

# NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN

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## President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino

### Educational Thought Control

By nature men and women are neither angels nor devils. Rather, as Irving Babbitt pointed out early in this century, they are torn between contrary inclinations toward good and evil, and it is only by difficult efforts at moral self-restraint in the infinitely varied and ever-changing circumstances of their daily lives that some become persons of unusually high character who are worthy sources of inspiration and leadership for those around them.

As in ethics and morals, so, too, in knowledge and learning, it is the destiny of men and women to fall short of perfection. Some are much more academically gifted than their fellows, some display greater or lesser genius in a host of other important areas essential to civilized life. But, regardless of intellectual brilliance, no individual, group, commission, or governmental body, acting monopolistically, is capable of omniscience. Nor, given man's innate moral weaknesses, could we count on such a body to act consistently to promote the common good in any case.

"Because of the complexity and diversity of human life," notes Claes Ryn in *The New Jacobinism*, "moral good must be advanced in a multiplicity of different ways that are adjusted to particular situations." The universal is not the same as uniformity, he writes, and it cannot be obtained by imposing some uniform blueprint, however seemingly well-intentioned. Rather, the goal of constitutional government is to "hold back the more blatantly self-serving desires" while allowing countless individuals and groups to contribute in their different capacities and special circumstances to the continuing articulation of the good society over time in ways that never could have been provided, but only hindered, by a pre-imposed plan.

Recognizing these bedrock realities, the Founders of the American Republic viewed the decentralization of authority—in states, localities, and private and religious organizations—as a central feature of our way of life. Though

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## NHI Notes . . .

Just out from Transaction Publishers (Rutgers—The State University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903) is a new edition of Irving Babbitt's classic *Rousseau and Romanticism* (526 pp., paper, \$24.95), with a major new introduction by NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn**. In this best-known and most widely discussed of Babbitt's works, first published in 1919, Rousseau is analyzed as representative of the ethical and aesthetic sensibility that is replacing the classical and Christian outlook in the Western world, with dangerous results anticipated by Babbitt that are now widely bemoaned.

. . . Also new from Transaction is *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (282 pp., cloth, \$34.95), by NHI Academic Board member **Peter J. Stanlis**. In this work Stanlis, a leading authority on Burke, examines Burke's political philosophy, his opposition to Enlightenment rationalism and the radical sensibility of Rousseau, and his prescient critique of the French Revolution. . . . **James M. Miclot**, David A. Scott Scholar in Political Theory at NHI, has accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor of Political Science at the College of William and Mary.

### President Nixon Praises 'The New Jacobinism'

*In a recent letter to NHI Chairman Claes G. Ryn, former President Richard Nixon expressed high praise for Ryn's recently released book The New Jacobinism. The following is excerpted from that letter:*

I was so impressed by the advance copy of your new book, that I have asked for three additional copies to distribute to members of my staff who are doing research for a new foreign policy book which I have scheduled for publication early next year. *The New Jacobinism* provides a much-needed antidote to some of the fatuous assessments of The New World Order emanating from many of the foreign policy experts who live in the Washington Beltway—the modern ver-

sion of Plato's Cave.

As you know, I feel strongly that the United States as the only complete superpower in the world today should play a positive role on the world scene. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind Frederick the Great's admonition—"He who tries to defend everywhere defends nothing."

We should set an example by practicing democracy at its best at home. But we should not be so arrogant to assume that what works for us may work for others with entirely different backgrounds.

We must also have in mind not only our

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much eroded, decentralization and diversity have served us well — so well, in fact, that even Communist rulers have been forced to concede their value. It is ironic, therefore, to see prominent Americans pushing now, of all times, for the nationalization and standardization of one of the most formative influences on American life, the curriculum to be taught in our schools. It is doubly ironic that many of those advocating this radical departure from tradition are doing so in the name of “conservatism.”

A prime example is Chester E. Finn, Jr., a neoconservative who was William Bennett's right-hand man at the U.S. Department of Education. In his new book, *We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future* (The Free Press), Finn justly criticizes major weaknesses in contemporary American education such as the emphasis of many schools on nebulous goals like building students' self-esteem at the expense of teaching traditional subject matter in a systematic way. He then leaps to the conclusion that the only solution for such deficiencies is to impose a uniform curriculum on the entire United States.

Finn acknowledges that his approach “turns on its head” the cherished American tradition of local school control, but he dismisses that tradition as an “anachronism.” And he ridicules those who would question his “vision of broad-based participatory democracy as our central social and political value” (what ever happened to the Framers' vision of freedom, limited representative government, and institutional checks on democratic excess?) as “a handful of conservatives, some of whom

still yearn for a premodern society of aristocracies and priesthoods, highly traditional and infused with religious faith.”

Such critics, Finn complains, periodically attack him, along with “Allan Bloom and William Bennett and others . . . , for clinging to the ideas of democracy, rationalism, and equality.” That the latter ideas owe more to the French Revolution than American constitutionalism Finn does not mention.

To support local control of education does not preclude suggesting that schools across the country adopt core curricula that have been shown by experience to produce well-rounded men and women of virtue and sound judgment.

In *Educating for Virtue* (NHI, 1988) Professor Peter Stanlis offers an exemplary curriculum for secondary students, based in part on a program taught at Middlebury College during the 1940s. At the elementary level, I personally can attest to the superior quality of coursework offered by the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in the late 1950s. But these are models, suggested for emulation where useful but not to be slavishly imitated without regard to other worthy influences.

By contrast, Finn (and those like him) would use the power of the federal government to promulgate a “one-flavor-suits-all” national curriculum, complete with an arsenal of rewards and punishments to coerce every school system, whether public or private, and every student in the land to go along.

While Finn frequently mentions the need for “flexibility” and “choice,” he is

referring to the means and methods to be used in teaching different students, but not the prescribed curricular content. That, he emphasizes, is to be the same for all.

Clearly, a country needs the highest educational standards and an underlying civilized consensus, but it is arrogant as well as superficial to believe that the educational needs of the entire U.S. population could be formulated once and for all and imposed by a single central authority in Washington, D.C.

This is proposed at a time when the utter bankruptcy of collectivist and centralized schemes is apparent for all to see. Many of those who are sympathetic to Finn's approach are complaining about the reign of “political correctness,” but here in Finn's book is outlined a scheme of curricular orthodoxy that is far more comprehensive and socially and politically intrusive than anything heretofore existing in U.S. education.

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strength but our limitations. As I observed to one of the Soviet leaders I met on my recent trip, “After Vietnam, many of our foreign policy observers concluded that the United States could do nothing on the world scene. After our victory in the Gulf, many now conclude that the United States can do everything. Both are wrong.

The evening I spent reading your book provided indispensable background material for the final chapter of my book in which I will attempt to set forth what I believe the role of the United States should be internationally in the years ahead.

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