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THE CONQUEST OF ILLITERACY

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IN order to satisfy the need for manpower in the Armed Forces, it became necessary to induct large numbers of illiterate and non-English-speaking men. Special Training Units were organized by the Army to give these men the academic training they required as soldiers. Approximately the fourth-grade level in reading and other academic subjects was the standard believed to be essential. By applying established principles of education, the Army succeeded in developing a very efficient program of education—a program which enables the average illiterate or non-English-speaking man to acquire the basic academic skills needed in Army life in eight weeks' time.

Origin of Special Training Unit Men. Where do these men come from? Some of them have lived in certain mountainous or rural districts of our country where schools are inaccessible during several months of the year, and inadequate at all times. Others are drawn from the border and coast states where immigrants form independent groups that manage to get along by using a very limited amount of English. And some come from the foreign colonies of our great cities. In one unit in Texas 95 per cent of the trainees were non-English-speaking men of Spanish or Mexican background. Large numbers of Special Training Unit men are Negroes who have been taken from sections of our country where schools are generally inadequate. But there are trainees from other parts of the country—communities where educational

opportunities are good or even excellent; some of these men have been faced with family needs which have made them leave school at an early age to help earn a living, and others have learned little during their years in school. However, most of the men come from sections of our country where educational opportunities are very meager.¹

Motivation in the Army Program. Typically these men in Special Training Units are eager to learn. Experience has shown the disadvantage of being unable to read. In the Army, they welcome their new opportunities. "More than anything else, I want to learn to read," said one man. When asked why, he summarized rather fully his reasons as well as those of many of his comrades: "I want to be able to read letters from home. Then, too, I want to know what's going on in other places." Finally he added: "I want to be able to read the things the other fellows do."

Methods and Materials of Instruction. Another factor in the success of the program involves the methods and materials the Army has developed for instructing these men. Of significance is the fact that both materials and methods are functional. Accordingly, the men are taught only those things that

¹ Surveys showing the amount of "functional illiteracy" reveal that one man in seven, or 13.5 per cent, may be so designated. The percentages vary from state to state; for Louisiana, 36 per cent; for Illinois, 10; New York, 12; and Iowa (the lowest), 4.

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they are able to use immediately, and all subject matter is presented in the form in which it will be most readily and most frequently used. The "Army Reader" and the "Army Arithmetic" deal with life in camp; and for example taking care of the barracks. Other supplementary reading materials are issued monthly; some of these describe heroes of the war while others tell of contributions of each of the United Nations in the present struggle. All these materials are written in very simple English. Their average difficulty is about that of the typical third-grade book. Abundant use is made of visual aids which foster rapid learning.²

The Role of the Teacher. The teachers in Special Training Units are enlisted men. Most of them have had considerable professional and academic training, and many of them have had experience in teaching either in public schools or in colleges. Perhaps the most important contribution of these teachers resides in the attitude they bring to their work. These instructors emphasize success and steady progress; they expect every man to learn effectively and rapidly. This attitude spreads to the men who have come to believe in their ability to learn. Thus the cycle begins and continues; success brings confidence, and confidence brings success.

In addition to the high calibre of teaching personnel in the Army program, two other factors certainly contribute to the effectiveness of the work as well as to the general well-being of the men. The Special Training Unit provides for many of these men a better environment than they had ever known from the standpoint of health and hygiene. Moreover, many of these soldiers experience a stable, well-ordered kind of life for the first time. These factors undoubtedly contribute to their adjustment and their ability to learn rapidly.

Implications of the Army Program. The program of Special Training has certainly demonstrated that the mass of American youth are educable. Moreover, it has shown that illiteracy need not continue as a great social problem in America. To solve this problem, however, social-minded citizens will have to make a vigorous and determined effort to bring about some essential changes in educational opportunity and practice. The following steps must be taken if illiteracy is to be reduced or eliminated:

1. It will be necessary to guarantee an equal educational opportunity to every boy and girl in America—re-

² Cf. Paul Witty and Samuel Goldberg, "The Army's Training Program for Illiterate Non-English-Speaking and Educationally Retarded Men," *The Elementary English Review*, December, 1943; Witty and Goldberg, "The Use of Visual Aids in the Army," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, February, 1944. See also Paul Witty and Golda Van Buskirk, "Beam in the Eye," *Childhood Education*, October, 1944, and "The Soldier Learns to Read," *The National Parent Teacher*, February, 1944.

gardless of racial background—in the East, West, North, and South. And it will be necessary to enforce attendance in school. It is well to bear in mind that part of the success of Special Training Units is traceable to the soundness of the materials and the methods of instruction. It is important to note also that every student in Special Training Units is provided with the essential books and instructional materials, and that his instruction takes place in a relatively small class.

2. It will be necessary to extend educational opportunities to adult levels. And here is a difficult problem, for many illiterate adults lack the initiative to seek out educational opportunity. Enthusiasts will be needed who will find these people and convince them of the values of education. Here is a problem for educational and civic organizations—to challenge their interest when the last bond drive is finished. However, the major requirement will be the establishment of schools and classes equipped to function with maximal efficiency.

The results secured outside the Army are not reassuring at present, for it is reported that the city and state programs that have been established for teaching illiterates have succeeded in salvaging relatively few individuals. Moreover, the

conclusion is inescapable that the city and state programs [thus far developed] have been almost altogether ineffective. It appears that their lack of outstanding results with selectees may be due to the absence of the very things the Army programs have—to an absence of the promising practices in motivation, functional materials, control, and excellent teachers which have been noted in the Army programs.³

In order, then, to provide the essential factors cited above it will be necessary to devise new programs and to secure financial assistance to train teachers, develop instructional materials, and establish schools.

The solution of the problem may be within our grasp if state and local school systems will recognize their responsibility for the education of adults, as suggested by some investigators. State and local authorities could initiate work upon the larger problem by establishing classes or schools for men returning from the Armed Forces. According to a recent report, approximately 150,000 illiterates were inducted into the Army during the year, June 1, 1943–June 1, 1944, and 50,000 probably went into the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Many others entered the Army prior to the above dates.⁴ Most of these men will be returning to civilian status sooner or later. What will happen to them? One possible answer inheres in the Servicemen's Readjust-

³ Martin D. Jenkins and others, "The Black and White of Rejections for Military Service." *The American Teachers Association*, P. O. Box 271, Montgomery, Ala., p. 43.

⁴ Lt. S. A. Lynde and E. A. Schuler, "The Undereducated Serviceman and the G.I. Bill of Rights," *Adult Education Bulletin*, December, 1944.

ment Act of 1944, referred to generally as the GI Bill of Rights. Many men will qualify for educational benefits according to Title 2, now Public Law 346, 78th Congress:

Any person who served in the active military or naval service on or after September 16, 1940, and prior to the termination of the present war, and who shall have been discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable, and whose education or training was impeded, delayed, or interfered with by reason of his entrance into the service, or who desires a refresher or retraining course . . . shall be eligible for and entitled to receive education or training. . . .⁵

It is stated further that any such person must not have been over 25 years of age at the time he entered the service if he is to be considered as one who has had "his education or training impeded, delayed, interrupted, or interfered with." Every eligible serviceman is entitled to one year of training; those men whose education was "delayed, interrupted, or interfered with by reason of entrance into the service" (men under 25 years of age) are eligible for an additional period not to exceed three years.

For veterans wishing to obtain elementary education, financial aid will be forthcoming through the GI Bill of Rights. But schools equipped with properly trained teachers and suitable materials are needed if the men are to be motivated sufficiently to take advantage of the help for which they are eligible. It is clear that men returning from service, for obvious reasons, should not be placed in classes with public-school pupils. In fact, few men would probably wish to enter such classes. They will require teachers trained for instructing adult illiterates, instructional materials chosen and developed especially for them, and a curriculum that aims to enable every man to make the most of one to four years of general and

⁵ Quoted by Lynde and Schuler, *op. cit.*

specialized training on the adult level. It is clearly the responsibility of agencies and organizations such as the NEA, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the U. S. Office of Education, and adult-education groups to assume the leadership necessary to assure immediate action. Civic and social organizations could also perform an invaluable service by stimulating interest in this important field.

Although the writer has emphasized the need for providing educational opportunities for men who entered the Armed Forces as illiterates, he is not unmindful of the millions of men who, when they entered the Armed Forces, had not completed the elementary-school program. Public schools, it is clear, should provide appropriate educational opportunities for these men.

Nor is the writer unaware of the large number of illiterate men and women not in the Armed Forces. It is reported that by September 1, 1943, selective service had rejected and placed in 4F⁶ 341,000 registrants because of lack of educational accomplishments. These men also need a chance to complete their education!

The writer is fully aware, too, of the crucial need for financial aid to public education in some states and communities. He wishes simply to cite the significance of an opportunity which we *now* have—an opportunity which, if seized upon, might initiate a movement to provide equal educational facilities for all citizens and their children. Let us act *now*! It takes time to train teachers, prepare instructional materials, and set up schools and classes for men who need elementary education. If we do act now, we have reason to believe that our country may ultimately eliminate illiteracy and add measurably to its stature as a democracy representing and serving all its people.

⁶ Testimony of Major General Lewis B. Hershey. Quoted by Lynde and Schuler, *op. cit.*

Events . . .

THE RECOGNITION OF EDUCATION BY THE CHARTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS

"TRIUMPHANT" is a term that should be reserved for superlatively if not, indeed, supremely significant achievements. It is, however, in no sense an extravagant or an exaggerated characterization of the Charter of the United Nations, formulated during eight weeks of concentrated—and consecrated—effort by the San Francisco Conference, adopted by unanimous vote, and signed on June 26.

It was said at the outset that the conference would

be concerned "with setting up machinery—and machinery only." As our State Department officially announced, "No substantive problems will be discussed." But, while the Charter that was adopted does provide—and admirably—the "machinery" of a new world order, the mechanistic implications of the term are happily inapplicable. It may be, in one sense, a "machine"—but it is a machine with a soul. The Charter is comprehensive, as befits the world-wide scope of its purposes; yet it is marvelously compact. It deals with situations that are almost infinitely complex; yet its principles and proposals not only cohere in a consistent unity but are formulated and expressed with