HUMANISTS AND GENERALISTS

Essay among 14 with the General Title

EDUCATION FOR PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

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I HAVE never heard of an analytical survey of the state of leadership that was likely to produce a complacent attitude. That statement can be applied to any field which is subjected to analysis.

Complaints about education and its deficiencies—due to lack of leadership—have been the standard pattern of discussion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America. The pace of social change always appears both more rapid and more decisive than the adjustment, not to say leadership, in the educational process. One sardonic educator summed up his view with the remark that it took about fifty years for half the educators to accept a new idea, however good. I can find the same thought, differently expressed, over a century ago. There is no point, therefore, in looking to the past to find a Golden Age of American education.

With the American genius—or weakness—for voluntary organization, we have had more committees, councils, societies, and associations to promote education than all the rest of the world put together. Yet the sad fact emerges that the larger part of their energies has gone into restrictive practices. They have not looked to recruitment of leaders, or to the development of leadership, but toward excluding from the guild any who do not meet "standards." The criteria by which the standards are defined have little to do with substance, and far too much with form. By deliberate design competent people are excluded from teaching because they have not performed some ritual of training. It is hardly too much to say that the net effect of alleged standards has been to inhibit
leadership rather than stimulate it. Salary policies, enforced by organizational pressure, have had a like negative effect. Protection of those in the trade, including those who should be eliminated, has been the normal practice. Defense of the weak rather than scope for the strong has been the goal.

Analyses of our government are almost uniformly negative. The deficiencies of the democratic process as such, and of our forms and methods of government specifically, have occupied the minds of men ever since the Declaration of Independence. Conspicuous among our shortcomings has been the want of political thinkers of a high order. The government of today is radically different from the government designed—or codified, if it does not seem to you very "original"—in 1787. Critics can assert upon good evidence that it has been shaped and modified by crisis and circumstance, by pressure and politics, rather than by reason and intellect. Proposals, however logical, evoke only mild interest, and virtually no response in action. There is an all but complete divorce between the thinkers and the practitioners of politics. To see how serious is this breach, it is necessary only to recall the terms of opprobrium heaped upon those who try to bridge the gap; "egghead" is only a recent example, the successor of a long line of earlier epithets.

The history of analyses is even more pessimistic when one turns to the arts. They are poorly supported. Symphony orchestras and deficits are so closely associated in the public mind as to seem virtually synonymous. Opera has been dependent primarily upon Europe to supply singers for its leading roles. The number of opera companies which has survived in America is far too small. There is inadequate opportunity for training, and even less for the acquisition of experience. Europe is the Mecca for both.

Painting, sculpture, architecture are in similar case. Their economic foundations are shaky, facilities for education are inadequate in quantity and quality, and opportunities for expression far too few. These things remain true, despite the fact that the public interest has grown astoundingly. Attendance at exhibits—once a problem—runs to vast figures. It is far greater than the over-advertised attendance at sports events. Yet, under these circumstances, our greatest public museum is forced to curtail its schedule and close one day a week for lack of funds.
The customary explanation for most of these deficiencies is historical. In a new country energy was absorbed in taming the land, in the westward trek, in building a standard of living which is the wonder of the world. It is in the economic field that names of leaders spring to mind: Rockefeller, Carnegie, Ford, on the one side; Green, Hillman, Lewis on the other. Such names are mere symbols; there has been a succession of giants in production, finance, marketing, and a striking number of labor managers whose leadership has been conspicuous, not only in America but in the labor movement around the world. It is a notable fact that when any such list is examined, it will be observed that nearly all the outstanding leaders were self-taught. They came up through the ranks, not by grace of wealth, or status, or privilege, but by energy, shrewdness, persistence, and a capacity to influence men. It is worthy of note, moreover, that strong leadership appears most often in an atmosphere of confidence; a defensive mood makes the task of becoming a leader enormously more difficult.

Despite the successes in the economic field, negative accents dominate current analyses. Voluntary organizations in this field—the Committee for Economic Development, the Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturers Association—as well as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the United Mine Workers, the Teamsters—all lay stress upon deficiencies, shortcomings, and weaknesses, rather than opportunities. Negativism is a poor environment in which to develop leaders.

All current analyses seem to be dominated by two concepts which have come to fascinate men’s minds during the first half of the twentieth century—planning and security. These two words, neither of which is closely defined, have become the watchwords of this generation. In the dictatorships—black, brown, and red—“Plan” was the key; in this respect, the democratic welfare state flattered the opposition by imitation. Plans in the democracies have been neither so precise nor grandiose, but the root idea is there.

So far as humanists and generalists are concerned, planning means very little, the security is almost a contradiction in terms when applied to them. A plan can allocate resources: money, materials, and unskilled, semiskilled, and, to a moderate extent, skilled technical manpower. In planning it is possible, moreover, to make
some projections regarding future needs.

Experience has shown those calculations to be extremely crude. This should not be surprising, for it is no exaggeration to say that ours is a revolutionary age outside the political world far more than in that relatively restricted sphere. The enormous growth of government in all countries and at all levels does not affect the validity of that statement. Since World War II, for example, agriculture has changed so rapidly and drastically as to have upset all calculations. Better seeds, better fertilizers, better machines, and better management have produced astounding results. Yet we see these things, not in terms of triumph, but as problems. The bulging surpluses for which government assumes responsibility clearly show that the presumptions upon which the farm program was founded were wide of the mark. It is not long since there was acute concern because young people were leaving the farms for the cities; now the problem seems to be how to prepare them and induce them to do that very thing. The whole temper in dealing with the most astounding victories over hunger in the entire history of the human race is negative and defensive—the antithesis of a sound environment in which to develop leadership.

Industrial planning is complicated by the development of automation. The new word means the industrial revolution raised to the nth power. All estimates of the manpower of many kinds necessary to industry have been subjected to a sharp revision, and present projections bid fair to become obsolete within a very short time; yet the calculators and the servomechanisms are in their infancy.

It seems reasonably clear that, in a free society, planning can be relied upon almost in inverse ratio to development. It is easier to plan for a static or slowly expanding, rather than an explosively dynamic, society. Where science and technology, research and development are pressed, successive "break-throughs" make earlier calculations seem absurd. But so, also, do external events. Just before the outbreak of the Korean conflict, the government of the United States issued statistics which indicated surpluses—of all things!—of teachers and engineers. Within months the projections relative to engineers were shown to be wildly inaccurate; those relative to teachers almost equally so, though at a slower
rate. Changes in working habits also make estimates go wrong; it now takes three nurses to do what it was quite customary for one, or at most two, to do only a few short years ago. The advent of prepaid hospital plans, the burgeoning of health and accident insurances of many kinds have had an additional impact. Every estimate of the planners was made obsolete by social changes as well as by science.

The fact of error in planning is very easy to establish and sometimes relatively easy to explain, at least in part. But it has yet to be realized and appreciated that our two watchwords are always in tension, and often in contradiction. If security is essential, if hazard is to be reduced to a minimum, if even the marginal worker—at whatever level—is to be protected in the specific job he holds, planning cannot be bold, for boldness and security do not go together.

This fact goes far to explain many of our difficulties. The full-crew law retarded essential change in the railroads; security hampered progress and ultimately defeated itself. The teachers' requirements, restrictive practices under the guise of standards, assured us of a shortage of teachers in the name of security. During the depression, engineers, chemists, and many others sought to have government control and enforce licensure—again, “standards” covered a drive for security. The whole apprentice system has broken down; labor sought scarcity as a guarantee of security. The pressure for a shorter working week was only in part resistance to being overworked. The demand for overtime is evidence enough. It was a “spread the work” device and created so much “leisure” as to make that into a new “problem.” Early and compulsory retirement and dozens of other devices and practices were launched in the name of security, until old age itself has become a “problem,” for which we need a “plan.”

But there are significant areas within our society for which planning is impossible and where security is unwise. Who can tell us, and by what powers of divination, how many poets we “need” or how many we could “absorb”? On an efficiency basis, the answer is clearly none. As Archibald MacLeish remarked, “Homer has already sung.” A vast wealth of poetic literature is lying virtually unused. Some of it has intense beauty, extraordinary insight; it
matches thought with cadence in a way to enhance both. If planning is to supply “felt needs,” it is clear that millions feel no need, and, so far as reading or listening is concerned, there is already plenty of poetry for every man’s lifetime.

It seems perfectly evident that if we are to have poets, it must be upon some basis other than public need or utility. It is part of the record of our society that poets are not always appreciated in their own day and generation. As with other artists, some achieve fame and rich rewards, material and immaterial, during their lifetime. But the general rule runs the other way. Should we plan on producing poets for our unborn generations? Any planner would denounce that proposition as arrant nonsense.

Even assuming utility of poets from a social point of view, how train them, and in what numbers relative to the population? Here we run into a difficulty which even the totalitarians with their tight controls have so far found insuperable. It is possible to make some identification of some sorts of talent at a reasonably early age. All the qualifications in that sentence are important. For no one knows how many men have been lost to professions for which they had substantial talents because they developed slowly, were “late bloomers,” and so were not chosen at eleven or twelve to get the education they could have used. Under most systems of education it is at those ages that the sheep are divided from the goats. What skills have been lost by faulty choices we cannot know. At the other end of the scale all who have been engaged in education are familiar with the talented boy or girl who never matures, whose precocity never fulfills its promise. What social pressures, physical weakness, moral deficiency, or any one or a combination of a number of other shortcomings halted development we may know without being able to overcome, or we may never know.

Where there are ability and will and resources, skills may be developed. A man can be trained as a fairly good engineer, at some level, by the expenditure of time and effort. He may make only a fair draftsman, or a satisfactory calculator, or succeed in routine design as a “handbook engineer.” Or he may have imagination in addition to skill and knowledge and do wonderful things. We know that under Soviet rule many people are directed or
"guided" into occupations they did not select; many others are trained in vocations, more or less voluntarily entered upon, yet they would like to change. Having once been channeled, however, they may not escape over the banks of the stream carrying them onward.

But I never heard of making a poet by training alone. The poetic equivalent of the engineering draftsman is a failure. More training may polish his technique; but if he has nothing to say, no emotional perceptions of a unique kind, skill as a rhymester will still make him no poet. Not all the dictators in the world could order a man, or train a man, to create poetry.

These considerations lead to an absolutely fundamental conclusion which must be accepted by all who would plan our manpower: the only justification for a poet is the poet himself. Utility cannot supply a test. Self-development, self-expression are either valid within themselves, or we should tolerate no poets. For some develop slowly; others achieve recognition slowly. Robert Frost once remarked in my hearing on the instability of his economic status during his first fifty years.

If the poet cannot be manufactured by training or compelled to produce by ukase, and if his gifts, however great, may not be properly recognized, what of security? On the negative side, the answer is easy. The planners may deny him the right of publication. Dr. Zhivago could not be published in the Soviet empire; the manuscript had to be smuggled out. His living may be curtailed; Pasternak was denied the fiscal rewards of the Nobel Prize, and probably got little of the royalties earned abroad by his novel. He may be inhibited and stifled—killed, for that matter. But nothing short of death can extinguish the creative spark; the true poet has a compulsion to utter his thoughts, though they be lost in the wind. As nothing in planning, or pressure, or even incentives can produce a positive result from a poetic craftsman who has nothing to say, so none of those things can completely silence one who has much to say.

One fact is very clear. Even the Soviets have had to recognize some of these things as facts of life. As I started to write this paper, one of my first inquiries was how a man became a poet in Russia. It transpired that the word "totalitarian," as so many other words
to which we customarily flee—from fatigue with precision—is grossly inaccurate. The inference carried by the word is false. There are vast reaches of life which, although affected, are not controlled even in a dictatorship. If a man wants to be a poet, he may become one. The hazards and difficulties may be severe, but the element of voluntarism remains.

The economy is "planned," but many aspects of experience outside production and exchange are not capable of such close governance. Surely there is not a quota of circus performers, even in Russia; clearly such people are not assigned certain feats to exhibit in the public arena. The element of voluntarism is high in such an area; and, significantly, performance is brilliant.

I have written at some length of poets, but only as an example of all the arts—and, for that matter, the humanities. In thinking about developing leadership for the next generation, those whose predilection is to seek a "plan" will do well to remember that for poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists, actors, painters, sculptors, musicians, historians, philosophers, critics—and all the others who make up the humanistic army—no quotas, no selective service, can achieve a useful end.

Those who would devote their lives to any aspects of the humanities must launch themselves upon their careers by reason of an inner urge. They must have that sense of a call—a vocation—without which no one would face the inescapable hazards. We are aware of and accept the chances taken by the entrepreneur who launches a new business. We are acutely sensitive to the danger of unemployment and have hedged it about with insurances of one kind or another. We too often forget the risk run by a research scientist, and the element of luck in success or failure. Hundreds of men and women may be searching for an effective vaccine and fail to find it while one, whose intellectual gifts, education, and laboratory equipment are no better, hits upon the precise combination which achieves the results so many others sought. A large element of luck—or happenstance, if the word "luck" is offensive—permeates every aspect of life. Nor all the power, nor wealth of the state can alter that stubborn fact.

There is all too little awareness of the innate hazards that are inseparable from the humanities as distinguished from the sciences.
The outlet for them is both a limited and a sophisticated market. Let the planners remember at every step of the way that the more other aspects of life are directed, regulated, and controlled, the more the outlet for humanistic talents tends to shrink. For the market is a voluntary market, and when voluntarism is replaced in any degree by compulsion and control, the loss extends to the receptivity of the public. Whatever pressure is put upon the humanist to conform—for instance, to such as Stalin's dogmas about art and music—the less his crippled work becomes acceptable.

It will be insisted by those who would direct effort more completely that the social hazards are not so marked in a democracy as they are in Russia. That is true; none the less, they may be very severe indeed. Some committees of the Congress in the exercise of their investigative functions have impaired a man's status as an artist for political reasons. Sometimes they have triggered social pressures of a disastrous kind: the blacklisting of writers, producers, and actors in Hollywood is a case in point. Speakers on the floor of the Senate and House of Representatives, under the shield of privilege, have done incalculable harm to men who had no like forum to defend themselves and no right of cross-examination, much less opportunity to produce witnesses in their own defense.

This is an exceedingly sensitive matter for the artist of whatever sort and for the humanist. With all their great contributions to our civilization, which must not be discounted in the least, the scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and production experts are, as specialists, in an essentially neutral position politically. If that were not true, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics could not have made the giant technological and industrial strides that have characterized its spectacular career over the last forty years. The humanist, on the other hand, has as the heart of his enterprise human values. Inevitably, by the very nature of his commitment and the character of his craft, he must deal with ideas which are politically sensitive. He is guided by values politically dangerous in a planned society. He is not “necessary” to the “giant leap forward”; he is not essential to the economic supremacy to which the Soviets aspire. By the very nature of his work he is expendable, in the sense that even a manual laborer—in a society short of hands—is not.
Whenever, and to whatever degree, a democratic society undertakes manpower planning, the vulnerability of those who deal with ideas is by that measure increased. This truth is partially concealed from us by the unfortunate habit of speaking of free enterprise only as an economic manifestation. Far more significant for the future of democracy is free enterprise of the mind. Vastly more important than economic liberty is freedom to choose voluntarily what one wishes to do, not only for a living, but for a life. Until free enterprise is conceived in these terms—so much broader than the economic—the humanities will suffer, not alone in economic rewards, but in popular estimation, in dignity, in the kinds of distinction which are often more important than the economic security upon which so much stress is laid.

I have been writing of the health, perhaps the survival, of the arts and the humanities. What of leadership? This mysterious quality is not the result of formal training; it is not the fruit of economic reward. If we have many practitioners of the arts, and many scholars devoted to the humanities, the leaders will emerge. Partly it will be the consequence of innate traits; and the characteristics which produce this magic result will be as various as the individuals themselves. To some extent, it will result from environment; there are public moods hospitable to leadership, and others which make it vastly more difficult.

To some degree, it will arise from events. The kind of leader appropriate to one set of external circumstances may find no opportunity for his special brand of leadership in another situation. This is not a counsel of defeat or despair. On the contrary, man is a biological fact. That means, explicitly, that he grows—and decays. Human chemistry is so infinitely complex that the determination of what accelerates and what retards growth is only dimly perceived as yet. We know that growth is not usually steady; it occurs in successive rushes and pauses. The timing of one phase or the other is governed by factors so obscure that we have only the foggiest ideas about them. What is true of all men is peculiarly true of leaders: they grow; they appear; they are supplanted.

It is well in a discussion of leadership to remember that we are governed—whether in a democracy or a dictatorship—by
amateurs, who may be regarded as humanists from some points of view, and as generalists par excellence. They are humanists in the sense that they deal with the human situation. In a characteristically provocative essay Lindsay Rogers has quoted Catherine the Great: “You philosophers are lucky men. You write on paper, and paper is patient. Unfortunate empress that I am, I write on the susceptible skins of human beings.” They are generalists because the reach of government has now extended so far that no one can be expert in all its phases, or, indeed, in any considerable portion of them.

Those who govern are amateurs in yet another sense. No training course, no education of a formal kind introduces the novice to the art of government. Indeed, very few books are helpful to the practitioner of politics. In this respect, politics is something like teaching: it is an art. It is, therefore, a reflection of the personality of the practitioner. What is amazingly successful for one man is the road to total failure for another. Some work wonders with speech, others with silence; each is astonishingly effective by his own method. Neither could conceivably copy the other successfully.

Moreover, there is no straight road into government. Indeed, few men—very few—start out to be politicians or deliberately plan to make politics their career. There are exceptions, but the usual thing is to get drawn into political action as an avocation and gradually make the transition to full-time absorption. The politician is the perfect example of learning by doing. He can read everything from Plato to Machiavelli to Rexford Tugwell. Reading may give him insights; it may help shape his philosophy of government; but he will get precious few tips on operating.

More than in most other professions, the element of chance plays an extraordinary part in his career. Illustrations are so abundant that every reader can think of his own. The dark horse who comes to the presidency, as did Polk, is one instance. I have seen a man prepare himself to be a senator by entering upon a succession of offices leading to that goal. He was frustrated once because a governor unexpectedly resigned; the lieutenant-governor succeeded and so got in line ahead of the “logical” candidate. So he stood in line, more or less patiently, while the man he
planned to succeed refused to retire at a “respectable” age, and seemed destined to live forever. With each passing day, the waiting candidate’s chances of ever achieving his cherished goal shrank. Any one of a whole series of accidents could have advanced him, as another series blocked his promotion.

When this element of chance is multiplied by the number of men in the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Cabinet, the Presidency—plus all those who sought those offices—the role of chance is seen to be very great indeed. When all the state offices and municipal offices and those who sought them are added, it is astronomical.

The element of chance continues to play a large part even when the politician attains office. Both Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt could easily have been classed as isolationists at the moment they took office. Yet both were forced by events to play great roles in international affairs. Some statesmen have a gift for leading their nation in war. But it has been observed many times that the man who can summon a people to battle and get them to accept all its hardships is often the wrong man to make peace and set policy in peaceful times. The changes on circumstance could be rung indefinitely, and any knowledge of history would be convincing that a planned career in politics is rare, and one that follows the plan with any faithfulness or consistency rarer still.

There are things to do appropriate for the youth who thinks of entering politics. He can read widely in history, in philosophy, and in literature. By that means, he can gain some perspective upon current events; they will lose their novelty, if not their newness. He will find analogues in the past; he will enter vicariously into the experiences of other times, other people, both real and imaginary. He will extend his memory, so to speak; he will stretch his imagination. He will observe that the moral issues remain much the same through the ages; while the circumstances of man alter at astounding speed, his nature changes ever so slowly. He will find relevant answers to present dilemmas in past experience. He will study economics and observe the competing theories. He will also see how seldom practice conforms with any of them.

In sum, he will seek a liberal education and then shape his own
life as opportunities and circumstances make possible. Of all occupa-
tions for which planning is irrelevant, politics is among the first. How many politicians do we need? Who will set the quota? What will he do when he is out of office? To these and many other questions, there is no simple answer.

Humanists and generalists take years to produce and bring to ripe maturity. To reach this maturity requires personal decision, personal commitment, and readiness to face all the hazards peculiar to the opportunities.