

# Education Commission Overlooks Need for Clerks, Truckers

By PETER GIBBON

**I**T is nice that the National Commission on Excellence in Education wants more academic courses, more homework, stricter grading, better teaching. It is salutary for educators periodically to engage in self-criticism and for government commissions to issue calls for reform, zeal and rigor. It is fair that education gets some media attention and that politicians make speeches about it; but before every high school graduate reads Plato, takes calculus and becomes a sober grind; before our best and brightest college students forego money to become school masters, before we take "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" too seriously — a cautionary note and some stubborn facts.

American public secondary-school policy is very simple: to keep all teenagers in a given residential area confined in the same school until they graduate. All means the swift, the slow, the motivated, the apathetic, the docile, the disruptive; those who speak English and those who do not;

from broken homes; those from homes where education is valued and those from homes where education is peripheral; those who must work after school and those who can study; those desirous of high-status jobs and resigned to anxiety, work, competition and delayed gratification and those desirous of ordinary jobs and looking for some fun and peace before settling down to life.

Reformers, unlike classroom teachers, have no visceral sense of ineradicable differences in temperament, intelligence, maturity and family background — differences that neither requirements, changed curriculum, nor inspired teaching can eradicate. High-minded thinkers such as Benjamin Bloom and Mortimer Adler continue to insist that if the right books are taught in the right way by the right people all American adolescents can learn high-school material and will be excited by the liberal arts. Even John Dewey, not known for his pessimism, had to concede that "... in the great majority of human beings the distinctly intellectual interest is not dominant. They have the so-called practical impulse and disposition." To offer a rigorous liberal arts education to all is difficult, maybe even hopeless and unwise.

If the commission seems somewhat oblivious to the nature of the students it would uplift, it also ignores the in-

stitution it would change. The commission might look at two recent field studies of high schools, Alan Peshkin's "Growing Up American" and David Owen's "High School"; or notice how high schools are portrayed in movies and on television.

Germans take their elementary schools very seriously, since by junior high school one is slotted either for university or the trades. Japanese take all precollege education seriously, but relax once in the university. One would have to conclude, from looking at the clues offered by popular culture and from reading serious studies, that Americans do not take high schools as seriously as do the Germans, the Japanese or the members of the commission.

In the mass media, high school means romance, pranks, sports and "interpersonal relations," reflecting an assumption that high school is a time to have fun and to be defiant. In many schools — to both parents and students — football, proms, clubs and jobs are as important as academic concerns. High school is seen as a last fling before work and marriage. It is unnecessary for teachers or students to push hard.

One leaves popular culture and serious studies convinced that high schools are shaped by communities and their values, not by commissions, Government regulations or crusading teachers. Communities get the teach-

ers, principals and schools they want — and many do not want Athens.

While secondary education prepares students for democracy and is useful in personal cultivation, most Americans see it as job training. To evaluate the commission's plea for increased rigor and excellence, one must look at the jobs that more rigorously trained graduates can expect.

The commission, like the media, seems to think of Americans as all upwardly mobile and middle class. In the name of equal opportunity, it prescribes for all an education that demands hard work, sacrifice and some serious concentration on mathematics, science and foreign languages. It glosses over the fact that America still must have millions of clerks and truck drivers, that two-thirds of jobs (even in a post-industrial, high-technology society) are routine, and that perhaps the rewards offered do not match the exertion the commission recommends.

Democracy and the gospel of upward mobility implies that every American can be and should be a leader and have a high status job. Such an ethos excites effort and ambition. It also produces frustrations and feelings of despair and failure. It makes those with ordinary jobs feel like failures. There is a pernicious illusion that more and better education will obliterate the need for foot soldiers. As the latest report from the

Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates, most jobs in this decade will be decidedly low-tech. Americans should be wary of producing a sullen, frustrated, unemployable intellectual proletariat such as the one we see emerging in Italy.

Even though this report is about how mediocre education endangers our "material well-being," there is little mention of money, particularly Federal money. "Excellence costs," the report concedes; but the emphasis for reform seems to be on some concerted effort by all to be rigorous rather than on a transfer of funds to education. There is no mention, for example, of what it would cost to reduce class size or to change significantly the profession of teaching.

There is the ritualistic, sincere and very American injunction that all citizens should have a "fair chance" to develop their "individual powers ... to the utmost." There is no mention that different schools and states spend different amounts per pupil and that because communities are segregated, so are schools. Problems that reveal America to be far less democratic than we pretend, that would require massive amounts of money and "social engineering" to address, and that would above all require changes in residence patterns and real egalitarianism are ignored.

One has the suspicion that this was

a report designed to shore up the education of the 16 percent of Americans who graduate from four-year colleges (a percentage that some think even too high, given the job opportunities for the highly educated), rather than a prescription for reforming all high schools.

"A Nation at Risk" is valuable in calling for intellectuality and in demanding effort and standards. It focuses attention on schools (which are often taken for granted) and forces politicians, teachers unions and concerned citizens to debate what should be happening in secondary schools. It reiterates the American dream of a high-quality education for all. The specific reforms suggested are not novel, nor is the clarion call for zeal and standards. Such a call has been issued throughout American history.

"A Nation at Risk," however, relies on platitudes and heroic rhetoric. It ignores the enormous differences among American adolescents, is wildly optimistic about the possibility of educating all to a high standard, is naive about the institution of high school, is oblivious to the reality of a hierarchical society and the need for foot soldiers, slights questions of equality and those at the bottom of the social-economic ladder, and favors those headed for four-year colleges.

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