

# Sheepskins in Mothballs

**Are college degrees still an open sesame to the good life—or are they a drug on the market?**

by Fred M. Hechinger

**I**N A current TV commercial, the head of an employment agency tells Abraham Lincoln that Abe will never get a decent job because he doesn't have a degree: "Without that sheepskin, fella, you're going nowhere!"

With variations, this theme has been drummed into us ever since World War II—without that magic-carpet degree, fella, you're going to end up poor, and a cringing social misfit to boot.

How sound is this notion today? Let's look at some facts:

- In comparison with 1969, starting salaries for college graduates last year had dropped by 23 percent for social-science and humanities majors and by 21 percent for mathematics majors.
- The financial return after graduation on the investment of tuition, which was estimated at between 11 and 12 percent five years ago, now is only slightly above 7 percent.
- Between 1969 and 1974 the proportion of eighteen- to nineteen-year-old males enrolled in higher education declined from 44 to 33.4 percent.

Experts predict that by 1980 there will be hundreds of thousands of PhDs who are not needed in the special fields for which they have been trained. With the number of school-age children declining sharply—since 1973 the num-

ber of first-graders in the nation's elementary schools has dropped by more than 600,000 each year—fewer teachers will be needed.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that these questions are being asked over and over again: are we sending too many young people to college? Will we turn out useless, and therefore disgruntled, graduates? Will the United States repeat the dangerous error of Germany and Italy in the 1920s—create an unemployed, alienated, and politically menacing intellectual proletariat?

The first question that should be asked is: why promise higher pay as a guaranteed return for going to college? The institutions of higher learning today find themselves in an uncomfortable box of their own making. During the affluent and expansive years, the colleges let the word go out—and even plastered it on posters in buses and on trains—that four years of college promised specific dollar returns. And as long as jobs were plentiful, the promise was fulfilled. With the job market tight, the promise has lost its credibility, and so has higher education.

Is the financial quid pro quo the only—indeed, should it be the principal—return to be expected from a higher education? Though it is reasonable to hope that more education will open more doors to successful careers (and it still does in relative terms, even when the job selections shrink), it seems a perversion of education to treat the entire enterprise like just another stock-market investment. (It may, incidentally, be pertinent to point out that stock investments also at times have a way of not paying off.)

To forget the vital relationship between education and the body politic is to ignore the foundation of a self-governing nation—at least as perceived by the Founding Fathers. Jefferson equated an "aristocracy of talent" with the very survival of democracy. There is no contradiction in being a college-educated worker or farmer. It was, after all, literally an American invention, and a revolutionary one at the time, to demand, as did the land-grant act of 1862, that the new colleges provide their graduates with training in mechanical and agricultural skills *as well as* in the liberal arts.

Today's union mechanics, moreover, get a high return for their labors and thus have infinitely greater use for the personal benefits of a general education—or could have, if the society encouraged it. I vividly recall, on a visit to Israel,

---

*Fred M. Hechinger is on the editorial board of The New York Times.*

Allen Green



# 5 uncommon magazines with one thing in common:

8 issues for only \$3.99



20 issues for only \$5.77

8 issues for only \$4.34

1 Year (12 issues)  
for only \$7.00

24 issues  
for only \$10.50

For the first time ever, these five outstanding magazines are being offered together at the lowest per-copy prices that the publishers can allow. It's *your* chance to pick up as many as four\* of them at savings of up to 50%. Savings that may never come your way again.

But sign on *only* if you have an uncommon curiosity about this curious and complex world...only if you aren't afraid to alter an opinion or two along the way.

Because here you'll discover a provocative and colorful mix of ideas and insights, of articles and reports that run the gamut from sheiks to skinflin, junta juggling to heroin smuggling.

## the lowest prices offered anywhere.

You might confront some startling new facts about the JFK assassination (New Times) or penetrate this year's political maze (New Republic). You could find out how supermarkets rip you off (The Atlantic) or gain an incisive view of 20th century survival (Harper's). You may discover why good guys make bum bosses (Psychology Today).

Are you ready for that kind of various and vital journalism?

At the lowest prices per copy offered anywhere, now's an uncommonly good time for you to find out.

\*Sorry, we must limit this offer to four magazine subscriptions per customer.

If card is missing, mail order to:  
Mardel  
Suite 1011  
One Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016

PRODUCED 2005 BY UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

being guided by a man who, as a member of his kibbutz, was a professional tractor driver; but his afterwork interest was the study of Shakespeare, and he was no worse for it as a tractor driver, and undoubtedly happier as a man.

What went wrong in Germany and Italy, and more recently in India, was not the result of an excess of higher education. The problem was rather a rigidity of social values and academic protocol that demanded that college graduates be used only in the narrow, high-prestige slots for which they had been prepared—or be condemned to humiliating uselessness, accompanied by loss of face and status. It would be tragic if the same rigidity were to be introduced into American society, particularly at a time when economic as well as political conditions demand the opposite.

A year ago, President Ford warned the graduating class at Ohio State University: “Your professors tell you that education unlocks creative genius and imagination, and that you must develop your human potential. And students have accepted this. But then Catch 22 enters the picture. You spend four years in school, graduate, go into the job market, and are told that the rules have changed . . . you are overqualified. . . .”

Overqualified for what? If higher education does unlock creativity (even without the hyperbole of “genius”) and imagination, and if it does develop a youth’s potential, should it suddenly be considered superfluous because the rules of the job market have changed?

This is not to say that education should ignore or that it ever really has ignored the marketplace. When there are fewer prospects for teachers, the number of those who train for the profession tends to decline. Marginal candidates stay away, thus perhaps improving the future quality of teaching. Ditto for, say, engineers and medieval scholars.

Moreover, the free-market economy of the human-manpower pool manipulates the quality controls tightened or relaxed by the colleges and universities. The 1950s, with their huge expansion of education at all levels and the attendant scarcity of teachers, forced a gradual loosening of those controls. The 1960s brought with them the wild ideological revolt against all qualitative hurdles and barriers. Tests and grades came to be viewed as the instruments of elitist devils. The grade inflation caused virtually open admission to the dean’s list. Flunking out became nearly impossible.

Now the law of supply and demand is once again at work reversing that trend. Today’s students—the immediate successors to the inventors of pass/fail grades as substitutes for the odious A to F value judgments—compete madly for grades. Regrettable? Perhaps. Yet it is simply an inevitable consequence of a temporary readjustment, suggesting that fears of overeducating great numbers may prove exaggerated. As standards stiffen, some nonstudent students will turn away from college. Because there was a highly visible need for them, the production of PhDs expanded from 9,400 in 1959 to 26,000 in 1969; under conditions of lesser need (and diminished financial returns), the academic assembly line will probably slow down.

It would be a serious mistake for the higher-education community—and it is precisely the road on which it is currently embarked—to turn away from general education and overstress vocationalism instead. The rationale, which seems so obviously self-defeating, appears to be that, because jobs are at a premium, the colleges must concentrate

on preparing their students to compete for the shrunken number of jobs. The real Catch 22—quite different from President Ford’s perception—is that to train great numbers for nonexistent jobs can only have the effect of further devaluing a college education. When jobs are plentiful, there is little harm in vocationalism; when jobs are scarce and the job market fluctuates, the payoff is in maximum adaptability and the capacity to apply broad knowledge in certain areas—say, mathematics, statistics, economics, critical analysis—to a greater variety of potential fields of employment.

The way to use people properly in higher education is decidedly *not* to keep as many as possible out of college on the vague theory that, as graduates, they won’t be needed. Who knows? Who can tell today what talents will be dispensable tomorrow? Put an end to the grade inflation, by all means. Demand talent, effort, dedication. But avoid like the plague any policies that restrict access to higher education as a way of manipulating the manpower supply.

Speaking at the Georgetown University commencement in May of this year, Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., president of Michigan State University, said: “When we reduce the argument over the value of higher education to its basic elements we may well find that we really are talking about manipulation of people. Shorn of its sugarcoating, most of the debate means deciding who should and should not attend college, the courses they should study, the majors they should select, and the job slots they should fill after graduation. . . . It is a danger we must avoid at all costs.”

The danger should be obvious to anyone who understands what makes a society open or closed. The improper use of people in higher education is to predetermine their course for reasons other than their personal capacities and aspirations; the proper use is to enable each, according to his or her talents and inclinations, to grow and blossom.

**W**HAT then? What if there are no jobs, no satisfactory outlets for those developed talents? The answer to these questions should come from the nation’s political and economic leaders. They must determine what the country needs and how it can use the capacities of highly educated young people.

It is hard to believe that the United States has exhausted its agenda for progress. The cities are decaying. The railroads are in disarray. The rivers and the air need to be cleansed. Our political and civic institutions, our courts and our schools, require massive infusions of integrity and efficiency. *The New York Times* reported recently that American farming is falling behind technologically and scientifically. The delivery of health services cries out for instant improvement. Deep divisions between races and nationality groups need to be closed. New sources of energy must be found. And beyond all these unfilled needs at home looms the desperate call to prevent starvation on much of the globe and to avert the horror of nuclear war.

Even such a sketchy list of what remains to be done should lay to rest the foolish new myth that America no longer has room for educated youths, for college graduates, for PhDs. The question is whether the nation’s intellectual and political leadership will recover the ingenuity and will to harness the American people for action and to dispel the astonishing idea that the only proper use of “overeducated” human beings is to put them in mothballs. ©



# Is Unemployment "Desirable"?

by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.

**A**MID all the statistics indicating that the recession is over and recovery is under way, there is the disturbing reality that unemployment is still well above historic rates. What's more, joblessness seems here to stay.

Almost 7 million people are officially counted as unemployed. That's over 7 percent of the labor force, and even the most optimistic forecasts assume that the 4 percent unemployment rates of the 1960s are unattainable.

In fact, a massive campaign is under way, designed to convince people that abnormally high levels of joblessness might be *desirable* in order to avoid inflation.

But this ploy overlooks the fact that the law of employment-induced inflation has been repealed. Last year we had runaway inflation *and* double-digit unemployment. Inflation must not be controlled by putting all of the burden on working people, most especially on those who are relegated to the margins of the labor force because of color, sex, geography, or lack of education.

The real threat to our society is our increasingly casual acceptance of human misery. High unemployment deals a blow to national prosperity. It means less consumption and therefore less production, lower tax revenues and fewer public services, and an ultimate harvest of bitterness and frustration that could tear apart our tenuous social fabric.

Lost among the statistics is the fact that joblessness is an affliction reaching far beyond the alarming numbers issued monthly from Washington. Unemployment is defined very narrowly, and the federal statistics don't include about 5 million persons who have given up hope of finding a job. In addition to these "discouraged workers," there are more than 3 million part-time workers who want full-time work but can't get it.

Thus, the official figures are "laundered," and involuntary unemployment actually is double the generally accepted rate. And this actual rate doesn't include the more than 2 million people who work for below-poverty-level wages.

So when economists talk of a "target" of 4 percent unemployment, the reality is that 8 percent of those willing and able to work will be jobless. And since rates among blacks are double those for whites, conventional measures of full employment will leave blacks deep in economic depression.

There is the further danger that a whole generation of black youth is growing into adulthood without access to jobs, training, or skills. Back in 1950, more than two-thirds of young black males were in the labor force; today less than half are. Up to two-thirds of black youngsters are jobless, and a similar situation prevails among other minorities.

I believe that every person willing and able to work should have the right to a decent job at a decent wage.

This is a proposition that has been gaining strength over the past few years, especially as millions of hardworking

Americans discover firsthand that joblessness is caused not by laziness but by the malfunctioning of an economy that lurches uncertainly from boom to bust and back again, often leaving the most devoted believers in the work ethic subject to long periods of unemployment.

A national full-employment policy will require some readjustment in our traditional methods of dealing with economic problems. Beyond granting incentives to the private sector, underwriting training and job-matching costs, and employing millions of public-service workers to fill national needs, the government will have to become involved in planning and resource-allocation decisions.

Such a turn from tradition would not, as some charge, spell the death of the free enterprise system. Rather, it would be the essential first step in saving it.

**F**ULL employment may not come cheap, but neither does full unemployment. This year some \$40 billion in taxes will go into unemployment benefits and welfare—bare survival mechanisms that serve only to keep people alive. It makes more sense to put those resources into efforts to create jobs and have people earning and spending, thus creating more jobs. Is the goal of our economy to create opportunities and encourage independence, or is it to create a large pool of marginal workers one step removed from abject misery, in order to drive wages down?

It has been estimated that the nation will have to create 72,000 new jobs every week for the next decade just to absorb new entrants into the labor force, find new jobs for those displaced by automation, and bring the unemployment rate down to the still-unacceptable level of 4 percent. That's double the number of jobs created in the previous decade.

Creating those jobs will take a massive national effort that includes making jobs the top national priority for public- and private-sector leadership. The charge that this initiative will mean too much government spending is wrong; it will mean increased federal *investment*.

Proof of the wisdom of such investment can be seen in the Urban League's Labor Education Advancement Program, which utilized some \$22 million in government funds to counsel, train, and find jobs for minorities in the construction trades. Some 16,000 people, some of them on welfare and on the streets, found jobs through our efforts, but the big winner was the federal government.

Since 1967 those people have earned more than \$380 million in salaries and paid about \$90 million in taxes, or over four times the government's total investment in the program. Last year alone, taxes paid by the program's participants totaled \$31 million, or \$9 million *more* than the government's investment in the whole program.

The implications of this are myriad, but three stand out: first, so-called social spending is actually investment that is quickly recouped; second, people stigmatized as unemployed are capable of acquiring the skills to hold productive craft jobs; and, finally, the vast unused human and productive resources of our nation can be harnessed to provide opportunities and prosperity for all.

Clearly, then, we should guarantee to all our citizens the vital prerequisite of meaningful freedom—the right to decent jobs and to economic security. What better way to celebrate our Bicentennial and to enter the promised land of a third century of national life? ●

---

Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., is executive director of the National Urban League.