



1-1-2012

The Federal Role in Education: A Personal Perspective

John Brademas

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp>

Recommended Citation

John Brademas, *The Federal Role in Education: A Personal Perspective*, 1 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 431 (1985).
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol1/iss4/3>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact lawdr@nd.edu.

THE FEDERAL ROLE IN EDUCATION: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

JOHN BRADEMAS*

Over the past few years, there has been a dramatic resurgence of interest in education in this country. We have, metaphorically at least, been inundated by studies and reports that call for reforms in our elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. In this context, I want to comment on the role of the Federal government in education and the posture of the Reagan Administration in meeting the nation's educational challenges.

My perspective derives from three sources. The first is personal. For nearly half a century my Hoosier mother was a teacher in the public schools of Indiana and Michigan, and her parents were teachers, too. My Greek immigrant father used to say, "John, I'll probably not leave much money to my children, but I will leave you all a first-class education"—and he did. I was privileged to study at Harvard and Oxford, and among my two brothers, sister and me, there are nine earned degrees.

Then, as a member of Congress for 22 years and of the Committee on Education and Labor, I had the privilege of helping write most of the laws enacted between 1959 and 1981 to assist schools and libraries, colleges and universities, and other institutions of learning and culture in our country.

Finally, as President of New York University since 1981, I naturally continue to be preoccupied with education and Federal policy toward it.

The question of the role of the national government in education is, of course, not new. The government has been involved in education in one way or another for a century and a half with Federal initiatives adapting to the changing needs of a growing nation. The benchmarks of that evolution are well-known. As early as 1787, Congress, through the Northwest Ordinance, reserved land for public schools. Nearly a century later, the Morrill Act made possible the establishment of land grant colleges and universities. The G.I.

* President, New York University; member of Congress from Indiana, 1959-1981.

Bill of World War II, the most sweeping Federal aid to education program ever enacted, afforded millions of returning veterans, including me, the means to go to college. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided Federal funds for improving the teaching of mathematics, science and foreign languages.

Each era has produced its own stimulus and rationale for the use of Federal tax dollars to help education. The movement toward land grant colleges in the 1860s took place in the context of America's entrance into the industrial age and the necessity to prepare students in the sciences, mechanical arts, agricultural and other skills essential to that time. The G.I. Bill arose from a sense of national obligation to our returning soldiers.

In 1958 the justification for an expanded Federal role in education came with the Soviet launching of Sputnik. With the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), a new Federal purpose in education—assistance to our national defense—was articulated. I entered Congress the year following enactment of the NDEA. As a newly elected Representative, I was determined to sit on the Committee on Education and Labor not only because issues that committee considered would have a major impact on the people I represented in northern Indiana, but also because I anticipated that the Federal government would be giving much more attention to education in the years ahead.

I. FOUR COMMITMENTS

Here briefly, during my years in Congress, is what we in Washington sought to accomplish. First, we made—and when I say “we”, I include presidents, senators and representatives of both parties—a commitment to having education be accessible to those likely to be excluded.

Obviously, I cite here the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which for the first time provided substantial federal funds to grade schools and high schools, with particular attention to the teaching of disadvantaged children. The financial fulcrum of that act was Title I (now Chapter 1) which helps school districts with large numbers of low-income children.

In addition, there were Head Start, the Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Upward Bound and other components of the War on Poverty. We also created vocational education and manpower training programs as well as a mea-

sure on which I labored long, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act.

To assure talented but needy young men and women a chance for a college education, presidents of both parties—Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter—as well as Democrats and Republicans in Congress, put in place—from the National Defense Education Act through a series of higher education laws—a fabric of grants, loans and work-study jobs.

We made a second commitment during my time in Washington—to assist our institutions of culture. The milestones on this path included the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities as well as programs to help public libraries and museums. I was proud to have been a champion of all these measures on Capitol Hill.

There was a third commitment—to strengthen international studies at our colleges and universities. Here I cite the International Education Act of 1966 and other efforts to encourage teaching and learning about the peoples and cultures of the rest of the world.

A fourth commitment was to research. Support from the national government has been crucial in enhancing our understanding of ourselves and our universe through, among other entities, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Education.

These then were the four commitments that guided and informed our actions as lawmakers for education.

II. THE REAGAN RECORD

Today I see disturbing signs that all these commitments are being eroded. Indeed, the Administration of Ronald Reagan is more hostile to American education than any Administration in the nation's history. Mr. Reagan has repeatedly attempted to weaken the role of the Federal government in support of education. His budgets have called for deep slashes in aid to schools, college and universities. His Secretary of Education, the highest ranking official in our government dealing with education, has made public statements contemptuous of the values of a college education. And the President has urged changes in our tax laws that would work great damage to public schools as well as colleges and universities, both public and private.

Ronald Reagan has never made a secret of his desire to reduce—indeed eliminate—the role of the Federal govern-

ment in education. Ten years ago, in a speech in Minnesota, Mr. Reagan advocated the abolition of the *Office* of Education in the then Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Former Governor Reagan said then, without qualification, that the Federal government "should not be involved in education."

As *President*, Mr. Reagan's legislative program for education has been concise: do away with the Department of Education; encourage prayer in public schools; enact tuition tax credits and family educational allowances to help middle and upper-income parents; offer vouchers to encourage students to attend private schools; and weaken Federal regulations, including those aimed at enforcing civil rights and improving opportunities for the handicapped and disadvantaged.

It is ironic that the National Commission on Excellence in Education, whose members were all appointed by President Reagan's first Secretary of Education, should have produced a report which does not even mention—let alone recommend—a single one of Mr. Reagan's proposals. Beyond this, nearly all of the reports on education of the last three years have explicitly urged some role for the Federal government in support of education.

The Reagan Administration has also pressed for massive cuts in most education budgets, including programs which help in teaching handicapped children and grants and loans to college and university students. Mr. Reagan has also called for consolidation of a number of elementary and secondary education programs into so-called block grants to states and local school systems, thereby abandoning the Federal responsibility to target these programs to specific needs. Just one example of an initiative that has suffered in this way is the Emergency School Aid Program to help schools desegregate.

Mr. Reagan *does* deserve credit for lifting the level of public awareness about education. Yet in his words of support for schools, he has not moved beyond public relations. He stresses stricter discipline in the classroom, more homework, better teaching, an end to drug abuse. He would raise the status of teachers by launching one into space. Despite all its rhetoric about the importance of education to our national life, the Reagan Administration is pursuing a course of action that is undermining the schools, colleges and universities of the United States.

These are strong words but justified.

A. *Higher Education Under Attack*

As a university president, I have been particularly distressed by the Reagan attack on Federal funds for higher education generally and on student financial aid in particular. These programs—Guaranteed Student Loans, College Work Study, Pell Grants—upon which hundreds of thousands of young Americans rely in order to go to college have been among the hardest hit by the Administration's budget cuts, dropping from \$10.8 billion in 1981 to \$7.9 billion in 1984, a decline in current dollars of more than 25 percent.

Following these steep reductions, the higher education budget Mr. Reagan first proposed for fiscal year 1986 called for a slash of 25 percent below the adjusted 1985 level. According to an American Council on Education analysis, here are some of the consequences of the original Reagan budget for fiscal year 1986:

Over 800,000 able but needy students from middle-income families would be dropped from eligibility for Pell Grants in academic year 1986-1987.

Almost one million current borrowers would be removed from the Guaranteed Student Loan program by capping eligibility—no matter how many children in the family—at adjusted gross family incomes of \$32,500.

About a dozen categorical programs with modest funding totaling nearly \$100 million, designed to strengthen academic quality, would be eliminated. These include all support for Federal aid to libraries and for international education. Support for facilities renovation and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education would be terminated.

B. *Graduate Education*

I have also been disturbed by the Administration's proposals in respect of research and education at the most advanced levels. I served recently on the National Commission on Student Financial Assistance and chaired the Graduate Education Subcommittee of the Commission. In December, 1983, this bipartisan Commission issued a report on graduate education which enjoyed the unanimous support of its twelve members. The report warned of signs of trouble in the nation's graduate capacities, including serious shortages in doctoral talent, obsolete laboratories and outdated library collections, and the potential loss of a generation of scholars in

certain fields in the humanities and social sciences. The Commission agreed that indispensable to excellence in graduate education was the support of the Federal government.

What has been the response of the Reagan Administration to our report, endorsed by a Commission appointed, one third each, by House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., Senate President Pro Tempore Strom Thurmond and President Reagan himself? The Reagan budget for fiscal 1986 calls for the elimination of all graduate education programs in the Department of Education. Moreover, as I write this essay, the Administration, in direct violation of the intent of Congress and certainly in opposition to the recommendation of the National Commission on Student Financial Assistance, is attempting to limit National Graduate Fellowships solely to persons whose family adjusted income is \$32,500 or less.

Taken together, the Reagan Administration's proposals for higher education would gravely weaken the capacity of the nation's institutions of higher learning to prepare scientists, scholars and leaders in every field of human knowledge necessary to the strength, survival and future of the American democracy. What are we to make of all this?

C. *Declaration of War on Independent Education*

The Administration's proposals pose a direct threat to independent institutions of higher education. In characterizing his education policy, I defer to the interpretation of President Reagan's first Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, in a *New York Times* article in April of 1985, Mr. Bell described the Administration's 1986 budget as an "assault on the nation's private colleges and universities." He pointed out that the Reagan proposals would cause the transfer of thousands of students from private to public institutions. The drop in enrollments would compel independent colleges and universities to raise tuition and thereby lose even more students.

Private institutions, heavily dependent on tuition for income, are especially endangered by the cuts in student aid. Twenty years ago, some 50 percent of the students in our colleges and universities attended independent ones; that figure has today dropped to less than half that. This is not Great Britain or Japan. This is the United States of America, the only country in the world with a major system of private higher education not under government control.

There is widespread agreement that independent colleges and universities are a hallmark of our American free-

doms. Indeed, I was present at the University of Notre Dame on May 17, 1981 when President Reagan declared, "If ever the great independent colleges and universities . . . give way to and are replaced by tax-supported institutions, the struggle to preserve academic freedom will have been lost." Unfortunately, the policies Mr. Reagan has pursued since that visit have been wholly at odds with the words he spoke at Notre Dame.

Clearly, Mr. Reagan strongly objects to the commitment that America has had for some time to ensure both access to a college education and choice of institutions to able but needy students. Mr. Reagan does not understand—or even seem to care—that by withdrawing help from students who most need it, he would move the United States toward the creation of a two-tier system of higher education, with independent universities for the rich, and state or municipal colleges for everyone else.

I am pleased that my former colleagues, members of Congress of *both* political parties, have sharply criticized Mr. Reagan's education policies. For example, the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Robert T. Stafford, Republican of Vermont, pronounced the proposed student aid cuts "disastrous." Both New York State's Senators, Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Republican Alfonse D'Amato, have also vigorously condemned the Reagan recommendations, Senator D'Amato calling them "an unwarranted attack on working middle-class families who are struggling to try to send their kids to college."

The latest Reagan higher education budget was followed by a rash of inaccurate and offensive statements on the part of the new Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett. Mr. Bennett accused colleges and universities of "ripping off" students and said he would give his son \$50,000 to enter business rather than Harvard. The Secretary of Education went on to insult college students by characterizing them as preoccupied with cars, stereos and three-week vacations at the beach. He next charged that 13,000 students from families with incomes exceeding \$100,000 were receiving federally guaranteed loans, a representation demonstrated to be false. In my view, both the budgetary policies and the rhetorical posture of this Administration with respect to higher education represent, in effect, a declaration of war on American colleges and universities—especially independent institutions—and on students from both low- and middle-income families.

D. *Tax Reform Triple Whammy*

Distressing as are the sharp cuts in funds for higher education, also alarming are the implications for education of the Administration's so-called "tax reform" plan submitted to Congress last spring. The Reagan plan embodies attacks on tax-exempt bonds, charitable contributions and the deductibility of state and local taxes which would have a devastating impact on education. First, the Reagan reform proposal would hurt education by denying tax-exempt financing for "private purpose" uses. Colleges and universities rely on tax-exempt bonds to construct, renovate and modernize equipment and facilities. Although public educational and health care facilities might still qualify, independent colleges and universities, like Notre Dame and New York University, and voluntary nonprofit hospitals could no longer borrow on a tax-exempt basis. This provision obviously discriminates against the private sector of higher education. Furthermore, tax-exempt financing could not be used to support student loans, which would be considered "private purpose." As a result, state lending agencies could no longer sell tax-exempt bonds to raise money to make student loans. This restriction could significantly reduce the availability of Guaranteed Student Loans and increase their cost to students.

The Reagan plan would also weaken incentives to individuals to make charitable contributions and would thereby seriously undermine private support of higher education. How? The Administration wants to deny taxpayers who do not itemize their deductions the right to claim charitable contributions. This proposal, although not as drastic as the limitations on private giving contained in the first version of the tax reform bill, would nevertheless cause significant damage to colleges and universities. According to at least one estimate, the restriction on non-itemizers, when coupled with the other changes in the Administration's tax bill, would, if enacted, reduce gifts to colleges and universities by 26 percent.

Finally, the proposal to eliminate deductions for state and local taxes would weaken the tax base for public schools in every school district in the country. Because colleges and universities—especially public ones—also depend upon state taxpayer support, higher education would suffer as well. Education is the single largest expense of state and local governments, comprising 40 percent of their total expenditures in 1982, and is usually the only item on which taxpayers vote directly. At a time of educational reform and renewal, the

elimination of state and local tax deductibility would stifle local efforts to raise taxes to improve schools. Estimates are that, under the Reagan tax plan, the average school district would lose 20 percent of its revenue, an average of \$606 for every elementary and secondary pupil. Beyond the harm the Reagan tax proposal would work on public schools, ending state and local tax deductibility would lead, according to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, to a loss of as much as \$2 billion to public colleges and universities.

Ronald Reagan has spent most of his life in politics arguing that problems are better solved at the state and local level, and he came to Washington espousing the so-called New Federalism. Yet his latest tax plan strikes a savage blow at federalism by making it far more difficult for states and localities to provide essential public services.

Educators from across the country have deplored the inequities of the new tax plan. In testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means in June, a representative of the National Education Association said, "We believe deductibility goes to the heart of the universally acclaimed effort to achieve educational excellence throughout the nation . . . There is a strong base for education funding at the state and local level which should not be undermined by the federal government which is the only partner in education not carrying its share of the load . . . Public education is placed in double jeopardy—federal funding is cut and the revenue base undermined through the loss of indirect contributions as well as public support."

Even as the Reagan education budget for fiscal 1986 distressed Terrel Bell, so too has the Reagan tax plan, with its adverse impact on public schools. In a statement in June, Mr. Reagan's former Secretary of Education warned that the Administration's tax proposals would severely hurt education, and expressed particular concern about the loss of state and local funds essential to raising schoolteacher's salaries. "Salaries need to be competitive," he said. "Our future is resting upon education." Bell also criticized the Reagan proposals on tax-free borrowing. Removing tax incentives that support education, said Bell, would impair the capacity of schools to make needed reforms.

Thus, with respect to higher education, the Reagan Administration, through efforts both to slash needed funds for education and to amend the tax laws, would, in effect, subject it to a "triple whammy." At one and the same time, the Ad-

ministration would: first, reduce Federal funds for student aid and for other education programs; second, undermine the ability of state and local governments to make up for the shortfall; *and* third, cripple efforts on the part of colleges and universities to raise funds from individuals and corporations and through tax-exempt financing.

E. *Ironies Abound*

From what I have so far said, it must be clear that Mr. Reagan's budget and tax proposals contradict his own philosophy. Ironies abound. An Administration that calls for the government to get off our backs and allow a wider scope for private initiative is pursuing policies that will damage private colleges and universities the most. An Administration that justifies reductions in Federal aid to education assumes that private philanthropy and state and local governments can make up the difference. Yet the tax changes now under review will reduce contributions from non-Federal sources, not increase them. An Administration rhetorically committed to achieving excellence in education is calling for budget cuts and tax changes that will kill efforts to achieve it. This is an agenda for mediocrity, not excellence. An Administration that talks of a society of opportunity would deny the opportunity for a higher education to millions of young American from hard-working, middle- and low-income families. Finally, an Administration that has placed economic prosperity and a strong national defense at the top of its agenda fails to see the close connection between these goals and the health of our schools, colleges and universities.

For as we move toward the final decade of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, it must be obvious that America cannot have a vibrant, thriving economy without well-educated men and women. And how can we begin to implement defense budgets of the magnitude Mr. Reagan wants—over \$300 billion annually—without people who are highly educated and trained in a variety of disciplines? Even assuming it's a good idea, how can we embark on a "Star Wars" without scientists, engineers and computer analysts?

As a former member of Congress, I should here like to underscore a significant fact about my own years in Washington: Support for higher education has always been bipartisan. I served in Congress with six Presidents—three Democrats: Kennedy, Johnson and Carter; and three Republicans: Eisenhower, Nixon and Ford. And every one of them, working

with members of both parties in the House and Senate, signed laws for Federal support of higher education.

Today's battle over higher education is not, I must insist, between Democrats and Republicans. Rather it is a struggle between, on the one hand, the bipartisan tradition of legislators and Presidents of both parties who have worked together to open the doors of educational opportunity and, on the other, a narrow ideological view determined to close those doors. Ronald Reagan's posture, therefore, marks a sea change in the attitude of an American President toward the role of the Federal government in education.

It has been heartening then to see in the last three years a renaissance on Capitol Hill of the bipartisan coalition in support of education that characterized all my time in Congress. In late spring, both the Senate and the House approved a budget resolution for fiscal 1986 which rejected the most damaging of the Administration's proposals on student aid. The actions of Congress in voting against President Reagan's proposals underscore the fact that student aid is a bipartisan matter, attracting the strong support of both Democrats and Republicans in Congress.

CONCLUSION

If I have seemed harsh in my criticisms of the higher education policies of the present Administration, it is not to score debater's points against Mr. Reagan but to emphasize that a commitment to education is central to the strength of the American nation and the well-being of the American people. For I believe we need to remind President Reagan and Secretary Bennett that when they attack education, they are really threatening our individual freedoms as well as our prospects for a growing and more competitive economy and the security of the United States in a dangerous world. Only if we bring to their fullest potential the greatest of our national resources, an educated citizenry—only then can we face and master change, chart and define the future, and enjoy the rich blessings of democracy secure in the knowledge that others will not create the future for us.

