

XLVII – Legalized Child Abuse

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By Butler Shaffer

"If you could push a magic button that would get rid of just one political program, which one would it be?" I am occasionally asked this question. I am not attracted to the idea of pushing buttons — magic or otherwise — as a way of resolving the messes we have generated through politics. It is for this reason that I long ago abandoned any interest in "reforming" the political system through political action of any kind. Still, if I were to awake one morning to be told that one political institution had forever vanished into a "black hole," learning that it was the governmental school system would give me more satisfaction than the loss of any other program.

The wars, riots, inter-group conflicts, and other political and social upheavals that have become commonplace, are the products of our individual thinking. Most of us are so enmeshed in mass-mindedness that it is difficult to imagine an alternative to politicized conflicts and disorder that is not premised on some collective process of change. A focused reflection should convince you that the state's very existence depends upon men and women who are convinced that [a] the world is too complex for themselves to have any effective control over their lives, [b] only collectivized efforts can be effective in overcoming such individual limitations, and [c] such collective responses to a complex world demands the exercise of centralized authority by wise and knowledgeable persons.

The government school system has been the principal instrument for conditioning our minds along such collectivist premises. From their earliest years, students are taught the importance of centralized authority, be it in the form of the state-certified duce at the front of the classroom; or the state, through the ever-present American flag to whom each is expected to daily recite his or her allegiance. Students come to accept that others will select what is of interest to learn, when and how they will learn, and will judge the value of what they learn.

In the process, students are slowly conditioned in the importance of obedience to authority, and without daring to question the sufficiency of their claim to such authority. Students learn to sit in rows, to march in straight lines, to speak only when permitted to do so and, above all else, to remain compliant with the teacher's expectations. Various punishments are meted out to those who fail to meet these demands and, for the student who persists in pursuing his or her own agenda, the ultimate stigma is attached to their very person: they are labeled "hyperactive," or suffering from "attention deficit disorder," and drugged into quietude with Ritalin, Prozac, anti-anxiety drugs or other medications.

Just a few days ago, I was driving by one of our neighborhood government schools. Two young boys were standing inside a fenced-in schoolyard, looking into the street at their basketball that had gone over the fence and into the street in front of me. They waved at me and asked if I could throw the ball back into the schoolyard, which I did. I then noticed that they had been unable to retrieve the ball themselves because the gate on this fence had been padlocked. These boys didn't appear to be criminal types at all, and yet the school was treating them as such, locking them up in what is little more than a state penitentiary for children.

At a time when so much concern is expressed about the evils of child abuse, it is remarkable that so few people have directed their attentions to the government school system as constituting the very essence of child abuse! Children have a proclivity for learning; they eagerly seek to understand the world about them; and they pursue it with the same inner spirit and excitement they bring to all their activities. By their nature, children — meaning you and I — are naturally disposed to be self-directed, self-motivated learners, so that we may live as independent but cooperative individuals.

It has been the purpose of government schools to change all that; to bring children into that condition of intellectual submission that will make it easier for them to be controlled by the state. In the words of Ivan Illich, "[s]chool is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is." It is little wonder that so many students regard school as either an undesired cost or a form of punishment.

Lest you dismiss all of this as hyperbole, consider the words of the Los Angeles County government, in declaring that children must be taught "that we are all part of one big social system," and "must learn how to participate effectively in the system." Or, pay attention to what is implicit in the explicit words of another school district, stating that "all pupils shall . . . submit to the authority of the teachers of the schools"; that "every pupil shall . . . conform to the regulations of the school; obey promptly all the directions of his teacher and others in authority." Those who have "wilfully defied the valid authority of supervisors, teachers, or administrators" are subject to suspension, while "pupils who are continually disobedient may be referred to the juvenile court." All of this was necessary, the district went on, to further the schools' "responsibility of seeking to correct the pupils' maladjustments and/or re-channeling pre-delinquent tendencies."

Do you see the vicious nature of the game being played, by the state, against those least able to resist, i.e., small children? Is it any wonder that children who were bullied into subservience by a system premised upon one rule — obedience to state authority — might years later find it justifiable to join the Army in order to bully the residents of another nation into submission to the authority of their state?

You may respond that my criticism goes too far; that there are good government school systems and good teachers. I will admit that some systems are undoubtedly better than others, but all government school systems are united on the premise of subjugating the wills of children in service to state authority. If you deny this, please let me know of any government school system to the contrary.

As for teachers, I have, indeed, met many wonderful, creative, and inspiring individuals who have taught in the government schools, but many have admitted that much of what they were able to do required them to ignore school directives, or to deviate from the collectivist party line, or to use their own resources to provide learning opportunities the schools would not support. It has also been my experience, however, that such teachers are in a distinct minority, many of whom get ground down by the system and eventually change careers. Like their conscript clientele, many decent teachers are caught up in a corrupt system over which they have little influence.

Fortunately, there has been a decided shift of interest away from government schools. Parents who have been able to transcend their own experiences with such schools, and who love their children more than they do the interests of the state, have been turning to private schooling and/or homeschooling by the tens of thousands.

The statisticians have greeted such changes with alarm. The initial response has been to identify "private schooling" as "elitist," something available only to the rich. But as more and more lower-income people have resorted to private schools — after all, poor people love their children, too — this Marxist-tinged argument began to collapse. In an effort to capitalize on bigotry, statisticians next tried to equate private schools and homeschooling with "religious fundamentalism." But apart from the question of whether having religious beliefs automatically disqualifies one from being able to direct the education of his or her own children, this argument by the statisticians ignores the "fundamentalist" nature of the state's position. As an agnostic, I am not that familiar with the day-to-day work at churches, but I doubt that many are more insistent in inculcating their catechisms than the state is in insisting upon its own (otherwise known as "political correctness"). If you would like to see evidence of the current crop of secular Elmer Ganttrys that are loose in the government school system, you might want to read Diane Ravitch's recent book, [The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn](#).

In one ongoing effort, the State of Massachusetts has focused its powers on a homeschooling family, insisting that the parents submit their educational plans, and subject their children to a system of standardized state testing to make certain that children are learning what the state wants them to learn. Policemen and social workers were sent to the home of this family to demand such testing, and the parents were even threatened with

having their children taken from them if they did not obey. The parents have steadfastly resisted, declaring (gasp!) that it is not the business of the state to approve or disapprove of how they choose to educate their children.

If the statisticians were truly concerned with the learning quality of homeschooling — which they are not — they need look no further than some reported ACT test scores and other studies that showed homeschooled children generally performing at higher levels than government-schooled children. The statisticians might also be reminded that homeschooled children have been winners and runners-up in national "spelling bees" and "geography bees."

I recently watched the finals of the national spelling bee on television, won by a homeschooled, twelve-year-old boy whose learning obviously went far beyond his ability to spell correctly. He spoke with clarity and self-assurance and, when asked what he planned to do with his prize money, responded: "I'll probably buy some books, and put the rest away for college." Here was a young man who seemed to exude the sense of independence and self-discipline that it has been the purpose of government schools to suppress.

Shortly after watching this program, I went to the grocery store, where I saw a woman with a couple of annoying children. They didn't look like the sort of kids who could correctly spell "noumenon" or "aphelion," or would have any interest in trying to do so. The mother wore a T-shirt upon which were emblazoned, in about six inch high letters, the words "Up Yours!" I have no way of knowing, with certainty, where she or her children had been educated, but if I had to bet my life on it, I would venture that they were all products of the government school system!

The Best of Butler Shaffer

