For someone who was “present at the creation,” revisiting A Nation at Risk is at once satisfying and unsettling. Satisfying because this retrospective confirms that, whatever else may be said of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, its words are still taken seriously by serious people. But unsettling because both the praise and the laments offered by the members of the Koret Task Force seem strangely disconnected from (or at downright variance with) the national concerns that first gave rise to Risk, as well as from its intent and sometimes its actual words.

Given Risk’s impact, it still comes as something of a surprise to me (as it has on other occasions since 1983) to find that the main critical arrow of the task force’s retrospective is misaimed. Observers continue to take exception not to what the report actually said, but to what it failed to say—complaining, for instance, that the report didn’t deal enough with X, Y, or Z, or offered an “incomplete diagnosis” of the problem in American education, or that it wasn’t “radical” enough in its analysis or prescriptions.

Particularly off target is the task force’s allegation that Risk was unconcerned with the problems of elementary education. A careful reading of Risk’s introduction yields a simple explanation: “The Commission’s charter directed it to pay particular attention to teenage youth, and we have done so largely by focusing on high schools. Selective attention was paid to the formative years spent in elementary schools” (emphasis added). While the commission repeatedly recognized the importance of K–8 education as the foundation for secondary school in both its analysis and its recommendations, its focus remained on secondary education. That was the mandate handed down by Terrel H. Bell, then the secretary of education, and supported via the leadership of the commission chairman, David P. Gardner. Rather than wander from issue to issue, the commission stuck to its charge.

In addition, the Koret Task Force claims that the commission “was either too obtuse or too naïve to take on the basic functioning and political control of the system itself.” While the commission’s obtuseness or naïveté are open to...
debate, it is true that the commission did not view the political structures of American education as the most blatant problem. The commission was alarmed more immediately by what it saw as a grave national peril stemming from the steady degeneration of (particularly) secondary education into a kind of curricular smorgasbordism.

With the flawless vision of 20 years of hindsight, it is easy enough for any of us to point out that structural flaws of power and control lay at the root of America’s education problems in 1983 and now—flaws which, in the commission’s defense, they were as aware of as today’s second-guessers. But this was precisely where the commission made a wise choice. Rather than stoke the coals of a fruitless debate over the power politics of American education, particularly at a time when the very fate of the U.S. Department of Education was in doubt, the commission chose to address four crucial reforms—of content, expectations, time, and teaching—that could be worked on immediately, irrespective of the power context.

As to whether Risk was “radical enough” in its prescriptions, it again strikes me that only the perspective from 20 years later could make the commission’s recommendations appear retrospectively tame. The atrophy of memory obscures the fact that they simply weren’t seen that way at the time. On the contrary, the operational implications of the Excellence Commission were received in many quarters as wrenching in both their presuppositions and structural consequences:

- No less than a whole new curriculum was envisioned for high schools, one that would be stringent across the board, but particularly so in areas critical to the national interest—mathematics, science, foreign languages, and computer science. The designation of computer science as an instructional “basic” for American education placed it, for the first time, on a par with math, science, English, the social sciences, and the arts.

- The commission insisted on more rigorous and measurable standards, calling for a national (but not federal) system of student assessment. This recommendation was sufficiently radical to guarantee that states still would be wrestling with it in 2003, in the context of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

- The commission’s recommendation on time was a call for longer school days and years. The issue of time was sufficiently beneath the radar in 1983 that it took the Department of Education another 11 years to address it in any depth. Even today, the in-school time of American students, still driven by a calendar from an agricultural age, does not begin to approach that spent by students in many other countries.

- A side-by-side reading of Risk and various reports on teaching that have appeared since reveals the teaching recommendations of Risk to be eerily prescient, if not always sufficiently radical.

- And may I also gently note that Risk’s passing mention of “current applications of technology” was still more than has been offered in the task force’s report, which mentions technology hardly at all.

That the task force has found power structure problems to be central to its own generation’s concerns about education does not diminish Risk’s prescience. Let history be the measure. Will there be retrospectives on the task force’s report 20 years from now? And, if so, will the report be seen as equally bold, or equally “naïve”?

The Platform
The task force has recommended a challenging alternative to the shortsightedness it perceives in Risk’s call for reform, offering three broad areas for action: accountability, transparency, and choice. Here, it makes some important arguments.

In its discussion of accountability, the task force directly lines up behind the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (and, not incidentally, the Risk report itself) in calling for coherent academic standards in every state, in key academic subjects (regrettably omitting the arts, which Risk mentioned and which the National Education Goals expressly included). The task force rightly lauds the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an important tool for measuring the results of state-applied standards and recommends taking NAEP to the district level. Going beyond Risk, the task force calls for “an accountability system with consequences,” such as rewards and sanctions whose result, it is hoped, will be that taxpayers will no longer have to continue paying for ineffective schools.

All to the good. In some cases, measures as drastic as “contracting out the management of failed schools” may well be called for. For example, my long-ago employer, the Philadelphia school district, has recently contracted out the operation of nearly 50 schools to 5 independent organizations, each espousing a different educational philosophy. With Koret, I want to insist that the key principle be: No matter the education philosophy or the means of delivery for education services, the goal has to be improved student performance. One thing American education reform definitely does not need is more pilot programs that are not held accountable for the results they generate.

One disappointing element of the task force’s report vis-à-vis accountability is its weak endorsement of the No Child Left Behind Act—such as its dissatisfaction over the act’s “relatively slow timelines,” Washington’s “scant leverage over states and districts,” and the “few real consequences on educators whose schools fail.” Perhaps so. But we need to guard against
such critiques’ becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. If we are to avoid a 20-year retrospective on the failures of the Bush administration’s education efforts, it seems to me that the new law should be accorded more support than it is receiving.

The most challenging element of Koret’s comprehensive reform strategy is choice. The choice issue is perhaps the line drawn in the sand of education reform and, therefore, deserves more than advocacy. Even if school choice were used only as a means to bolster accountability, it would reconfigure American education on the basis of an entirely new paradigm.

Because the market solution is so politically volatile, some questions need to be answered before choice can move forward. For instance, will we be sure to hold all charter schools to the same standards of accountability as other schools? As the task force suggests, choice advocates want to exempt charter schools from certain regulatory strictures. But the same acid test must be applied. Exemptions from regulations must be granted because it can be demonstrated that they stand in the way of improving student performance.

In addition, can we apply the market model to American education without dislocating children and resources? The rationale for the market model is usually based on the performance of individual schools and the application of whatever rewards and sanctions that performance evokes. But there are roughly 50 million children in the public schools of the United States who need help now. All 50 million of them are entitled to a high-quality education. It should be readily possible, as a function of the market, to provide a high-quality education for some via charter schools and vouchers now. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that, as we encourage experimentation, the benefits of the education laboratory must ultimately accrue to 50 million children. Let’s expand our choices, but never lose our passion to work with and improve all of education.

In its recommendations regarding transparency, the task force is correct to insist that performance data on schools and school systems should be publicly available as a matter of course to whoever wants them, via web sites or other communication vehicles. Full disclosure on performance is the only way to ensure meaningful accountability. The task force rightly argues that it is singularly important for academic achievement to be reported in both absolute terms (compared with school and system standards) and value-added terms (student progress over stated periods). Recalling the problems the Risk commission had in collecting and making apples-to-apples comparisons of performance data, I am certain that the commissioners would have no problem with Koret’s suggestion of a major overhaul for the National Center for Education Statistics.

Left Out
There are two gaps in the task force’s report that seem worth addressing. First, in its rehearsal of the responses, outcomes, and derivatives of Risk, the one advance since 1983 that gets short shrift from Koret (so short that it is virtually unmentioned) is the recent reform focus not just on teachers as linchpins of the education system but on teaching as the very core of what happens in schools and thus of school reform. This focus on teachers and teaching was one of Risk’s four main areas of concern; it is still largely unmet as a reform agenda item. The task force’s report, for all its focus on student performance, pays sparse attention to teaching.

Second, I invite the task force to take another leaf from Risk’s book. Toward the end of its review of the commission’s work, the task force states, “Education reform will only come about in the United States when the delivery system itself is reconstructed around clear principles, sound ideas and learning-centered rules, incentives and power relationships.” The road ahead must lead, the task force argues, from reform all the way to reconstruction. That assessment is on the money, but to echo the task force’s own assessment of Risk, it doesn’t go far enough. In its concluding word to parents and students, Risk added a further, vitally necessary dimension: “Finally, Risk encouraged parents to “help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues.” Risk admonished its student readers that “you forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning. . . . When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others.”

The final piece of the reform puzzle, then, is morals and character. Civic well-being and societal health depend on both the intellectual and moral status of our citizens. We who seek to improve education must always remember that this, in the end, is why we educate.

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