

BEHIND THE LINES

by Gregory Curtis

Five days a week, nine months a year, dutiful parents roust their children, see that they're dressed, pack lunches, round up books, make sure various cards, reports, permission slips, and excuses are signed, serve breakfast, pile the kids into the car or send them off to the bus stop or out the door to answer the honk of a car pool or set them out walking to . . . what? The common perception is that our schools and colleges are a shambles from which students emerge older but no wiser, still unable to read or compute. The news is a steady litany of declining test scores, tales of violence in the classroom, and headlines like the one in the *Houston Post* early this June: 21 PERCENT OF TEXANS ILLITERATE, STUDY CLAIMS. And for the first time in years education is an important political issue. Mark White wants his teacher pay raises with new taxes to pay for them. Ronald Reagan is weighing in with his call for a return to "basics" in education. His view is bolstered by the recent report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, whose alarm at its dismal findings on the state of our schools is indicated by the report's title: *A Nation at Risk*.

Who or what is to blame? There is no shortage of possible culprits. Students, at least those who care, blame teachers. Teachers blame parents for lack of support and for sending their monstrously unruly offspring into the classroom. Parents, particularly white parents, blame the federal government for imposing busing. The federal government blames local school administrators for not fulfilling their responsibilities under the law. Local school administrators blame local politicians for not budgeting enough money to build good schools and hire good teachers. And local politicians blame other local politicians of the opposing party. Each person in this vicious circle of finger-pointing has a case, but it is time to break the circle and assess the fundamental blame.

One man who has worked relentlessly for years to do just that is Richard Mitchell. He teaches at Glassboro State College in New Jersey, but eight times a year he writes, prints, and publishes the *Underground Grammarian*, an acerbic, combative, and fearless broadside that lies squarely in the tradition of Tom Paine. The focus of Mitchell's contempt and the butt of his jokes are those he calls the educationists. They are professors of education, school administrators, government bureaucrats, and academic researchers whose sin, worse even than the wretched prose of their journals and reports, is believing that the goal of education is not to convey knowledge but to integrate the individual into a particular kind of society. As a result, driver's education assumes the same importance as mathematics, and our schools are increasingly weighed down with noncourses like the Two-Career Couple, which was offered for credit at SMU last spring.

In the *Grammarian* published in April, Mitchell begins with what has become the most-quoted line from *A Nation at Risk*: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." After noting the sentence's lunky English—how can you impose a performance that exists?—he unleashes a full blitz:

But there is no whisper in this report of the bums who must be thrown out if anything is to change. The

sad state of the schools, which the commission aptly characterizes by its allusion to courses in bachelor living, is remarkably *less* sad for those vast legions of people who make livings from the fact that the deepest principles of American educationism do not merely *permit* but actually *require* courses in bachelor living, and other like travesties beyond counting. Such things were not smuggled in through the boiler-room in the dead of night. Commissions, committees, boards of "education," all approved them. Professors of education, who concocted such courses, commended them, and designed programs for "teaching" the "teaching" of them. Legislatures enacted them. Supervisors, developers, co-ordinators, facilitators, hastened into the service of every new empire and began at once the preparation of grant proposals for more of the same . . . Those bachelor living courses and all their siblings are not nasty growths on an otherwise healthy organism. They are the heart of the matter, and they will never go away unless the ideology that spawns them is specifically repudiated.

There is nothing even close to such a repudiation in the report.

Such a repudiation would have to begin at the top of the educational system. But in the catalog for the University of Texas at Austin for the coming fall there are such courses as Survey of Public Relations, Television Criticism, Briefings and Sales Presentations, Family Life Education, Human Sexuality (with its lugubrious text), Science Fiction, and a composition course, now mercifully being phased out but still taken by hundreds of sophomores each year, titled Rhetoric of Popular Culture. Its text includes advertisements, newspaper stories, selections from best-sellers, and magazine stories, including—we beg forgiveness—one from *Texas Monthly*. These courses are an immense lost opportunity. What in the Survey of Public Relations is going to serve a student, even a business student, as well as a course in history, physics, French, or, what the hell, beginning piano? Wouldn't those hundreds of sophomores reading ads in Rhetoric of Popular Culture be better off reading "The Eve of St. Agnes," even if they hate it? I know that for kids whose brains have been plugged into Sony Walkmans since puberty, ads are more accessible, more familiar, and initially more interesting than Keats. But that's no reason not to teach his poetry. That's the reason *to* teach his poetry. Anything less is a concession to ignorance, a failure of will.

I asked one professor whether a student who had been allowed to choose a course in science fiction over a course in Chaucer wouldn't have been cheating himself, even assuming he never read a word of Chaucer again after the class. "Well," he said, "I can't say. That's a moral and political judgment." Then he went on, "Who gets to decide what the dominant culture is? There are all sorts of class questions involved in that." This stance, that it is impossible to make choices between classics and pulp, even that it is somehow immoral to make such a choice, was widely echoed by other faculty members. It is wrong for society to decide what its members may or may not read. That's a simple matter of freedom of personal choice. But that's not teaching. Teaching is making choices, assigning relative values, insisting on the best. If professors cannot make judg-

ments, how are they to teach their students to make them?

The dishonesty of this vacillation is apparent in the proliferation of courses whose existence depends upon a political stance determined by either gender or race. To continue for the moment to pick on the department of English, which is typical in this regard, a student this fall will be offered the following courses: Mexican American Rhetoric and Composition, Introduction to Black Literature, Introduction to Women in Literature, Mexican Folklore, Women and Scandinavian Literature, Mexican American Life and Literature of the Southwest, Introduction to Women's Studies in Humanities, Mothers and Daughters in Literature, Contemporary Black Writing, and Race, Class, and Gender. Where are the equally stimulating and significant courses that could be given on the soldier in literature or the professional man or the minister or, for that matter, the teacher? The answer is that the first group of courses are sails put up to catch prevailing political winds, just as the second set would catch winds from a different quadrant. But the winds should not have been tested in the first place. This is an example of what Richard Mitchell meant when he said American schools are no longer intended to educate but to adapt students to a certain kind of society, and thus they not only permit but *need* courses like bachelor living and others narrowly defined by race and gender. And if these are allowed, then what rational argument could oppose the teaching of courses of ever-narrowing interests based on vastly different political beliefs—Free Enterprise in Literature, Pronuclear Energy Rhetoric and Composition, Creation Science Studies?

There is a way for the schools to be saved. Two things need to happen. One will cost money and one will save money. For now Mark White should get his teacher pay raises and the taxes to finance them. In fact, teachers ought to be paid quite a bit more than they're making now—\$50,000 for the best in high school and grade school and more than that for college. Why not? That alone would attract the intelligent and ambitious to teaching and make our schools the envy of the world. But this money should be offered as one part of a bargain. Educators need to be made to knuckle down and teach what needs to be taught in language, mathematics, science, and humanities. This would result in the elimination of the phony baloney courses as well as their teachers, administrators, textbooks, and multimedia visual aids, providing the \$50,000 for those who deserve it. Otherwise we will continue to fashion a generation that thinks literature is a course in science fiction, psychology a course in human sexuality, philosophy a course in family life education. And that generation, defiant in their ignorance, will never understand why their children should have to learn anything at all. ♣