

Remarks at Meeting of
The Higher Education Council
Mast and Rudder, Northeast Harbor
by James Russell Wiggins

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One day in March 1965, when I came to my office at The Washington Post, after lunch, my secretary told me that the President had telephoned and that she had turned the call over to Managing Editor Alfred Friendly. I talked to Mr. Friendly later, and he said that the President had expressed the hope we would cover closely the House struggle over the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and that he had been assured we were watching the story.

A few days later, my phone rang and the first thing I heard on the line was something like this:

"Everytime I telephone your office you are either sleeping, in conference, out to lunch, or you haven't arrived at the office. I know you are much too busy a man to bother to answer a telephone call from the President of the United States, so I did not expect you to call back." (I interrupted to say "let me up, Mr. President, what do you want?") He continued, "I want to say that if The Washington Post doesn't pay more attention to the education bill that Agnes Meyer has prodded me into advocating, it will never pass. We have been working night and day in the House

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and now we have it right up to the lick lock, and it is only going to take a little more effort to get it passed".

I assured him The Washington Post was interested in the bill and hoped it would pass.

It was a characteristic Johnson treatment — of a kind that was typical of the joshing, jostling spirit of the West — a kind of treatment few academic people and eastern intellectuals were ever to understand.

At the time of the President's call, the education bill was in the House. Secretary Celebrezze had been working hard on House members and estimated he had 248 votes lined up. The White House estimate, according to Valenti, was 229. Finally, on March 26, it was passed on a roll call vote of 263 to 153. It then went to the Senate where a flood of hostile amendments were beaten back, and passed by a vote of 73 to 18.

In his book VANTAGE POINT, Johnson relates that he was so eager to sign the bill that he could not wait the usual ten days between passage and the time a measure reaches the President. The bill passed on Friday night, April 9 at 7:43 p.m. and the President told his staff he wanted the action completed so he could sign it in 24 hours. Engrossing and congressional certifying of the bill was rushed, and on Sunday, April 11, President Johnson signed it. He had at his side his first school teacher, Mrs. Kathryn Deadrich Lone "Miss Kate" who had hurried to Washington from her home in California.

No wonder the President was in a hurry. It had been a lifelong purpose of his to improve American education. He

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wrote in VANTAGE POINT:

"As a young schoolteacher more than three decades before, I had represented the teachers before the Texas Legislature, urging that cigarette tax revenues be used for raising the income level of teachers to that of skilled workmen. I knew what 'school' meant for hundreds of thousands of boys and girls: crowded facilities, double shifts, overworked and often undertrained instructors. I knew that unless the federal government could step in and render necessary assistance, many American children would be doomed to inferior education, which presaged an empty future. Not only would those children suffer but so would their country".

Previous efforts to provide federal aid to education had gone aground, most recently in the Kennedy administration, over issues of the role of parochial and private schools. President Johnson got around that by the distribution system in the 1965 act. He was euphoric about the effects of this bill. A year after its passage, Harold Howe, who had meanwhile replaced Francis Keppel as Commissioner of Education, told him what the effect of the law had been in the first year following passage. He said (in VANTAGE POINT) that "the funds were being used for language training and remedial reading, for audio visual equipment, and for specialists to work with pre-schoolers. The report from Howe described the work of nurses' aides, counselors, and bilingual teachers, and the support of evening classes for high school drop outs".

It is now 15 years since this effort was launched in 1965. Has the experience of 15 years fulfilled President Johnson's high

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hopes and expectations? Has it vindicated his faith that the act would have an enormous affirmative impact on education in America? Since the passage of Title I of the ESEA in 1965, the federal government through 1979 spent \$23.2 billion on local school district aid. The funds were intended primarily "to provide services at the school level for children who were doing badly academically". The expenditures were concentrated mostly on primary grade pupils.

Patricia Albjerg Graham, Charles Warren professor of the history of American Education, at Harvard University, in an excellent article in *Daedalus* for the Summer issue 1980, gives a somewhat negative answer. She thinks academic performance did not improve, and that there has been a resultant loss of faith in the schools. She believes the government strategy was based on two false premises: (1) the assumption that money can buy learning; and (2) the assumption that education by itself will bring upward social and economic mobility. Policy makers, educators, and the public accepted these assumptions, and the scapegoat became the school when the expected improvements did not occur".

In her opinion, "The fundamental lesson of the sixties and seventies is that additional funds will not necessarily provide better education for all students. Money is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for improved education".

I am not here to amplify Patricia Graham's mixed answer to the question of whether or not the Act of 1965 has achieved the results for which President Johnson hoped. All of you educators have that answer, I can only raise the question.

One note of caution, I think, must be entered. The field in

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which money and effort has been spent since 1965 is not one which can be expected to yield immediate results. I recall the last meeting of President Johnson's cabinet. In his usual manner, he went round the room asking for summing up statements on the Johnson years. My own answer was that in its domestic programs, the people in government had been working on efforts to bring about sociological and economic effects that are slow to mature — in effect, unlike the first generation pioneers of the middle west, with their annual grain crops, they were orchardists, and foresters, working on crops that mature in generations and not in single seasons. It will take a long time to demonstrate success or failure, to fix the yields and weigh the harvests.

Firm as President Johnson was in the belief that the federal government should aid education, he was aware of the risks of trying to do it. Many of his advisors warned him against it. It is intimidating to recall that James A. Garfield also was much interested in education. In December 1871, he told a meeting of Williams College Alumni: "Give me a log hut, with only a simple bench, Mark Hopkins on one end and I on the other, and you may have all the buildings, apparatus and libraries without him". One must proceed cautiously in the criticism of education in a country where two presidents who dealt with education have been "shot in the back". Fortunately, it was only a metaphorical matter for President Johnson, but, in a symbolic sort of way, he also became the victim of reprisal — and surprisingly enough, nowhere more emphatically was he attacked than on the campuses of institutions to which he made a greater contribution than any president in the country's history.

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Now 15 years after the aid to education bill was passed, opinions about it probably are as divided as they were the day it was signed. We are still a long way from consensus on the proper role of the federal government in education. There is a simple, straightforward, pragmatic doubt about how much education (the chief object of aid) has benefitted. Questions are being raised about the influence of the mandated special programs on the ordinary programs of the schools. Has so much attention been diverted to the extraordinary programs that the regular courses of study (and the students taking them) are suffering diminished attention?

Are the declining achievement scores of students a reflection of this neglect? Have we just redistributed the weaknesses of the schools so that they show more clearly among average students than among the underprivileged or the handicapped?

The declining standings for high school students it seems to me cannot be wholly blamed upon changes in federal policy or educational methods or staff. There have been profound changes in the high schools, over the years, and in the society from which students and teachers are recruited — changes for which the educators and schools are not chiefly responsible. In a matter of decades American high schools have been transformed from the academies of the elite into universal learning centers. In 1895 about 6 percent of all eighteen-year-olds graduated from high school. In 1935, the figure was 41 percent. In 1957 it rose to 63 percent. The figure today is 75 percent.

The figure for Hancock County, in 1970 was 59 percent. For

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the State of Maine it was 52 percent. Not as high as the national average, but high enough to qualify as something different from the select educational schools of 50 years ago.

At the turn of the century, the high schools enrolled the students with the highest motivation, the best academic standing, the easiest access to the schools, recruited from the homes of the best circumstanced and best educated. It is foolish to compare a system that did not even pretend to provide universal opportunity for education with one that has that for its primary object.

At the same time, there has been an equally revolutionary change in teaching staffs. Fifty years ago, teaching was the best opportunity for most bright young women. Today, business, the professions, and government, cut into that pool of potential teachers. Has the quality of teaching staffs declined? Who knows? At any rate an enrollment demanding more and more and better and better teachers, has had to be content with teachers recruited from a diminishing pool of candidates for teacher positions.

Whether or not the schools are as good as they used to be; it cannot be disputed that they are not the same as they used to be decades ago.

J. Myron Atkin, dean of the school of education at Stamford University, has pointed out another change, which in my opinion, has had as much to do with the diminished public confidence in the schools as the quality of education provided by the schools. He notes that "for the first time in the United States, it is possible to conceive of the significant weakening of the common school concept which the nation has pioneered". He attributes this,

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among other things, to the fact that "with greater income and fewer children to educate, if it has the desire to do so, a family can send its children to privately sponsored institutions".

But his basic anxiety is the federal government's invasion of the class room. He thinks that "local school administrators and teachers are losing control over the curriculum as the result of government action.... The local school administrator becomes less of an educational leader and more a monitor of legislative intent. He or she must assure federal officials or the state education agency that requirements of the law are being met".

This to me is the most notable, and most unanticipated consequence of increased federal and state intervention in local education. At meetings of local school boards, I have observed the curious diminution of the responsibility and authority of the local school officials. Discussions at school board meetings chiefly concern what the schools must do to fulfill the mandates of the state and federal government. There is very little discussion of policy. Local officials have been diminished to mere clerks somewhat fearfully undertaking to execute policies that they often do not understand. They talk about what they must do to conform to rules and regulations, not about what they ought to do to further education. The role of the amateur local school officials steadily declines. Fewer and fewer people care to participate in this curtailed and shrunken role, in which less and less discretion is left the board and the teachers. They are interpreters of the will of remote authority. Often they are confused by disagreement in the construction and interpretation of the rules handed down

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to them.

Atkin has a gloomy forecast. He thinks public education will continue to slide perceptibly while the government strains to have an ever-greater role in stemming the decline. He thinks that while government will improve certain conditions in the education system, it is "likely to contribute in direct, subtle, and unintended ways to a redefinition of schooling and professional practice that itself will lead, (in his opinion at least) to a further decline".

Robert Wood, former president of the University of Massachusetts, has a further contribution to gloom. He thinks that collective bargaining is increasing the vulnerability of the educational institution. He says "it replaces the sense of community and common purpose that had once been typical with an adversarial posture; labor is made to appear the opponent of management. With each participant, the conflicting tugs of professional and unit loyalty come to the surface. Because the unions are by and large national in character while management is still overwhelmingly provincial, the advantage in professional collective bargaining negotiations generally lies with the employees; the institutional employers are often inexpert and inexperienced in their responses. As union agreements are reached and as costs rise, public resentment, whether against increased taxes or higher tuitions, is bound to follow".

In Maine, the citizens of the different communities are largely shut out of the give and take of labor negotiations through which they might gain a better understanding of the issues involved. State law permits these transactions to be conducted behind closed doors. All the citizens know about them is the inevitable result

of higher pay scales and more taxes — considerations not likely to make education popular.

Collective bargaining, patterned on conditions in industry and business, has introduced divisive elements into education where there has hitherto been a refuge for dissent and nonconformity. The standards of the mines and factories have been brought to the faculty. There is the same blunt insistence that all must conform or contribute to the union, a practice that to many seems alien to an academic community where men have spent their lifetimes in the search for courses that commended themselves to them on the basis of intellectual appraisal and not on the mere say so of a non-academic labor boss or of a majority of their fellows.

Passage of the education act of 1965 has not ushered in the millenium for America's educational establishment. The hopes, dreams, expectations and plans of President Johnson are far from fulfillment. Perhaps we might have been even farther from fulfillment if the act had not been passed. Maybe, though it is dimly perceived, we are at the metaphorical "lick lock" he saw in 1965, if only the problems arising from inevitable changes in our time were to be attacked by those inside and outside the educational establishment with the same zeal and enthusiasm they were approached by the country school teacher turned President who sought to transform educational opportunity in America just fifteen years ago.

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