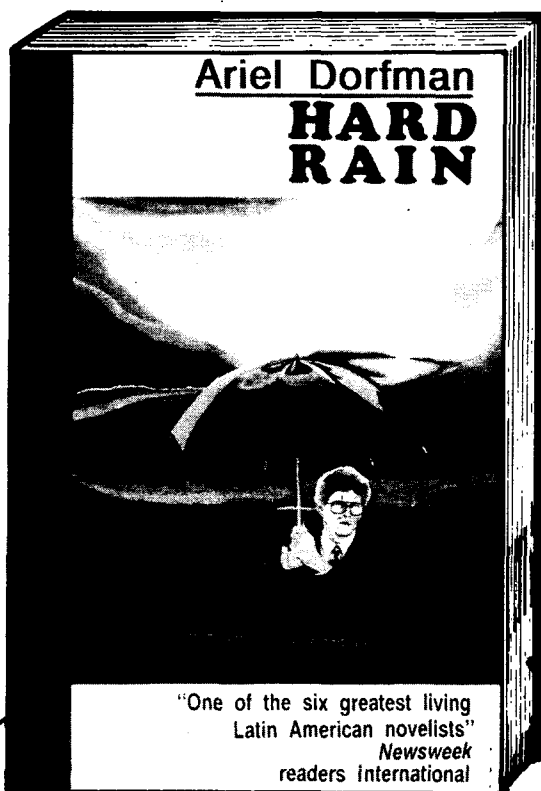
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By Ken Gluck

MOSCOW

THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT PRESS IN THE Soviet Union this month broke an ominous verbal barrier in its coverage of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The bitter conflict in the Caucasus has recently picked up all the attributes of a real war: helicopter gunships, artillery fire, prisoners of war and the evacuation of civilians. On May 5 the official government daily *Izvestia* dropped its usual euphemisms and openly described the four-year-old conflict as "a civil war between two republics."

The renewed fighting has quelled hopes raised by the surprise April 23 agreement between President Mikhail Gorbachov and nine republican leaders in which Gorbachov pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of republics and virtually recognized the republics' right to leave the union. For many in the Soviet Union, the agreement signified the beginning of the end of the paralyzing struggle between the central Soviet government and the republics. Even Democratic

SOVIET UNION

Russia, the country's main opposition coalition, awarded the compromise some lukewarm praise. Before the agreement, Democratic Russia had been calling for Gorbachov's resignation.

But the renewed fighting in the Caucasus illustrates what may prove to be the agreement's fatal omission. It is silent on the many inter-republican and inter-ethnic conflicts that plague the Soviet Union.

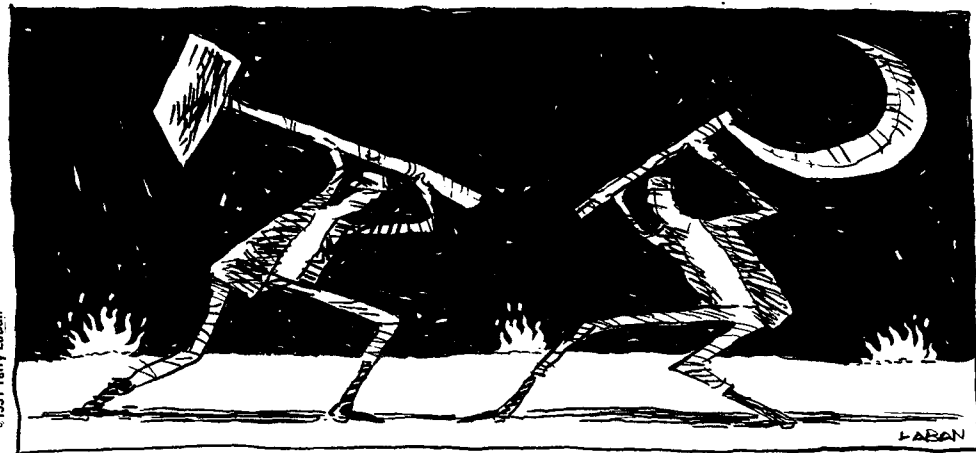
The republics and the pro-reform opposition have been adamant in rejecting interference by the central Soviet government, but they fail to propose alternatives in situations where some form of outside intervention is clearly needed. With a huge number of potential conflicts on the horizon, the Soviet Union must find some way to control these conflicts if it wants stability in the future.

From the beginning of May, the central Soviet government has sharply increased its role in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Troops from the Soviet army and Interior Ministry are taking an active part in the fighting.

This means war: The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has steadily escalated over the past four years. Initially the dispute focused on Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian region in Azerbaijan. The Armenians have maintained the territory's right to formally become part of Armenia. The Azerbaijanis have steadfastly argued that their territory is inviolable.

The latest skirmishes center around the mostly Armenian villages in western Azerbaijan, outside of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the Armenian government, Soviet troops, together with forces from the Azerbaijani government, have besieged the mostly Armenian villages of Getashen and Martunashen since April 29.

The Armenian government accused the Soviet troops of collaborating with Azerbaijani special forces and deporting the local population. At a May 6 press conference in Moscow, Levon Ter-Petrosian, the leader of the Armenian Supreme Soviet, accused the Soviet interior minister of "conspiring with Azerbaijani President Aiza Mutalibov."



Stability increasingly elusive as longstanding disputes simmer

The Armenians see the deportation as part of an ongoing campaign by the Azerbaijani government to expel the republic's ethnic Armenian minority. The massacres of Armenians in Sumgait in 1988 and in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku in 1990, they bitterly point out, have gone unpunished.

The central Soviet government and Azerbaijani leaders have defended the troops' actions in Getashen and Martunashen. The army's only intention, they claim, was to put an end to the terrorist activity based in the villages. Civilians, they argue, are being evacuated for their own safety.

"Armenia has been conducting an undeclared war on Azerbaijan for more than four years," read a May 5 statement by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet. The fighting, the statement emphasizes, has occurred exclusively on the Azerbaijani side of the border.

At the same time, according to the non-official press, forces from the central Soviet government have initiated operations on the Armenian side of the border, allegedly to disarm the volunteer militias there and prevent further border attacks.

In the view of the Armenian government, the motives of the central Soviet government are no secret. Armenia was one of six republics that refused to sign the April 23 agreement. The central government's participation in the conflict represents to the Armenians nothing less than retaliation for their intention to leave the union.

"The union has in effect declared war on Armenia," Ter-Petrosian said in his May 6 statement.

At the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, a small group of Armenian refugees demonstrated alongside the parade route, protesting the actions of the Soviet army in the conflict. Many World War II veterans, in uniforms covered with medals, were outraged by signs accusing the central government of betrayal and even of approving genocide.

The Armenian government has appealed to the Russian government, headed by Boris Yeltsin, and to other republics for assistance in the conflict. But it is unclear what sort of help the republics could provide.

The Russian republican government has studiously avoided the appearance of interference in other republics' affairs. To do so would clearly undermine its own fight for sovereignty within the union.

The other republics also have enduring and not always pleasant memories of life in the Russian empire even before they were

drafted into the Soviet Union. Most of the republican leaders believe that Russia, despite its size and importance, should not be granted any special status in the union.

At a May 4 meeting, Ter-Petrosian reportedly reminded Yeltsin of the Russian government's decision forbidding the deployment of Russian soldiers in conflicts outside the Russian republic. Issued in the spring of 1990, the edict has been largely forgotten in the present conflict.

As if to block criticism of its inactivity, the Russian government sent a fact-finding mission to the region on May 5. Further actions, it announced, would be discussed only when the group returned with its report.

Russia's opposition parties clearly favor the Armenians. Armenia's government is headed by anti-communists and nationalists voted into office last summer. The Azerbaijani government is still controlled by the republic's Communist Party, which has used nationalist appeals to generate public support.

Moscow's anti-government press has confined itself mostly to criticism of the specific actions of Soviet troops in the region and expressions of sympathy for the Armenian people. Like the Russian government it supports, the Soviet opposition seems to lack constructive proposals.

After having championed the sovereignty

The Soviet Union's many inter-republican and inter-ethnic disputes could spark dozens of "minor" civil wars in the not-too-distant future.

of the republics, the opposition is hard-pressed to call for intervention by the central union government. Leonid Gozman, writing in Democratic Russia's newspaper, suggested that only United Nations involvement could solve the dispute. But with the central Soviet government still enjoying veto powers in the U.N., this is hardly a serious proposal.

More to come: The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia was the first and hottest of the disputes among the Soviet republics, but as the republics gain increased independence other conflicts are sure to follow.

The principal source of these conflicts is the significant number of ethnic minorities

in all of the republics. With nationalism sweeping the country, ethnic minorities within republics are seeking the same sovereignty or independence that the republics have sought from the union. The newly empowered republics, trying to consolidate control of their territories, have been reluctant either to compromise or to let go. Inevitably, the ethnic minorities in the republics have appealed to the central union government for help.

By far the most politically significant of these minorities are the millions of ethnic Russians living beyond the borders of the Russian federation. At a recent conference in Moscow, Cambridge sociologist Ernest Gellner pointed to similarities between the Russian minorities in the republics and the ethnic German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe before the war. Like the ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia before World War II, the Russians in the republics could become a severe destabilizing factor, according to Gellner.

Further seeds of violence lie in the longstanding border disputes between the republics—some of which long precede the advent of Soviet power.

Both czarist and Soviet governments laid down boundaries according to the political and military needs of the time. These border disagreements were taboo subjects before perestroika. Since the power of the republics was minimal in relation to that of the central government, the border disputes among the republics were largely ignored. But they weren't forgotten.

Old questions, new importance: As the republics began to demand sovereignty and even full independence from the union, old border questions quickly took on new importance. Soon after Lithuania's declaration of independence in March 1990, officials in the republican government of Byelorussia announced that the border between the two republics would have to be re-examined. According to some members of the Byelorussian government, the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius is located on their side of the fence.

Similar potential border disputes exist between the Ukraine and Moldavia and among the Baltic republics themselves. Border clashes are most likely in Soviet Central Asia, where the map resembles the gerrymandered voting districts of some American cities.

Without some mechanism to control and eventually negotiate an end to the inter-republican and inter-ethnic disputes, the Soviet Union could see dozens of "minor" civil wars in the future.

The present central Soviet government is not in a position to act as a neutral arbiter. As the opposition charges, it largely plays the conflicts to its own advantage in its power struggle with the republics.

The leaders of the republics are intent on limiting the authority of the central Soviet government in the ongoing negotiations on a new Union Treaty. There is a danger, however, that the new central Soviet government will be powerless either to settle disputes in the republics or to enforce the settlements.

The Soviet Union is rife with potential conflict. Preventing those disputes from blossoming into armed confrontations will be the real test of Gorbachov's new agreement with Yeltsin and the republics.

Ken Gluck is an American journalist living in Moscow.