VALIDITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

We are all familiar with the fact that too many advertisers are dominated by a single Scriptural passage: "Behold, I make all things new;" appropriately enough it is drawn from the Book of Revelations. They constantly and stridently assert that every product is "new." Often it has been in use for donkey's years--and the choice of that as a measure of time was deliberate, for many people have long made asses of themselves by using it. But the older the product the more the advertiser clamors that it is "new."

There is a careful avoidance of outright falsification. The goods are new in the sense that the particular bar of soap which the customer buys—if anyone still uses soap—is not second-hand. But the proclaimed newness too often consists of a new dye to alter the color; heretofore it was white, now it is pink because "pink makes men propose." Or an insignificant ingredient has been added in order to validate the claim to "newness." It is made scientific and mysterious by giving it letters and a number. The inference is that the higher the number, the more combinations had presumably been weighed in the balance and found wanting before perfection was attained. The purpose is to induce people who are tired of the product to keep on using it, trying to discover what is new about it. It seeks to lure non-users who quit it sometime ago to give it a new trial in the hope that it is different in some significant way from the product they discarded.

Trivia in the product, verbally inflated into significant advances, are all based on "research," the modern substitute for magic. Research is an omnibus word that covers anything from counting fingers and toes to asking 1/100 of 1% of housewives how often they brush their teeth and extrapolating the resultant mendacity into authoritative statistics on the dental care exercised by American women.

It is easy to heap deserved scorn upon huckstering techniques. But we should take careful note of the color of our educational kettle before we compare it to the advertiser's pot. The sad fact is that an enormous amount of educational discussion employs the same absurd tricks. What term is more often heard than "research;" it is a word as much abused in our field as in trade. Proposals for programs in education too often rest upon a proclamation that "something new has been added." The new procedure is marketed with all the energy, the skill, and sometimes the deceit of the huckster. Let me concede at once that not all this sorry process is dishonest. Often it is simply naive. The proponents have no sense of history; their research has been too superficial. As they flail away, they do not realize that they are threshing old straw; they raise dust but product no nourishment.
The state of our art bears yet another striking resemblance to the shoddier advertising techniques which I have, by oblique inference, been criticizing. Some advertising does not attempt to sell its product for its genuine virtues, which are often very real. Soap will get you clean and used often enough will keep you so. Toothpaste will keep teeth in good shape. Hygiene, however, is too seldom mentioned. These products will make you glamorous. They will provide a skin others love to touch; no one has yet had quite the hardihood to suggest his product will lead to having passes made, but someone will soon breach that barrier of taste. These products will keep romance from fading away. They will make your hair shine so that the opposite sex will flock to your side in satisfactorily surplus numbers. Sex is brought into areas where it is irrelevant. Perfectly good products are sold not for what they actually do; they are marketed for everything else but.

Again let us not be too censorious of others so long as we flatter them by imitation. An advertisement I often hear begins by citing statistics as to the number of people who do not possess a high school diploma. It then offers a short (and that word is given great emphasis), easy (and that word gets equal stress) means of getting an equivalent certificate "right at home." This program is given the appearance (maybe the substance!) of official endorsement by a charter from the Board of Regents.

What is offered?--a diploma. I have listened carefully and many times. I cannot recall any hint, much less a promise, of an education; the diploma is all that counts. The promise is to cleanse the outside of the cup. (I hope the allusion can still be understood.) Nothing is said of personal growth, nothing of inner satisfaction, nothing, even, of enlarged knowledge or understanding.

There is endless repetition that, on the average, possessors of a diploma make $50,000 more in a lifetime than a non-possessor. It seems, despite the Harvard boys, to make no difference whether it is in Latin or English, on parchment or on paper. The diploma means cash. The economic motivation is primary. Second only to that, social snobbery gets the play. The possession of a diploma will improve your job and thus your social status. Lenin said "the material life of society is primary," all other aspects of life are secondary, derivative. He never said it more explicitly than do these diploma merchants. Like many others who insist they oppose Communism, they embrace its key doctrine.

You will be saying that I have chosen an extreme example. Its blatant crudity makes an unusually strong case. Beyond that concession I will not go. For in a vast amount of our educational discussion the same elements appear, muted, disguised, papered over--but still plainly to be discerned.
Let me cite a concrete case. I was at dinner with a member of a state board of education, who was serving as chairman of its committee to see that teachers took advanced work in order to "stay alive," and to get a salary increase. Present also was an exceptionally good teacher to whom this form of artificial mental respiration was being applied. During each five years she was required to accumulate so many "points." Since she did not live near the state university, she was forced to take whatever courses were given within commuting distance by the extension department.

She listed the courses she had taken during the last few years. I will not repeat them lest I be accused of extravagance. There is a further reason for reticence; conceivably, in some circumstances, one or more of them might possibly have had value for some registrant. But it was agreed by all around the table—all in educational work—that none of the courses had any relevance for her professional improvement, or for her personal enrichment. The state was content that she had accumulated the prescribed number of points. Form was all that was important; substance was of no concern. She had been required to tithe with mint, anise, and cummin, without regard to the weightier matters of the law. I may remind you that the verse from which that passage is drawn begins with an appropriate phrase, "Woe unto you." The state board member freely conceded that the instance was more nearly typical than unique. The effective requirement was not education but credits. It might be argued, feebly, that this exercise was better than none. But that argument is based upon a concealed major premise—that the teacher had no inner intellectual interests which would stir her to personal initiative. But if that major premise is correct, she was dead beyond resuscitation. Then the intellectual pulmotor was useless.

Sale of an educational product upon the wrong basis sometimes is just as real even when it is not so transparent. The teaching of foreign languages has long been an open scandal. My own instruction consumed fourteen year courses in four languages. It took place over fifty years ago. I had two magnificent teachers, two or three who were adequate, and several scandalously bad. If you will go back just beyond my memory—to 1823—you will find a denunciation of the teaching of foreign language which made my experience seem halycon. For a long time, then, need for reform was imperative. Whence came the great thrust for improvement of methods, equipment, results. Did it have a deep intrinsic educational purpose? No, it is part of the National Defense Education Act.

Most people know about the appropriation, but few seem to have read the legislation. It is solemnly incorporated in Section 101 of the Act that "the Congress hereby finds and declares that the security of the nation" requires this reform. The law goes on to declare: "The defense of the nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles."
That can only be described as an astounding statement. It is cast in the form of an absolute. There is no qualifying word or phrase such as "to some extent," or "among other things." As the statute is written the defense of the nation rests upon just one thing—mastery of modern techniques. There is nothing about good citizenship, nothing about personal development. Techniques are all that count.

I have not misunderstood the act. Its purpose is specific: "to insure trained manpower of sufficient quality and quantity to meet the national defense needs of the United States." Even where it refers to needy students, it does not represent an effort to improve them as persons, only to make them more efficient servants of security. Cynics shrug their shoulders. Legislation is not like cigarettes; it is not what's up front that counts. Nothing matters but the money that is at the intake end—and no filter, please.

The aims of this educational reform are public and political. Of the growth of the individual, of the beauty and charm of learning, of the validity of the educational process, there is not a word, not even a hint. This is a hard-headed, no nonsense matter of public safety.

It is conspicuous and irrefutable evidence that there was not enough faith in the validity (hence the significance) of the educational process to produce reform upon an adequate scale. The idea of improvement was marketed on a basis that could be more easily sold to the Congress and the public. Institutions must be bribed to get adequate equipment; the significance of knowledge for its own sake must be replaced by a patriotic motive. That statement about patriotism I am forced to withdraw; it was inaccurate. Patriotism is the individual response to public need arising from love of country. No echo of any such hope appears in the finding and declaration of the Congress. The sole motive is the enhancement of a national power position by the multiplication of technical skills. Patriotism does not enter the picture.

Doubtless many proponents of the new program were motivated by genuinely educational objectives. Many good men and true had struggled for years to make head against budget officers who wanted next year's column to look as much like this year's as possible; they had talked themselves hoarse to administrative officers who were without vision or sensitivity. Perhaps desperation led them to catch onto the chariot of national defense; had it not carried the natural sciences to unexampled heights? Now at last the humanities might profit from Federal subsidy. Those who entertained such hopes paid no attention to the intent of Congress.

The language of the act contains no taint of even a remote humanistic interest. It contains no kind word for the literature of other nations, that vast source of understanding their cultures. There is no encouragement for broadening and deepening one's own perceptions through the vicarious experiences which literature provides in such rich abundance. It is language only, capacity for daily practical communication, to which attention is confined. More explicitly, it is the mastery of modern techniques that is vital, not depth of appreciation or understanding.
The law sought to shift interest away from the humanities. The language makes that clear. Section 101 spoke of correcting "as rapidly as possible the existing imbalances....which have led to an insufficient proportion of our population educated in science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages and trained in technology." The Congress appears to believe that we have had too many humanists rather than too few.

In order to make the point perfectly clear, contrast the language of the National Defense Education Act with the tone of the Morrill Act of almost exactly one hundred years earlier. In seeking to stimulate work in agriculture and the mechanic arts, Congress specifically enjoined the subsidized institutions not to neglect "scientific and classical studies."

Moreover, the purpose of the Morrill Act was not to enhance the power status of the nation; nor was it social or political. The declared aim was "the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life." It did not overlook the practical value of the studies; equally it did not scorn, as does its modern successor, the liberal side of education, the development of the person for his own more satisfying self-realization. The contrast in tone of the two statutes authorizing federal subsidies is so striking that it should have been noticed by all who read it, even as they ran.

Even more striking is the contrast between this new support for teaching and the simple, eloquent language of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787: "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

The new program, then, was not humanistic at all. The values sought were extrinsic. The inner meaning of the humanities was neglected; the stress was on utility. This statute dealt with citizens only in terms of their utility to their state; no other value was mentioned. This was training for national power purposes. It does not have the blatant crudity of those who called a generation ago for "social engineering," for treating persons as interchangeable parts--like nuts. Nor does it have the candor of the totalitarians. They boldly proclaim that the citizen is trained in order to be a more effective servant of the state. Nevertheless the statute represents a decided shift in the direction of both these groups. The law carries overtones inherited directly from the Technocrats. They also stressed efficiency, not personal worth. This will be obvious if your memories are not so blunted by successive crises that the propositions of the Technocrats have faded from your minds.

Without the candor of the totalitarians, the new law assists students in order to train them specifically to serve the national interest. They are not to be educated either as good citizens nor for the pursuit of happiness upon which the Declaration of Independence laid such great stress, outmoded in the new age. The current emphasis would have been much less dangerous had it been expressed in clearer tones. Then, at least, the direction and danger of the drift would have
been so explicit as to sound an alert. Now all the dangers are hidden behind a dollar sign, apparently the perfect camouflage. If the money is provided, why worry how, or for what purpose it was voted.’

Perhaps the humanities hoped to garner some of the crumbs that fall from the table of national defense, but that unearned dividend would be due to wastefulness or inadvertence, it would not be related to the central purpose of the law. Moreover, if the humanities cherished this hope—or illusion—it was a silent surrender of their main bastion. They could never again assert the innate validity and urgent significance of their own disciplines. They were conceding them a subordinate, a dependent, status. And they were doing it cynically, saying, in effect, that as long as we get the money, the end justifies the means. But in education, of all things, ends and means are inextricably intertwined.

I began by complaining that goods were often marketed on the wrong basis; I now repeat, let us not be self-righteous in condemning the hucksters as long as we are content to sell ideas to Congress on the wrong basis.

There are two more points of profound significance here to which little or no attention has been paid. The first has to do with the education of public opinion. In a democracy public opinion is—in the long run—dominant. Our whole educational system, private as well as public, is dependent upon citizen interest and sense of public values. There has been bitter complaint that the public is not alert to the seriousness of our situation. More specifically, bond issues for new schools are too often voted down in referenda. If public opinion is directed always to utility—to financial gain, to national defense—but never to the inner satisfactions of the educative process, to its intrinsic values, how is public opinion ever to be mobilized behind a genuinely humanistic approach to education? If we perpetually sell our product upon the wrong basis, because it is quicker, it is easier, it gets more money faster, we merely compound the difficulty—inherently great—of making our appeal for genuine education (as distinguished from training, however valuable) ever more and more difficult for ourselves.

This is not a speculative matter. The evidence is plainly set forth before our eyes. Who believes the Congress would have made funds available for the advance of learning in language, literature, mathematics, science, for the sake of their own intrinsic values without tying it to a practical necessity arising from an immediate national danger? If the language of the Northwest Ordinance had been offered as its "finding and declaration" the Congress would have rejected it.
Even in national terms this is a short-sighted view. For a brief moment one might try to defend, though not very successfully, the shallow thesis of the National Defense Education Act that "the defense of the Nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques." But in the long run the viability of democracy—the goal we should have in mind—does not depend upon an agglomeration of technicians. All the external power in the world will not save democracy from internal decay. The defense of the nation requires experts, but the life of the nation demands much more. It is a wholly unjustified assumption that a well-trained technician, or any other expert, will make a good citizen. Democracy is not the rule of experts. On a specific technical question the experts (if you can get two experts to agree) are more likely to be right than an ordinary citizen. But the more expert a man may be within his own field, the more is he just another common man outside it. This is well illustrated by the political nonsense that has been visited upon us by some of the most famous atomic experts. Contrary to the explicit assertions of the Congress, the future of democracy lies not in a society of technologists, but in the activities of free, self-directed, intelligent, educated people. Technicians can serve the state, it takes broadly sensitive citizens to direct it.

In his farewell address, which is read once a year to empty congressional seats, George Washington made the argument cogently. "It is substantially true that virtue and morality is a necessary spring of popular government....Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric" Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened." Now that through the processes of history public opinion has become really dominant, Congress sells it short. Instead it pleads for and supports the training of technicians—with apparently the full approval of the educational world.

If you doubt the correctness of that judgment, consider the fact that the same Congress renewed the support of the National Defense Education Act, and then with a whoop and a roar defeated support of public education for the purposes set forth in the Northwest Ordinance and Washington's Farewell Address. The majorities against support of general education were as large as those to continue appropriations for the National Defense Education Act. They also gladly voted funds for Federally-impacted areas. That phrase sounds like some kind of badly developed educational wisdom teeth! But it has closer resemblances to the pork barrel.

Let me say parenthetically that nothing I have said or propose to say is an argument either for or against Federal appropriations for education including those phases mentioned in this bill. That is an important topic, but it is a different one. It should not be confused with what we are discussing—recognition of the validity and significance of the educational process itself.
When education was the possession of an aristocratic minority it was easy to make the appeal for liberal education to the leisure class on intrinsic grounds. Those days are gone. The appeal must now be to a broad spectrum of public opinion. I do not discount the difficulties we face, but if the educational appeal is persistently based upon utility, then utility will become the acid test by which public opinion will judge the program.

Here in New York City this hard-headed, practical approach has influenced the design of schools. One public official has made outcry against esthetics as extravagant and irrelevant. He actually accuses some schools of possessing architectural merit! Well, if we want a factory product, why not produce it in a factory? If public utility of the end product is the criterion, why bother with esthetics? Only of the educative process is valid within itself, only if it is concerned with the development of the individual as an integer is beauty not only relevant, but essential.

It is true that some manufacturing concerns have been able to prove, to the satisfaction of their directors and stockholders, that an attractive environment and attention to esthetic values improves morale and advances productivity. Unfortunately education has not tried very hard to prove that its product can be so improved. If personal development in the widest sense were really thought to be of value, then the esthetics of environment would be seen as vital, not as extravagance. But as long as we want nothing but efficient earners, beauty is an expensive irrelevance.

That it is so regarded is manifested in some of the post-war dormitories that disgrace our university and college campuses. They are little better than educational cell-blocks. They have a bare legal minimum of cubic air space, the minimum of internal light. Of noise suppression they are heedless. I actually experimented by having a colleague drop a pin on the floor above a room in which I was standing. It was clearly audible. Imagine what a radio or a hi-fi—or high heels—would do. In one well-known institution students were not only given no facilities, such as moldings, upon which to hang pictures, they were forbidden to have any pictures at all. The dean explained the decision by saying that they would choose the wrong ones! It never occurred to him that the University had any responsibility for improving their taste. He would abolish—or at least prohibit—bad taste by forbidding it. The place to learn about art, in his view, is in a course—where else?

In the design and construction of many "housing units"—an apt expression—there is no consideration for personal privacy, much less thought of promoting a private life of the mind. In the standardized furniture, bookcases are conspicuously missing or revealingly small. The plain fact is that not only does the curriculum scamp the liberal arts in many institutions, the whole environment, physical and emotional, would go far to prevent the student from acquiring true cultivation by his own efforts.
Nothing but a total, however unconscious, denial of the validity of the educational process would set at naught all we have learned in the last century about environmental influences upon personal growth. Yet the denizens of these academic slum dwellings are taught—in courses of instruction—to be alarmed at the decay of our cities. Huddled together as they are, they learn of the necessity of green belts and more parks. Is it any wonder when educators stress the wrong things that public opinion is misled?

Not only does misdirected emphasis upon the wrong product defeat effective mobilization of public opinion—and in that manner impair the democratic process—the damage to the American ideal is even more serious. We are accused around the world of being materialists; it is an assertion we hotly resent. We can adduce a great deal of evidence to buttress our rebuttal. Nevertheless any candid review of educational discussion, and of educational offerings, makes it painfully clear that we often go far to validate the charge against us. About 20% of the bachelors degrees given men as they leave college are in business administration, more than in all the sciences and mathematics combined, more than in engineering and vastly more than in the liberal arts. The number of business degrees shows an increase from a little over 3% after the First World War to its present level. The vast preponderance of undergraduate work in this field is in training in gainful skills, not in personal development, or in the virtues of a citizen. The percent of the four-year course for these degrees given over to professional work has advanced sensationaly—sometimes to 70 or 80%. It is hard under these circumstances to make as convincing a case against our materialism as would be desirable.

I am not denouncing business administration, which has a proper place in the educational scheme, though not to this extent—by a wide margin—at the undergraduate level. It does not first stimulate and then rely upon the continuing education of the individual after he has his degree. The cynics leap upon such a statement. They can show statistically—the modern form of revealed truth—that alumni do not, in fact, continue their self-education. But the cynics confuse cause and effect. If you build your program upon the presumption that the student must learn it now or never, the process is not one which will inculcate the habit of self-education. If you stuff the student with data, if independent reading and study are sacrificed to another course in another subject lest there be a gap in his gainful capacity, you have short-circuited the habits that would lead to continued intellectual growth. If you put your energies into getting him ready for his first job, the long run effect is bad. If you call for the formal solution of synthetic problems by imitative processes you do not stimulate independence of mind, flexibility of judgment, readiness to experiment and to accept failure as an inevitable element in the learning process.

I repeat, I am not singling out Business Administration save as a sample. I have seen engineering taught as a handbook enterprise, with wholly inadequate stress upon principles, almost complete neglect of any genuine higher mathematics, much less with any room left for humane studies. Or take what is often regarded
as a cultural subject; I have seen music taught in so commercial a spirit, with so much emphasis on using it to make a living that it was as anti-cultural as the most crassly materialistic vocational study. Indeed that is what it was.

The materialistic ideal can dominate any field. Some disciplines lend themselves to it more readily than others, but most great disciplines can be perverted. All that is necessary to attain that end is to accentuate the negative and turn to the defensive. That has become our besetting sin; it is exemplified 100% in Section 101 of the National Defense Education Act.

The defensive mood is partly the heritage of the great depression. It is more than a whole generation since its onset; economically we have not only emerged from it, the gloomy forebodings of a mature economy, of an end to growth are now all but forgotten. The cry today is for faster economic growth; government propaganda in the economic field has taken a 180 degree turn. The same men who then denounced growth now demand it—and at a faster pace.

Emotionally, however, the wounds of the great depression have not yet healed. In the matter of unemployment we still accentuate the negative and search for palliatives. For the most part the suggested programs merely deepen the vocational grooves, impair flexibility and retard re-training. Many of the proposals and procedures, far from making the situation better, actually promote unemployment in the long run.

But of all the defensive moods lingering from the depression, education offers the best example. It is easy to denounce featherbedding among labor unions; some of it is utterly scandalous. It is killing the legitimate theater. But anyone who is irritated by the practice should take a close look at featherbedding in curricula. Courses are padded out, and multiplied like the sands of the sea. Parthenogenesis—infertile reproduction—has never been more fully illustrated.

Many labor unions have limited apprenticeships; some have virtually closed the door against all but the absolute minimum number of new entrants. They want to protect their jobs not by excellence of performance, not by meeting new competition with more efficient work, but negatively, by curbing fresh competition. All kinds of rules, going far beyond the legitimate protection of seniority, have put rigidities into the economic structure that inhibit vigorous growth. Abandonment of such hobbles upon the economy would go much further than featherbedding to assure adequate security.

We do right to denounce that kind of sabotage of progress. But we should remember always, when we do, that teaching belongs in the front line so far as restrictive practices are concerned. Defensive mechanisms without number have been embalmed into law. It was done, of course, in the name of "standards," which all too often measure intangibles by number, weight and size, none of which can be determined. One striking effect, however, has been to discourage entry
of young people into the profession by erecting irrelevant and occasionally outrageous barriers. In the name of professional improvement, requirements have been enacted into statutes that have no such result; indeed, the opposite is more likely.

We have developed an artificial shortage of teachers and made procedures so rigid that reform is needlessly difficult. Lacking the stimulation of adequate competition, protected by all kinds of security arrangements, the lazy, the incompetent, the uninterested were fastened like leeches upon school systems. Even salaries have ceased to reflect teaching skill and capacity so much as years spent or points gained, without reference to performance. For the excitement, the challenge, the competition that gives zest not only to one's employment but to the whole of life, there has been substituted a system of super-security that tends to rob both profession and avocation of those exciting qualities. Many teachers have surmounted all these hurdles and have done superbly. If they had not, our situation would be desperate. Many others, however, are waiting, in the classroom, for their pensions. When looked at closely all these defensive mechanisms are a manifestation of an over-accent upon material things--the precise charge which is levelled against us around the world. Yet we resent the slur without considering how to make it not only wholly untrue, but demonstrably so.

The Soviets boast of their materialism, they proclaim it as the basis of their social, political--and personal--philosophy. We insist, by contrast, that our basic faith is in the unique value and infinite variety of the individual. No respectable economist any longer believes in the "economic man." Motives are vastly complex, and action reflects balancing many impulses, some of them subconscious. The Russians, despite their highly organized dialectic materialism, have had to make practical concessions to the fact that man does not live by bread alone; they have been compelled to appeal to love of country, to historical episodes--to a vast number of non-material motives and springs of action. Sometimes--as during the war--this process went so far as virtually to eclipse, for a time, their basic philosophy.

We have done the reverse. While we have never denied the value of material incentives our historical philosophy has never made them central. They have been one among many; powerful, indeed, but far from dominant. The core of our political and social philosophy has been moral and our achievements have been most conspicuous when that was held in right perspective. A Scotch philosopher summed it up in two sentences: "A man's true significance does not lie in his job, in his service to society, in his citizenship. It lies in being a man--in the inner quality of his own consciousness." If we really have faith in the inner integrity of the educational process we must restore that faith to its central, its dominant, position. Then all the other values which we rightly cherish will be added thereto--heaped up, pressed down and running over.
There was a time when American optimism not only verged upon, it actually became, bumptiousness. Braggadocio was all too current. For a return to the attitude of the braggart I do not plead; but I do urge a renewed accent upon the positive values inherent in our democratic philosophy.

We are in competition with the Soviets—how can doubt it? Let us meet them not on their terms as the National Defense Education Act explicitly proposes to do. It has the fatal defect of being wholly defensive in tone. The only sound defense is to take the offense: let us move forward upon our own terms. This requires education that cultivates the imagination, disciplines the will, enlarges the area of appreciation and deepens its sensitivity, that toughens mental processes. When those things are done, the skills will be more quickly acquired; their refinement will be a lasting enterprise.

Let us not concede to the Soviets, even by inference, the validity of their fundamental materialistic view of the world. Once that concession has been made, their victory is certain. If, on the other hand, we stick to our own way of life, our strengths are sure to prevail.