by Robbie McClintock

This blog entry starts an effort to critique neo-liberal programs of educational reform through a close reading and commentary on "U.S. Education Reform and National Security," recently released by the Council on Foreign Relations. The entire critique will comprise 6 to 9 installments, with the full text of each appearing roughly once a week on the blog, Formative Justice.

In mid April, the Council on Foreign Relations presented its Independent Task Force Report No. 68, the fruit of the Council's first assessment of American K-12 schooling —"U.S. Education Reform and National Security." The Council charged thirty private sector leaders from commerce, academe, advocacy groups, and officialdom to report on the repercussions for national security arising because "America's primary and secondary schools are widely seen as failing." So charged, TF68 further hyped the failure of the schools and reiterated favorite elite prescriptions, frequently intoned with minor variations since Sputnik went into orbit in 1957. The variant by TF68 is mindless verbiage, deeply irrelevant to the education of the young and to the experience of the adult.

Symptomatic inadequacies in the Report do not stem from failings peculiar to the members of TF68. Their acculturation to the power elite has embedded them in the mythologies of American meritocracy ever more deeply. Meritocratic myth impairs a believer's capacity to grasp the realities of living experience. Already over-committed, TF68 members were selected because each was an important person charged with substantial responsibilities, high and complex. Through long apprenticeship, they had become adept at accomplishing additional tasks by hewing to the path of least resistance within the community of their peers. Hence, they could do their work with dispatch.

In about a year, with a few meetings for deliberation, TF68 diagnosed and prescribed their remedies for an enterprise that rivals the national security state in scope and scale. They wrote their findings up in 60 pages, with a further ten for genteel caveats. The result reprises *A Nation at Risk*, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, and other jeremiads. In view of the dire threat this iteration purports to address, its prescriptions are limited and stale. Let us recognize that this Report is less the original work of the Task Force and more an expression of pure "power-speak"—an example of the free-world dialect of conformism at work.

Read more. . . .

But as a work of pure power-speak, the Report deserves close attention. Its language and the congealed thought patterns expressed through it exert great power over educational theory and practice. These, the language and thought patterns, not the putative failings of the schools, are the real danger, a danger not to the nation or its security, but to the educational experience of the American people.

Power-speak clouds the minds of those in the leading elites. It is bipartisan and estranges leadership in all its major variants from the realities that most persons experience daily. People live and work immersed in tangible concerns, radically different from the realm of abstract portents described in power-speak. "U.S. Education Reform and National Security" provides an epitome of power-speak about education that we should gloss with care, for by doing so we may be able to awaken elite leadership from the paralysis of its congealed thinking. In this and subsequent postings, let us look closely at what TF68 says, and ask its members whether that is really what they think.

We start with the chairs' preface (pp. xiii-xiv). It is short, a few paragraphs giving four reasons why K-12 public schooling is a national security issue, followed by two more declaring the importance of strengthening what public schools can do for national security. Let us follow closely what the chairs say, for parsing their words reveals a lot about the workings of power-speak.

First, the chairs aver that security through schooling entails preparing children "for futures in a globalized world." For that purpose, children "must master" the familiar set of basic skills, foreign languages, and American civics and values "in order to be engaged in the community and in the international system." We need not quibble with the chairs' assertion, but we should think carefully about how they couch their assertion.

For the most part, I will treat the text of the report in an impersonal way, referring to the chairs or the committee as the authors. As a collective document, the report represents less the considered thought of particular persons and more the outcome of a social situation, here called *power-speak*. I hope a close critique of what participants in this social situation have produced will lead them and others in similar situations to exert personally more critical vigilance on what they say as a group. The report includes biographical information on the committee members and observers. Joel I. Klein, an

executive vice president in the News Corporation and former chancellor of the NYC Department of Education, and Condoleezza Rice, professor of political science at Stanford University and former U.S. secretary of state, chaired the Task Force.

Note the prescriptive confidence typical of power-speak. The chairs list, as if self-evident, the requisite skill and knowledge that the globalized world will require people who venture there to possess. The actual skills the chairs specify—reading, writing, math, and science skills, foreign languages, knowledge about the world, and American institutions and values—are conventional. They actually have little to do with living specifically in a globalized world, for they have been the staples of secondary schooling for many generations. But note further the chairs' construction of this imperative: "[children] must master [the skills] in order to be engaged in [a globalized world]." It exemplifies how power-speak subtly elides the agency of ordinary persons. Not only do the chairs insist on what children must do, they explain their imperative with the phrase "in order to be engaged," which leaves it unclear who or what does the engaging—the child, the world, or its leadership. Thus power-speak assumes substantial prerogatives.

In this passage, we can see as well how power-speak often clouds the capacity to think critically. Power-speak favors amorphous abstractions that encompass a great range of experience, none of it precisely. Thus nonsense invades a text. To avoid it, power-speakers should concretize their thought. Envision the child grown, engaged "in the community." What skills and values do ordinary persons—each of us most of the time—use in participating in the actualities of our everyday lives of our actual communities? Participation by real persons in real communities requires a many-sided know-how, not the stock of abstract knowledge and intellectual skills the chairs would like each person to acquire. Make no mistake—their aim may be highly desirable, but it does not follow from purpose they give, engaging in the community.

At the level of lived experience, the same is true for what it takes to be engaged "in the international system." Again, to sharpen power-speak, think with a novelist's imagination. Who are the flesh and blood persons, whom we are likely to encounter in our daily experience, living in the international system? Who embodies the globalized world of which the chairs so abstractly speak? To answer, look around. Take a taxi. Hire a lawn worker. Get a hot dog from a street vendor. Strike up a conversation with the cashier at the supermarket check-out—Oops! I forgot. Power-speakers don't do supermarkets. Too bad, for if they did, they would realize that the people really in the international system are the many migrants, legal and illegal, moving here and there to employ in a great diversity of jobs, more often than not lacking precisely the educational preparation the chairs single out as preconditions of entry into their international system.

Too often power-speak is pedagogically impotent because it fails to consider the world of lived experience, the world which people existentially engage. Education is not an abstract process. It occurs continuously in the lived experience of each child, engaging all day, every day, with a flux of real situations and actual conditions. Confronted with the endless particularity of educative experience, power-speak has little to say. The complexity of life strikes it dumb.

But power-speak does not know that, and so we must continue along our parsing path. To do so, we turn next to the chairs' second reason for linking public schooling to national security. Public schooling "must produce enough citizens with critical skills to fill the ranks of the Foreign Service, the intelligence community, and the armed forces." In later postings, we can examine how power-speak defines those critical skills, especially as they might impinge on the curriculum of public schooling—or perhaps might not. Here let us initially note the essential pedagogical principle according to power-speak and observe how it misses the realities of educative experience. By their reasoning here, the chairs hold that education results through a process of rational production, which executives can plan and managers can control, in which line-workers follow specified procedures to instill the output—learners—with prescribed knowledge, skills, and values. Hence the chairs stipulate that the United States, via its public schools, *must produce* enough citizens with critical skills for an important purpose.

Power-speak incessantly uses the metaphors of industrial production to talk about education. It is language fundamentally inappropriate for describing the existential realities of education and the pervasive reliance on it is now culminating in a destructive absurdities of so-called "educational reform." Consider closely the practical logic of the education reform efforts. These draw together several components:

- the ongoing development and promulgation of core learning standards,
- the massive assessment on a frequent schedule of learning outcomes as stipulated by the standards, and
- the systematic use of teacher-value-added measures to enforce compliance with the standards and tested means of meeting them throughout the system of pedagogical production.

As the Obama administration Race to the Top embodies these principles, cloaked in a user-friendly rhetoric. For a great deal of information on core learning standards, see the web site for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. To sample effort going into learning outcome assessment, consult the site for the Race to the Top Assessment Program. To get a feel for how teacher-value added data may look from the perspective of a teacher, one will find the NYC Department of Educations FAQ for teachers about its "Teacher Data Reports" thought provoking. The public release teacher-value-added data in Los Angeles and New York City has created a wide track of online news reports.

This practical logic is a massive example of TQM, Total Quality Management, in the design and management of industrial production. The vogue of TQM has subsided a bit, but its logic is deeply embedded in managerial thinking, and TQM was especially popular in the business world during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the decades in which business leaders largely gave shape to the educational reform movement. TQM is a methodology with many variants, developed to systematically improve processes for developing, producing, and delivering products, especially that of complex machines such as automobiles or airplanes. The "total" in TQM subjects the whole productive process, everything involved in it, to an integrated command and control system aimed at

rationalizing the complete process, from initial conception of a product, through design, development, and production, to its final delivery. The "quality management" in TQM gathers objective data from every stage of the whole process and uses it continuously to improve design specifications and production tooling, ensuring that the production processes conforms to the specified expectations, using assessment of output in turn to improve product design and production tooling. The mentality of TQM, if not the jargon, has become integral to power-speak.

A good basic source for TQM is by James H. Saylor. *TQM Simplified: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).

Not surprisingly, the language and thought patterns of the chairs and their Report are those of pedagogical TQM, the current cant of educational reform. Impose rigorous core standards; monitor closely how teachers deliver instruction; systematically measure results by testing at numerous stages what pupils know; and then use those output assessments to improve the design and delivery of instruction, disciplining what teachers do and how they do it through performance penalties and rewards. By a robust and rigorous implementation of such reforms, American performance on international comparisons of student achievement would rise, just as adoption of automotive TQM once upon a time raised the comparative quality of American cars relative to those of Japanese competitors. But let us move on, merely asking whether the metaphor likening the education of a child to the production of a car is either sound or desirable? Education reform and its TQM logic is the very subject of the Report and we will have occasion in later installments to return to the topic.

Next, the chairs give their third reason for considering public education to be a matter of national security—the importance of human capital to national security. With this link, the chairs continue reasoning within the metaphor of education as industrial production. They observe that "economic competitiveness and innovation" are important components of national power and suggest that it will wax if the educational system produces lots of human capital. But should public schools flounder, "the failure to produce that capital will undermine American security." Here again power-speak lacks a basic empathy with the lived educational situation.

Power-speakers may hold the public schools responsible for producing human capital. The children laboring there do not. No one hears their six-year-old suddenly assert, "Mommy, when I grow up, I want to be human capital!" Perhaps from the perspective of the National Security Council or the Murdock boardroom, such a child would have it right. But neither from a sound educational perspective, nor from a human one.

Persons, especially young persons, do not want to be mere abstractions; they want to be living, complex, interesting persons, doing challenging things—a doctor, nurse, detective, athlete, teacher, lawyer, a climber of mountains, even a queen. To adults, especially power-speakers, even these fantasies are abstractions, defining one or another profession or role, but to the child they are words, personified, a possibility taking form by a linkage with real persons that the child meets, hears about, or observes with admiration. Real education comes about through a long, winding self-formation, motivated by an ever-changing variety of aspirations for many-sided achievements, near and far, which each child pursues, day in, day out, attracted to moving potentialities.

Then, "finally," the chairs address their fourth link between education and national security, namely the inequalities that separate the power-speakers from the other 99 per cent. They do not put it quite that way, for inequality is a difficult topic in power-speak. In their preface, the chairs manage to acknowledge inequalities in two sugary paragraphs without bringing themselves to use the dangerous word. The chairs recognize a clear threat to "the country's cohesion and confidence" arising from incipient division. "Opportunity and promise," the birthright of all, are becoming unobtainable "for a substantial part of the American population." Always prone to the abstraction of power-speak, the chairs here become unusually vague with discomfort: "The true American identity is born of the idea that it does not matter where you came from; it only matters where you are going." After which, the next, conclusive sentence begins with a breathtaking leap, "And thus, solutions to education must be . . . "

In the spirit of the chairs' "and thus," suffice it for now to hypothesize what power-speakers think about the problem of inequality. They hold opportunity and promise to be a binary condition, one in which relative degrees of opportunity and promise are irrelevant—a person either has opportunity and promise or she does not. If this binary condition divides a population significantly, a part possessing opportunity and promise and the rest bereft of the pairing, the people will have a confused identity, one which lacks cohesion and confidence, rendering the nation weak in international competition. In the face of incipient division, we must ask with the power-speakers, what could be responsible for some lacking opportunity and promise and how can the imbalance be righted?

We will have opportunity in later installments to examine further the views about inequality in TF68. Here we need only note that the chairs responsibility for the inequalities threatening national security rest with an economy that persistently operates at far less than full capacity. Nor does it rest with a social structure long biased against many. Nor is a criminal justice system that locks away an unprecedented proportion of those who lack opportunity and promise at fault. Nor is a structure of income distribution that increasingly leaves even the merely well-to-do feeling second-rate an apparent part of the problem.

That many lack opportunity and promise is the fault of a failing system of education. For the sake of national security, power-speak concludes, public schooling must produce a citizenry in which all persons have some tangible opportunity and promise, thereby overcoming the lack of national cohesion, enabling all to stand together, equal peers once again in the enjoyment of opportunity and promise. And thus, we hypothesize, power-speak dispatches the problem of inequality by laying the whole

burden on the imperative of ensuring that no one completes public schooling lacking some iota of opportunity and promise. Thus power-speak deals with inequality without having to consider the difficult problem of relative degrees.

Two paragraphs then wrap up the chairs' preface, issuing in wooden prose "a clarion call to the nation, aiming to magnify the need for change." We see again in this formulation a characteristic hubris, for only power-speak would impute such objective historical force to its words. The chairs leave out any qualifier limiting their power to magnify the need for change to some plausible outcome of a task force report—merely magnifying the public perception of the need, or something like that, letting the historic need for change itself, whatever it really is, to be what it is. But as we will see in further installments of this gloss, power-speak often sacrifices realities to the grandiosities of wishful thinking.

Coming next, "Clueless: Power-Speak on Public Schooling -- 2," a close reading of the "Introduction" to *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*