R E P O R T  R E S U M E S

ED 021 011 UD 006 376

EDUCATION'S STAKE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, A PERSONAL TESTIMONIAL AND PLAN TO COLLEAGUES.

BY- BILLINGS, THOMAS A.

PUB DATE MAY 66

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.24 4P.

DESCRIPTORS- *CIVIL RIGHTS, *EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY, GOVERNMENT ROLE, DEMOCRATIC VALUES,

AS A MAJOR SOCIAL INSTITUTION THE SCHOOLS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ACCEPTING THE "MONUMENTAL" CHALLENGES FOSED BY THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. IN RECENT YEARS TRENDS WITHIN THE WHITE ESTABLISHMENT HAVE UNDERMINED HUMAN DIGNITY AND EQUALITY. FOR EXAMPLE, ESTABLISHMENT-CONTROLLED ENFORCEMENT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL HAS MADE IT ONLY A SYMBOL OF WHAT IS HOPED FOR IN ACTUALITY. AMERICAN EDUCATION MUST PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH KNOWLEDGE AS THE NECESSARY PRECONDITION FOR A DIGNIFIED HUMAN EXISTENCE. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 47, NUMBER 9, MAY 1966. (NH)

A Personal Testimonial and a Plea to Colleagues

# Education's Stake in the Civil Rights Movement

By THOMAS A. BILLINGS

IN July, 1963, I was asked by the local leadership of the Congress of Racial Equality in the city of Sacramento to participate in a "freedom march." I had planned a salmon fishing trip on the Mendocino coast that weekend, but it was no great trouble to cancel it. I assured the CORE leaders that I would march with them.

The march began, and for three miles some 400 of us, black and white, old and young, walked along in the hot summer sun carrying our various banners: "CORE IS HERE," "FREEDOM NOW!," and "THAT THIS NATION MIGHT HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM!" As we marched, some in the group sang the old Quaker hymn, "We Shall Overcome." Children walked along beside their parents; husbands walked along beside their wives.

The march received considerable local press coverage, and the evening edition of the *Sacramento Bee* featured a picture of us on the front page, along with a mildly supportive news item. The following Monday my summer students asked me a significant question: "Why were *you* in the march?" I think my answer was important, important because I was caught off guard with no prepared comment. I was forced to be either honest or a fool—not really such a bad place to be. I remember my answer well. "First," I told them, "I suppose I marched because my friends in the movement asked me to march. Secondly, my sympathies are entirely with the civil rights movement. But more important than either of these is the fact that, were it suddenly Judgment Day, I can't think of any place I'd rather be than walking, under a hot summer sun, along with my neighbors, standing for the right things and carrying the right banner. It may be a silly thing to do, but I can think of sillier things."

The answer still holds. I have since been involved in other marches, picket lines, sit-ins, and demonstrations. Though many of our gestures were of no immediate significance, they did, I believe, help create a climate of opinion which, if America is to survive, is absolutely necessary. Let my try to explain why I feel this way.

On August 6, 1945, an era of human history came to an end. It was a dreadful moment—horrifying for the existing generation, darkly ominous for all subsequent generations. Clifton Fadiman described that moment this way:

> On August 6, 1945, the planet, with the United States in the lead, passed half unconsciously into an era of despair. With a noiseless flash over Hiroshima *homo sapiens* issued the first dramatic announcement of his inability to make a biological success of himself. The next few years or decades seem almost certain to prove years or decades of planetary wars that will rend and crack and shiver the earth's thin skin, years of wholesale suicide, years that will paralyze the moral and religious sense of mankind. Civilized man—unless he decides to use his reason—will fall forward into a new and almost unimaginable barbarism. The time for the pessimist has come again. As our planet rolls slowly or rapidly in the direction of its own eclipse, men's minds will darken with it. Losing their faith in themselves, they will look into each other's eyes with hatred, and every man's hand will rest lightly upon his dagger. Even the most sensitive will find it difficult, as the lamps go out, to draw comfort from the words of those who believe in progress. Decline and fall will be the order of the day and night. New philosophies of violence and despair will be contrived, and old nihilisms be exhumed . . . in an age which is getting ready to renounce compromise, kindness, and Christianity.

After August 6, 1945, it was impossible to believe with Dr. Coúe that "day by day, in every way, we are getting better and better." All naive hope about human progress vanished in a mushroom cloud over Nagasaki. Twenty-one years later, half a dozen nations have geared their major efforts to producing these ultimate instruments of disaster. Some ten years ago the United States alone had sufficient nuclear power to over-kill

MR. BILLINGS *(Chi 1227) is director of a U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity project for disadvantaged youth at Western Washington State College, Bellingham.*

every one on the planet, while Russia talked of fashioning the "ultimate weapon" and China complained that nobody would let her in on the fire. During the 1964 presidential campaign our two leading candidates entertained us with charges and countercharges concerning the proper *credentials* for detonating a nuclear war.

Violence seems inevitable. One of the leading "white liberals" recently betrayed the cynical superficiality of most of his ilk when he was asked to comment on the increased number of civil rights demonstrations occurring across the nation. After assuring us of his sympathy with the movement and his concern for the Negro, our white liberal friend went on to suggest that Negroes must "take it slow"—that they risk alienating "white liberal" support by their "aggressive" demonstrations. (By "aggressive" he could only have meant "frequent"; there had been no aggression at the time.) He explained that "white liberals are sympathetic" to Negro demands for justice, but when "demonstrations reach a point where they *inconvenience* whites, much white support and sympathy will be lost." In effect, he was saying that when Negro demands for justice reach the point where they can no longer be quietly ignored and denied, white support will vanish. If he is correct about this, Mr. Fadiman's prophesy must certainly come true —"each man's hand will rest lightly upon his dagger."

The civil rights movement is no more than an attempt to recall government to its neglected duties, i.e., safeguarding guaranteed rights for all American citizens. The movement commenced in earnest with the Supreme Court decision which held segregated schools to be unconstitutional. All eyes turned on Little Rock, as Governor Faubus challenged the right of the Supreme Court to determine the school laws of Arkansas. Faubus lost, but only after people all over the world saw how incredibly far the American promise had fallen. People in Leopoldville and Cairo and Lima and Peiping and Magnitogorsk looked on in amazement as white mothers and fathers fought with black mothers and fathers in the streets of Little Rock over the education of children; they watched as the President was forced to send troops into Little Rock so that a black child could study from a book, in a quiet room, with ample heat and light, assisted by a competent teacher. It was a bitter episode in American history, to be followed by others still more bitter.

Meanwhile, the farm has vanished and automation continues to displace workmen; the human slag heap at the edge of American affluence deepens and (when war does not consume manpower) extends its hold to a fourth of our people. Confronted by our suicidal nuclear arms race, paralyzed by posturing politicians, gnawed by a sense of frustration and hopelessness, this fourth of our people are in an ugly mood—a mood which threatens to become uglier.

I would like to explain the connection between the civil rights movement and the ugly mood now growing in our big city slums and ghettoes and show how the American schools are involved in and instrumental to the success of the movement and crucial in changing this mood.

Americans have been criminally negligent about their own noble experiment. Each child born into our society was to have life, liberty, and an opportunity for happiness. These were rights he received, by virtue of birth, from his Creator, not from the government. Government had *one* responsibility: to *safeguard* these birthrights. If government failed in that, an outraged people could dismember it. In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln wrote: "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional rights of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it." Another president was to write: "Too long denial of guaranteed right is sure to lead to revolution—bloody revolution, where suffering must fall upon the innocent as well as the guilty."

During the summer of 1964, and again in August of 1965, in New York City and in Rochester and in Chicago and Buffalo and Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the ugly mood in our big city slums burst into violence. Though the violence *may* have been triggered by professional agitators, the mood which allowed the violence was not the work of professional agitators. At the margin of our affluence, that mood had been growing for decades, the natural spawn of frustration, hunger, injustice; the bastard offspring of neglect. Unfortunately but predictably, the angers and frustrations which undergird the civil rights movement are now mainly irrational. They are the massive residues of an ancient hurt, so long inflicted by the rich, so long endured by the poor (both black and white); there is only a remote possibility of redressing these ancient hurts short of massive violence. A time comes when a man, dying of multiple wounds, each unjustly suffered, feels compulsively irrational toward those white-frocked medics of the social order who offer him tincture of merthiolate or half a dozen aspirin. The civil rights bill passed by Congress amounts to little more.

The white Establishment utterly fails to compre-

hend the depth of the ancient hurt. The monumental silliness of the programs developed by the Establishment to begin a redress makes this all too clear. The mere passage of a civil rights bill isn't even an important beginning. This for two reasons: 1) The problem isn't essentially a political problem and it will not be solved politically. 2) The civil rights bill is but a *symbol* of what is hoped for in black and white reality; it will not, by its mere passage in Congress, insure a radical (and necessary) change in the social, political, economic, and judicial habits of a people. In short, the mere passage of a civil rights bill is meaningless unless it is followed by radical enforcement; and we have all seen how closely the enforcement agencies in this country are aligned with the white Establishment—frequently with the most jaded and recalcitrant wing of the Establishment.

Meanwhile, American industry had made it nearly impossible for persons to find employment unless they had, at least, a high school diploma. Though industry does much of its own training, it expects a reasonably well-educated person to begin with—a reasonable education is, indeed, a precondition of employment. Lacking that education, our young men and women are left to drift into that desperate army of the unemployed at the ragged edge of American society.

The American school finds itself, however reluctantly, at center stage: the single social agency whose mandate obligates it to cope with the problem. Governments—local, state, and federal—can *pay* for the problem (and they will, one way or another), but the school will have to work at *solving* it. If the American experiment is to continue, if the American promise is to be even partially realized, the American school, cooperating with our other social institutions, must accept the monumental challenge, and take whatever steps are necessary to provide the precondition of dignified human existence for all our people. That precondition of dignified human existence is *knowledge*.

Perhaps it cannot be done. Perhaps America, like ancient Greece and Rome, reached its zenith years ago and is now, as Toynbee and others have suggested, in a stage of advanced decay. Perhaps if we haven't become soft we've become calloused, and no longer have a sense of commitment to our ancient ideals. Or perhaps it isn't possible, for governments such as ours, to cope with the problems of automation and unemployment, bigotry and racial tension, poverty and frustration; perhaps a system of government such as ours breaks down when confronted by major domestic crises. There may be factors operating in our national life which are beyond the control of any of our social agencies. If so, of course, our national days are numbered. We can all see, I think, the handwriting on the wall; or at least those of us who have been involved in and around big city slums can see it.

If we are to survive as a people, it seems to me, there are half a dozen principles we must hold to with all our strength. They are not new principles; they are, in fact, very old. They served as the basis for the American experiment in living:

1. Every child is unique and irreplaceable.
2. Every child has a deed to the land, the fruits of the land, and the heritage of the past. These are his birthrights.
3. Our social institutions—home, church, and government—have a single purpose: to respect, nurture, and protect the development of every citizen. Our citizens are not born to serve our institutions; our institutions are organized to serve our citizens.
4. Every citizen is responsible for the elemental well-being of every other citizen. If one of thirty children is deprived, twenty-nine are deprived, and judgment will be brought against those responsible.
5. A child cannot participate in human life if knowledge is denied him. Without knowledge, he is condemned to animal servility.
6. The school, as the reservoir of knowledge, stands between the child as animal and the child as citizen. Violent, animal outbursts betray a failure of both the school and the people who support and control the school. The transfer of knowledge from school to child cannot be accomplished by a wave of the hand and an abracadabra; it requires time and effort and planning and finance. It cannot be accomplished, so far, in any other way. Since our way of life (if not our life) depends on massive new programs of education, any expenditure of time, effort, planning, and money is a reasonable expenditure.

Thirty years ago, in the depths of the Great Depression, there appeared what I think is one of the noblest expressions of American purpose ever written: *What Does America Mean?,* by schoolmaster Alexander Meiklejohn. It is somehow terribly significant that this book, which sold out one printing and has not been reprinted, is generally unavailable. In his last chapter, Meiklejohn, after discussing the American spirit, asks: "What shall we do?" The question is as relevant today as it was in 1935. And his sentences are as relevant now as they were then:

> The course of our national life has not been a steady, triumphant, uninterrupted march toward freedom. On the road marked by ideals.

men and nations travel in both directions. Liberty is loved by us, not as a form in which we always act, but as a principle in accordance with which we know, in our best moments, we ought to act . . . it is not at all certain that, in the America of today, the cause of democracy and liberty is winning. Men and nations do destroy what they care for. And it is quite possible that that fate is waiting for us. We may be known in history as a nation which, having seen something great to do, was yet too confused in mind, too weak in spirit, to hold fast to the insight. I do not think that will be the case. Shall we, confused and bedeviled by external opportunities, desert our own colors? Or shall we play our proper part in the human struggle for sensitive and intelligent living? That is the issue, not yet decided. Either we shall be very great or we shall be pitifully mean and contemptible.

In an English-speaking democracy, every man and woman among us must know and delight in Shakespeare and the Bible. Every normal person must have some understanding of what Darwin and Galileo were doing. Music, drama, and the other arts must, at their highest levels, be made matters of common delight. All of us must study Plato and Augustine and Marx and Henry Adams and Emily Dickinson. The permanent and recurring problems of a social order must be, for each member of society, objects of vital and lively study. The life of the community must be shot through with the activities of inquiry, of taste, of creation, of interpretation. The sharing of the most significant human experiences must bring us all together into spiritual unity. We must become a genuine fraternity of learning, afraid of nothing, eager to understand everything. I am not saying the task will be easily or completely done. But, by proper teaching in a proper social order, every normal and mature person in America can be so developed that he will interpret and fashion his life on the basis of his participation in a society so conceived. In a word, if we try, we can make a democracy—a society in which every member is in process of education for the highest forms of behavior of which he is capable. To that attempt we are committed.

Nothing is more clear than that, taken as a whole, the present attempt of our schools and colleges to establish our young people in the ways of sensitiveness and intelligence is a ludicrous failure. Our boys and girls do not thrill with enthusiasm for the intellectual and esthetic and volitional adventure of the race. They are not made ready to play their part in the life of a democracy. And we must find ways of making them ready. In the doing of that task we have hardly yet begun. We have built many schoolhouses but we do not know, as yet, what or how to teach.

> We are, I think, just beginning to see, here in America, what the possibilities of a national planning of . . . education really are. Teachers . . . must be our most gifted, most enthusiastic interpreters of American life. We have upon our hands the task of making a national mind, a national spirit within which each individual mind and spirit shall find its own peculiar work to do in proper relation to the whole. No single enterprise is more crucial than this as we plan for the making of the democracy to which we are as a nation pledged.

As an American citizen, as the father of children, as a man who wants desperately to be honestly responsive to the age, and as a schoolmaster, I want to believe that the American people care about the challenge before them. Two summers ago there was a march on Washington, a part of the civil rights movement. The Reverend Martin Luther King stood on the capitol grounds and told us about his dream. He was not ashamed to confess, before the entire world, that he had a dream about this troubled country of ours. It was a magnificent dream. It involved elemental human dignity, responsibility, and freedom. Out of the depths of his troubled heart, he told America what a black man dreams of for his people. My dear colleagues, we can make at least a part of that dream come true. Consistent with our circumstances, consistent with our spirit, let's accept the responsibility.

---

Commenting under the heading "The Late, Great Society," *New Republic* editors said in the April 9 issue:

> With handshakes all around, the House of Representatives last week approved what may be the only important Great Society legislation of the year: appropriations of $12 million for rent subsidies to poor families, and $10 million for a National Teacher Corps to improve instruction in the poorest schools. Both programs had been authorized by Congress in 1965 and then were cut off without a penny. To allay congressional anxieties (Negroes infiltrating the suburbs, too much federal influence on schools), the Administration reduced its already modest request for rent funds by two-thirds and wrote in a local "veto" provision; the Teacher Corps appropriation was cut by 30 per cent. . . .
>
> So now, if the Senate concurs, 20,000 of four million ill-housed urban families will get rent supplements (the low-income tenant paying 25 per cent of his income for a fair rent, and the government making up the difference), and 3,000 Corps teachers will be spread thinly among 10 million ill-taught children. By any standard—$1 billion a month for Viet Nam, to name one—it is small potatoes. . . . .