

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EDUCATION REFORM: THE CASE OF *A NATION AT RISK*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the power structure behind education policy through analysis of the political and economic affiliations of the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, an educational reform report. Analysis of historical documents such as the 1983 reform report provides an explanation for contemporary policy and practice. Many researchers have analyzed the contents of the report and the historical circumstances following its release, but the connections authors shared with the state and their class backgrounds have been ignored as has the class-biased nature of the education policy-making process. Power structure research and a Marxist theoretical perspective are employed in this essay to demonstrate the interlocking network of authors and their shared organizational affiliations and interests. The networks and exploration of the policy-making process demonstrate that education policy resulting from reports such as *A Nation at Risk* is formulated by a power elite, and serves to enhance the interests of the dominant economic class.

### INTRODUCTION

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2002 still causes teacher educators serious concerns. It is a rare day that passes on campus when no prospective or practicing teacher expresses anxiety about NCLB requirements. Teacher educators are sometimes frantic to develop new programs or alter existing ones to address teacher-licensure and test requirements without sacrificing goals of equity and access. To some, NCLB is an unprecedented and unexpected threat upon the educational shores, an Act guided by specific economic objectives. Yet, it would be a mistake to see the provisions of the Act as unique in the history of American education. Indeed, little more than 25 years ago, another attack on public schooling surfaced that fostered many of the same recommendations formulated to ostensibly address the national economic situation. Unlike NCLB, *A Nation at Risk* was issued by the executive branch instead of Congress. It did not become law through actions by the federal government. *A Nation at Risk*, however, was built upon many of the same assumptions about the national economic situation and had similar effects on the education community. Indeed, NCLB is one of the indirect outcomes of that earlier effort to reform American public schooling. *A Nation at Risk* laid the foundations for debate and posited the national educational and economic values that eventually came to legislative fruition with NCLB. Thus, it is important to look closely at the origins of the earlier report and examine it from a class-power perspective since it was written by individuals associated in a variety of ways with a dominant economic class.

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The essence of the education literature regarding the report has been content analysis seeking answers to questions about “what” was written and speculations as to “why.” This study addresses the failure of education researchers to deal with the agents and mechanisms employed in the construction of *A Nation at Risk* which contributes a substantially different answer to the question of “why” it was written. The theoretical perspective employed in the study emphasizes questions of class power and examines the concrete relationships between class forces and policy formation. As an empirical and historical study, this essay provides additional information about policy formation heretofore lacking in the education literature. As a theoretical treatise, it posits explanations for the class-specific recommendations made in *A Nation at Risk*.

### **THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS**

*A Nation at Risk* assumed a direct relationship between education and the condition of the economy.<sup>1</sup> It linked a supposedly ailing economy with decreasing student achievement and lowered educational standards. The flamboyant phraseology and educational prescriptions of *A Nation at Risk* are commonplace in discussions of that education reform initiative, and may even have become cliché. The contents of the report are familiar, as are the many debates surrounding its political and economic goals, but its subtle reactionary and class-specific prejudices may be less well-known. Recent efforts to assess the impact of *A Nation at Risk* have been disappointing because they unequivocally accept the notion that academic achievement was at the heart of the report rather than economic concerns. These assessments continue to neglect the political and economic roots of the report by failing to address questions about the interests and affiliations of the authors or the nature of the policy-making process through which the report was developed.<sup>2</sup>

The empirical questions that should be asked in order to get to the biased root of this reform effort are: Who were the members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), the authors of *A Nation at Risk*? What were their political and class backgrounds? What were their shared connections to the state, corporations, universities, policy-making bodies, and the social elite? Theoretical questions include: To what extent did the construction of the 1983 educational reform report reflect interests ascribable to a dominant class? How did the policy-making process itself contribute structural limitations and biases to the final results? Much of the literature dealing with *A Nation at Risk* has neglected examination of the political and economic backgrounds of the authors, and does not theorize the class-specific education policy-making process that initially set the boundaries for prescriptions for reform.

## DEFINITIONS

For purposes of this essay, it is necessary to operationally define a set of terms within a Marxist perspective. The essay deals with “essentially contested concepts” (Hanson, 1985) such as *power*, *dominant class*, *the state*, and the *power elite*.<sup>3</sup> First, *power* is defined in structural terms as a set of “relationships in society and exercised by individuals and groups based on their location in a given structure” (Isaac, 1987, 28).<sup>4</sup> This definition includes practical norms or customs and traditions, covert official and unofficial connivance, and enduring social relationships that are structurally set. The exercise of power must be seen as contingent. Its limits are set by the way particular individuals and groups choose to deal with their given circumstances.

Second, the *dominant class* is a set of individuals and families (including, but not exclusively, a social elite) who compose an “economic class that has successfully monopolized other power sources to dominate a state-centered society at large” (Mann, 1986, 5). The claim that a particular class is dominant, however, is not meant to imply that it is ultimately successful. G. William Domhoff claims that dominance does not leave other levels of society in a position of total powerlessness. He argues that “[D]omination does not mean total control, but the ability to set the terms under which other groups and classes must operate” (1983, 2).<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to emphasize the power of the dominant class to set the terms for debate, because with respect to policy formation, what is really important about *A Nation at Risk* is not its particular recommendations as much as the fact that it established the philosophical boundaries within which education would operate. This process eventually led to NCLB.

The third term to be defined, *the state*, is a multifaceted concept that refers to “an interconnected network of territorial, institutional, and ideological phenomena” (Barrow, 1993, 24). Under the theoretical perspective employed in this essay, the state can frequently be depended upon to further specific interests; those of the dominant class, which is a capitalist class.

Fourth, the dominant class is the pool from which the *power elite* is most often pulled. The power elite is,

“...composed of men [and women] whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences .... they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society .... not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision” (Mills, 2000, 3-4).

They should be seen as members of a dominant class or “members of a top social stratum, as a set of groups whose members know one another, see one another socially and at business, and so, in making decisions, take one another into account” (11). However, this is not always the case. Not all members of this dominant class are politically active and are therefore not considered part of the power elite. Individuals from other classes sometimes move in and out of the power elite. They occupy a structural or

institutional position of power for a time, and then move out of it, leaving the structural position intact. The extent of this group's power is "subject to historical variation" (20).

### **POWER STRUCTURE RESEARCH**

The Table below lists the authors of *A Nation at Risk* along with their primary affiliations. The list includes Terrel Howard Bell, Secretary of Education, who was appointed by President Reagan and assigned the duty of establishing the NCEE which produced the report. Bell established the Commission, set the agenda and goals, and determined the time-table. The essay includes several Figures that graphically demonstrate the voluntarily listed organizational and interpersonal affiliations of Bell and the other 18 authors of *A Nation at Risk*. The data contained in the Table and Figures include the names of the individual authors of the report followed by his or her initials in parentheses. The Figures reflect the connections that the authors of *A Nation at Risk* had with the state, corporations, universities, foundations, and the social elite. The data provide empirical evidence of membership in the power elite as defined above. The organizations are loosely categorized as follows: (1) The "STATE" includes the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government and its agencies, committees, and councils. It also includes the United Nations affiliations and agencies of state governments such as Departments of Education. Of course, there are great power differentials between these different groups, but this category follows the definition of "state" as including the governmental, coercive, administrative, and ideological subsystems. (2) The category titled "CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS" encompasses Chief Executive Officers of corporations and their Boards of Directors, corporate law firms, banks, and any major corporate-sponsored policy groups. It also includes individuals who own their businesses, even if those enterprises are rather small. (3) "UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR INSTITUTES" incorporates all universities attended by individuals as well as those in which the individual taught or was an administrator, trustee, or visiting lecturer. It also includes universities that awarded honorary degrees, and any research institutes directly affiliated with a specific university. (4) The category titled "FOUNDATIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS" encompasses research institutes that could not be tied to a university, and includes private foundations, think tanks, and societies. Organizations that could not be categorized but were affiliated with more than one individual were listed in this category. (5) The "SOCIAL ELITE" lists private clubs attended by a select group, fraternities, sororities, and private societies.

As noted above, all listings in biographical sources are voluntary so there exists the possibility of numerous false negatives. The guiding thesis for assigning individuals to organizational categories was to err on the side of negative affiliations. It was the case that many affiliations could not be isolated under any of the categories applied, so those affiliations were not added to the networks. It was also the case that some institutions appeared several times for a particular individual. In that instance, the institution was drawn into the networks only once.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1: Authors and Primary Affiliations**


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1. T. H. Bell (THB) Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education, Washington DC.
2. D. P. Gardner (DPG) Chair of NCEE, President of the University of Utah, President-Elect, University of California
3. Y.W. Larsen (YWL) Vice-Chair of NCEE and Immediate Past President of the San Diego School Board, CA
4. W.O. Baker (WOB) Chairman of Board (Retired) Bell Telephone Labs
5. M.A. Campbell (MAC) Former Commissioner of Education, NE
6. E. A. Crosby (EAC) Principal, Northern High School in Detroit, MI
7. C.A. Foster, Jr. (CAF) Immediate Past-President of Foundation for Teaching Economics, San Francisco, CA
8. N.C. Francis (NCF) President of Xavier University, New Orleans, LA
9. A. B. Giamatti (ABG) President of Yale University in New Haven, CT
10. S.B. Gordon (SBG) President Highline Community College Midway, WA
11. R.V. Haderlein (RVH) Immediate Past-President of the National School Boards Association
12. G.Holton (GH) Mallinckrodt Professor of Physics and of the History of Science, Harvard University
13. A.Y. Kirk (AYK-RAK) Kirk Associates in Mecosta, MI
14. M.S. Marston (MSM) Member of the Virginia State Board of Education
15. A.H. Quie (AHQ) Former Governor of MN
16. F.D. Sanchez, (FDS) Superintendent of Schools Albuquerque, NM
17. G.T. Seaborg (GTS) University Professor of Chemistry and Nobel Laureate, University of California- Berkeley
18. J. Sommer (JS) National Teacher of the Year for 1981-1982, New Rochelle High School, New Rochelle, NY
19. R. Wallace (RW) Principal of Lutheran High School East, Cleveland Heights, OH

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### **INTERLOCKING CONNECTIONS AND POINTS OF DIVERGENCE**

In a nation where the government is closely tied to large corporations and a social elite, policy would be class specific. The cumulative effect of upper class power would establish a situation wherein the policy-planning process itself is institutionalized through time so that its systematic conduct would rarely be questioned. In such a context, education policy would be more likely to serve the interests of a dominant class. If this is the case with *A Nation at Risk*, there should be ample evidence that indicates multilayered connections between the individuals who actually construct policy and the state, corporations, universities, foundations and think tanks, and a social upper class. This essay provides evidence that can serve as a starting point for class analysis.

At first glance, the authors of the report appear to be a diverse group of educators and political officials, with one corporate chairman and a parent of school children. Indeed, *The New York Times* reported that Annette Kirk (AYK-RAK) was “a mother of four from Mecosta, Mich. who was the parent representative,”<sup>7</sup> leaving readers to infer that even typical or common folk whose children attended public schools were involved. Bell (THB) referred to the reform movement spurred on by *A Nation at Risk* as “grass-roots” (Bell, 1984, 531), and the report itself discussed the different ideas and arguments it heard during several public hearings and in NCEE commissioned papers. It stated that “In many ways, the membership of the Commission itself reflected that diversity and difference of opinion during the course of its work” (NCEE, 1983, 3). One is left with the impression that this diverse group must have all reached

the same conclusion through a democratic process, and therefore that conclusion must be accurate and unbiased.

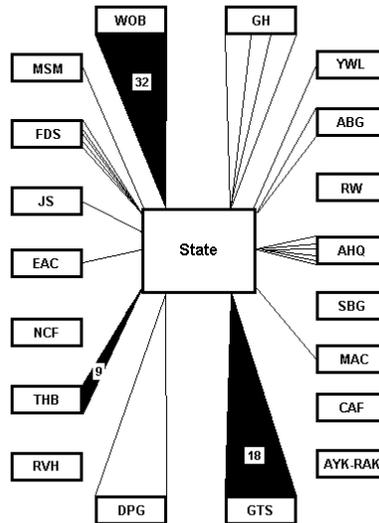
Contrary to what was portrayed, *A Nation at Risk* did not represent a cross-section of opinion or views of people from different positions in American society. Rather, it reflected the point of view of an interconnected group of policy elites. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the organization network that illustrates the connections between the authors of *A Nation at Risk* and the state. Baker (WOB), for instance, had 32 connections to the state including membership in military groups such as the Advisory Board of Military Personnel and Supplies, Air Force Systems Command, and Oakridge National Laboratory. He was involved with other state organizations such as the Commission on Critical Choices for Americans, Energy Policy Office, Federal Energy Administration, National Bureau of Standards, National Institute of Health, National Research Council, National Security Agency, several presidential advisory groups, and many more. Quie (AHQ) was a former member of Congress and Governor of the State of Minnesota. Seaborg (GTS) was Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission for a time, and was a member of the President's Science Advisory Committee, Federal Radiation Council, National Aeronautics and Space Council, Federal Council on Science and Technology, and more. Figure 1 illustrates that *some* of the authors of *A Nation at Risk* were highly and intricately connected to the federal government.

Some of the federal connections are especially significant with regard to policy formation. Membership in these organizations indicates membership in the power elite. Baker's (WOB) connections to the National Security Agency and the Federal Emergency Management Advisory Board are indicative of a highly placed, influential individual who was actively engaged in federal policy construction. Giamatti (ABG) was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) which is the largest policy formation body in the United States. Indeed, the CFR was a primary actor in the creation of the post-World War II international economy, and its relationship to the upper class and corporate community has been clearly demonstrated.<sup>8</sup> Some of the authors were connected to international organizations such as the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Atomic Energy Agency, and the Limited Test Ban Treaty. These relationships that some authors had with federal policy boards, the executive branch of the government, and international organizations support the inference that they were politically powerful. These authors made decisions with far-reaching consequences; their positions allowed them to transcend the environments of ordinary men and women; and, they had access to major hierarchies.

On the other hand, there was a minority of individuals with few to no connections to the state other than their membership on the NCEE and their role as State and local educators. A small number who wrote the reform report were isolates; that is, they were probably not affiliated with the power elite on a continuing basis. No connections between Foster (CAF) and the state or corporations, for instance, could be located in voluntary sources. Although Foster once served as president of the Foundation for Teaching Economics, he is considered an isolate since this affiliation is not shared with any of the authors of the

same report. The Foundation for Teaching Economics, however, is an important policy-discussion group, but to err on the side of caution, Foster is not considered part of the power elite.

**Figure 1: Organization Network: *A Nation at Risk*, State**



Figures 2 through 5 (available from author) illustrate the affiliations authors had with corporations and business, universities and their institutes, foundations and associations, and the social elite, respectively. It is important to note that several of the individuals who were connected to the state, were also involved in corporations. This is not the case for all of the authors of *A Nation at Risk*. Those individuals who did not have numerous connections to the state, did not have numerous connections to corporations and business. Several authors had multiple connections to universities and their institutes, but few had any connection to the social elite. It is important to note that Baker (WOB) and Seaborg (GTS) had numerous connections with the state, corporations and business, universities and their institutes, foundations and associations, and the social elite. Those connections total 117 for Baker and 97 for Seaborg.

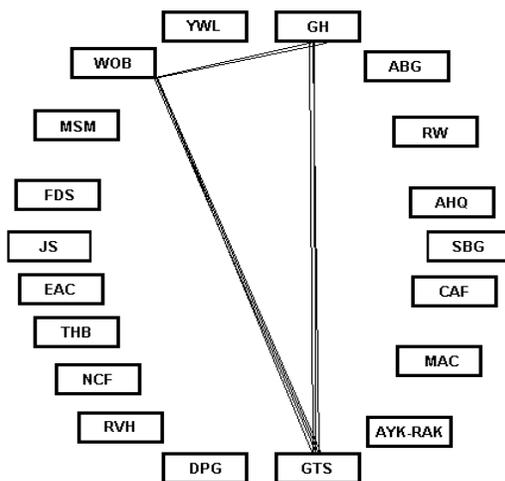
Most important with respect to membership in the power elite are the connections that authors had with corporations and business and the social upper class. Only 5 members of the NCEE were affiliated with corporations. Baker was the most intricately connected with the corporate community. Baker, Seaborg, Holton, and Gardner (WOB, GTS, GH, DPG) had the most connections to the social elite. Membership in Sigma Xi, the Bohemian Club, and Colonial Dames of America is especially indicative of upper class standing, as is attendance at elite private schools. It is important to note that affiliation with an elite university is not enough to qualify for membership in the power elite. Combined with private club membership, corporate affiliations, and relationships with think tanks and policy-making groups, however, attendance at or teaching in an elite university allow an individual access to seats of power that ordinary persons do not have.

Figures 6 through 10 (available from author) illustrate the interpersonal networks or *shared* contacts among the authors and organizations. Shared connections are extremely important because they frequently serve to strengthen the social ties that augment class-consciousness. Figure 11 demonstrates the complexity of these interlocking relationships.

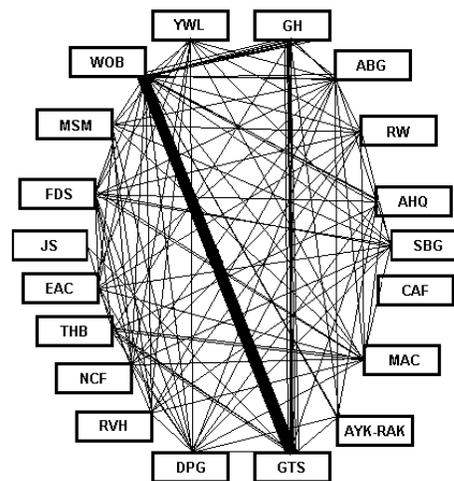
The intricate interlocks demonstrated by the data are augmented by other relationships with the state. Some of the shared connections include the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Institute of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF) which is directed by the National Science Board, the Office of Science and Technology (OST), the National Research Council (NRC), and the Presidents Science Advisory Committee (PSAC).

It is crucial to point out that there is a significant disparity between the number and type of affiliations claimed by the highly connected authors of the report and other authors. In the Figures, a triangle of connections is visible between one set of three authors and another for all of the others. The gulf that divides the two sets of individuals, those intricately connected from those who have few to no connections, is significant. The intricate connections allow for the inference that few individuals were highly influential and would have had a great deal of power with respect to policy formation.

**Figure 10: Interpersonal Network – Social Elite**



**Figure 11: Shared Connections**



### INTERPRETATION OF POLICY CONSTRUCTION

In a letter to Carl D. Perkins, Bell wrote that he was establishing a “blue-ribbon” commission “comprised of 19 respected citizens from the education community, State and local government, and the general public.”<sup>9</sup> The wording in the letter was notably similar to the wording of the final report, employing words such as “mediocrity” and “excellence.” It provided Perkins with information about the problem to be studied, the sources the NCEE would use to make its final recommendations, the individuals who would write the report, and the time expected to complete it. These elements of the policy formulation process were decided in advance.

The policy-planning process begins with the identification of specific problems so that the parameters of discussion are established from the outset. This limits the range of possible solutions that are considered. The policy-formation process ends in government where solutions are constructed into policy. Between the beginning and the end “there is a complex network of people and institutions that plays an important role in sharpening the issues and weighing the alternatives” (Domhoff, 2002, 71). It is during this process that interests are ascertained, articulated, and refined. Policy constructors from the dominant class and subordinate groups either clarify and solidify their interests, or those interests are amended, altered, or silenced. Either way, a consensus is reached through compromise and particular interests are transcended during the process. This point becomes most obvious in the records of the public hearings that the NCEE held, and in the selective emphasis of specific recommendations made in the NCEE commissioned papers.

Between 1981 and 1983 the NCEE held six public hearings in different cities across the nation. Each hearing was directed at a particular topic which promoted specific educational reforms, and was chaired by a member of the commission. Each hearing began with testimony from a number of *invited corporate and academic experts*, some of whom had submitted commissioned papers for the NCEE to review. In the Denver meeting, Linda Sorrento, an invited guest speaker, stressed that:

“Perhaps most importantly, we need to establish some kind of vehicle where we can blend the three worlds of government, education, and private industry. We need to support each other more and empower each other on levels that we really have not” (Sorrento, Denver, 77).

Sorrento recommended that the three groups work together to develop curriculum because educators need to know “what the needs of industry are” so they can help enhance the marketable skills of students.

The NCEE believed that poor educational performance was at the root of economic problems. Expressions of concern about values or virtue came to the forefront in the public hearings, and those concerns were tied to the educational decay that was seen to be responsible for economic crises. Instruction in academic subjects was a way of improving character or behavior. Some of the commissioned papers relied upon declining test scores as evidence of decay in values, thereby accepting the definition of the problem advanced by elites. Lauren and Daniel Resnick recommended more emphasis on standards, tracking, and examinations. These authors argued that there was a “lack of stringent course requirements” and “weak content and poor instruction within courses” in many cases (Resnick & Resnick, 1982, 35). Alexander Astin imparted an elitist attitude when he cited declining achievement skills and claimed that college students were less well-prepared than 10-15 years ago due to the “watering down” of public high school curricula (Astin, 1982, 46).

Most of the commissioned papers, however, were optimistic and supportive of education as providing significant gains in a variety of areas. Many of them cast doubt on cross-national comparisons of test scores, and advocated a more open or liberal approach than what was finally suggested in *A Nation at Risk*. Martin Maehr, for instance, wrote that there was little evidence that the current generation had lost

the achievement ethic (Maehr, 1982), and Donald Holsinger reported that there were no significant variations in achievement between the U. S. and other countries (Holsinger, 1982). Barbara Burn and Christopher Hurn wrote that a comparison between achievement scores in different countries was not valid because America had different values and expectations of education. The American system was a highly diversified one, according to these researchers, and valued equality, utility, and practicality. Burn and Hurn stated that American students were individualistic and suspicious of government authority, so comparisons between countries were not very useful (Burn & Hurn, 1982).

Several commissioned papers recommended more freedom of choice in schools rather than an emphasis on basics. In her paper, Deborah Stipek advocated a somewhat Deweyan approach to education with hands-on experiences (Stipek, 1982). Beatrice Ward, John Mergendoller, and Alexis Mitman recommended more practice for high school students in making elective choices, more cooperative learning experiences, and more emphasis on social skills (Ward, Mergendoller, & Mitman, 1982). Frederick Rudolph also suggested extensive choices for students and faculty and celebrated the ways in which American education disperses control (Rudolph, 1982). Opposition to tracking and pull-out programs was expressed by Thomas Good (Good, 1982), and Zelda Gamson condemned overzealous budget-cutters because working people and women suffered most from cuts (Gamson, 1982). Several authors questioned the value of imposing standards by external examinations as other countries do because Americans value encouraging the average and motivating the less-capable rather than shoring up a set of centrally-determined, unyielding standards. These more liberal views and recommendations were nevertheless ignored in *A Nation at Risk*. The selective use of evidence and contentions found in the commissioned papers was accompanied by a selective use of testimony from public hearings. As stated earlier, the issues to be discussed were limited at the outset.

The Commission also selectively addressed concerns of its own members. Pull-out programs were attacked extensively in the second public hearing, and when corporate influence on schools was criticized by Crosby (EAC) in the Denver hearing, Campbell (MAC) responded as the chairperson with "It's a complex problem I think being pointed out. Are there other questions?"<sup>10</sup> which effectively cut off further discussion. In addition, Sommer (JS) questioned whether the educational situation was really as bad as it had been portrayed. Yet, when *A Nation at Risk* was released, it did not mention the hesitation on the part of these educators to increase testing, involve corporations in decision-making, or depict the educational situation as seriously flawed.<sup>11</sup>

The first public hearing held by the NCEE was devoted to science, mathematics, and technology education. Seaborg (GTS) stated in his opening remarks that "the strength of our technological and scientific enterprise will do much in the coming decades to determine the economic well-being, security, as well as the health and safety of Americans." Although Seaborg was interested in the "competence of professional scientists and engineers," he was also concerned with,

"... the overwhelming remaining proportion of the population who do not become professional scientists and engineers, but who need to understand science and

technology if they are to function effectively as technicians, repairmen and technology users in business, government and the armed services.”

A definite degree of elitism crept into his account that bemoaned the lack of scientific and technological knowledge of working people and the middle class. Seaborg employed phrases that differentiated professional scientists from average citizens. References to the education of the former included such phrases as “sophisticated” and “most capable,” but the latter was frequently referred to as “the rest of the population.”<sup>12</sup>

In the fourth public hearing, Clifford Sjogren, Dean of Admissions at the University of Michigan, contended that those who design curricula must “give them [gifted and talented students] a more rigorous educational program. And the curriculum, then, should be less flexible for those students than it is now.”<sup>13</sup> Baker (WOB) agreed, and in the public hearing held in Cambridge he spoke about encouraging genius in science and engineering. Elitism was visible in remarks made throughout this hearing that focused on gifted and talented education. Marcel Kinsbourne, stated that “The important point is that there is no kind of experience which can push up the potential set by the biological limitations of the brain, but there are many kinds of experiences that can pull it down.”<sup>14</sup> There was a great deal of elitist rhetoric at this hearing expressed by William Oliver Baker about the importance of productively using the “best minds,” the intellectual “lighthouses,” the “great and glorious Miltons.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the efforts of some, not much about race and class issues was explored in *A Nation at Risk* beyond a slight mention. The NCEE recommended that the federal government assume responsibility for educating gifted and talented, socioeconomically-disadvantaged, minorities, and handicapped students. Protecting the right of minorities to be educated was mentioned several times, but beyond this, little was said.

Virtue was mentioned prominently in the NCEE public hearing held in Denver in 1982. Invited guest speakers and Commission members discussed the problem at length, and Roy Forbes, the Assistant Director of Programs for Education Commission of the States and former Director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, claimed that the first thing business asks for is “send us the people with the correct attitudes.”<sup>16</sup> In the same meeting, a staff member representing the Department Chief of Naval Education and Training for Research and Development, Martha Brownlee, argued that attitudinal development was essential with respect to the military because people need to know how to handle a disciplined environment. Crosby (EAC) suggested that the problem is not necessarily limited to schooling:

“I keep hearing attitude, attitude .... you might find that we [educators] had the same problem with that youngster, too, that we had a problem with attitude, and along with a poor attitude he probably had very poor attendance, very poor punctuality and consequently, he managed to get out not really having those particular skills.”<sup>17</sup>

A long discussion about the importance of discipline and structure ensued. Later in the hearing, the Executive Director of the American Institute of Banking, Kathy Collins Smith, emphasized the need for “communication skills; customer relations, telephone etiquette; personal financial skills; interviewing skills

and personal appearance skills.”<sup>18</sup> These “virtues” would contribute to a better “attitude” which in turn would benefit those in control of the workplace.

In reviewing values education in other countries, Judith Torney-Purta and John Schwille from the University of Michigan, stated in a commissioned paper for the NCEE that the Commission should “give extensive attention to values in its report” and what and how values should be taught in schools. A major issue for such an agenda, as for this paper,” they claimed, “is how to reconcile striving for consensus with tolerance for dissent” (Torney-Purta & Schwille, 1982, 66). The authors argued that although teaching shared values might be important in elementary school, in the junior high schools, criticism should be taught. These suggestions for the teaching of criticism were not found in *A Nation at Risk*.

During the Chicago public hearing, the Assistant Vice President of Academic Services at Berkeley, Alice Cox stated that her university only admitted the upper 12 and a half percent of high school graduates in the state, and admission requirements were being raised still. “Some people would accuse us of being elitists.” “In the 1950s,” she said,

“when there was a certain degree of excellence, at least in science and mathematics, in education, people who fed into institutions such as the University of California, came from traditional high schools. And by “traditional,” I mean certain high schools. The university was not accessible to all people. That is one of our goals.”<sup>19</sup>

Cox implied that university admissions are part of the ongoing class struggle, as did Clifford Sjogren who recognized that his support for Advanced Placement classes benefitted only certain groups and that it may be seen as “an elitist attitude.”<sup>20</sup>

Numerous disparaging remarks were made by guest speakers and Commission members in the NCEE public hearings about specific class groupings that indicate class-specific concerns. For instance, Martha Brownlee stated in Denver, “Today, all of the [military] services are enjoying a productive recruiting environment, caused perhaps by our economic problems .... But it is disquieting to find that those reading below the ninth-grade level, which is the minimum to respond to safety instructions and administrative requirements and not fall over the pointy end of the ship, will be about 24 percent.”<sup>21</sup> Crosby (EAC) broached the idea that there may be a conflict of interest between big business and education, though, since young people are playing video games and arcade games at all hours and business fights to keep those arcades open during school hours. Martha Brownlee stated that the conflict of interest is seen in the military as well since they have to work to separate their people from learned family values. Crosby said

“We probably need to stop the corporations because they want kids from all over having good basic skills but then all of a sudden they decide to move down in lower Mississippi where they can get cheap labor because the people don't have those skills and they pay less taxes.”<sup>22</sup>

This tendency for Commission members and guest speakers to stereotype based on class and race was visible in a number of disparaging remarks made by Kirk (RAK-AYK). With respect to immigrants during the first NCEE public hearing, she stated:

“ ... just as you have people who have come here from other countries, immigrants who never learn to speak the language, and so consequently they are always with a problem and then their children go on. Are we going to have a generation of people who never will be able to use computers, and then the next generation, in a sense, will be trained in that thought process?”

“There's a lot of backwoods people in this country,” she argued.<sup>23</sup> In the third hearing, Kirk also stereotyped women and remarked that once women reviewed all of their opportunities and discovered that they were capable of going into engineering, law, or medicine, “they may decide that they are really happier teaching.”<sup>24</sup>

The interlocking network that connects some of the authors of *A Nation at Risk* demonstrates the workings of the power elite in a class-specific context of policy-construction. Most important, the selective use of evidence provided by commissioned papers and participants in the public hearings promotes the inference that the development of education reform was class-specific.

### **A CLASS POWER ANALYSIS**

Education policy was, in 1983, constructed within a specific political and economic climate, not within a social vacuum. Policy was intricately tied into class power, and the state agents and mechanisms that developed it cannot be seen as neutral. State actions and the individuals involved in them frequently serve, intentionally or unintentionally, the dominant economic class. Under these circumstances, education policy in 1983 was shaped by an interlocking elite with particular views of economic problems and educational solutions to those perceived problems. The views espoused ruled out dissenting opinions and ultimately established the terrain for debate about American education which indirectly resulted in NCLB.

In 1983, education policy that did not need Congressional approval presented what appeared to be an inexpensive, easily accomplished, relatively conflict-free way of addressing economic problems. The conservative economic agenda was solidified under Reagan into a pro-big-business, anti-labor agenda. The reactionary political and economic climate of the 1980s established conditions conducive to reactionary ideologies that supported education reform for the sake of corporate and elite interests.

The education reform report is an artifact of an on-going class struggle. The role of the state, at this time, was to arrange for conditions conducive to economic growth which benefitted a specific economic class and enhanced productivity for the sake of a specific class. The role of education was ideological in the sense that the correct values must be taught; it was material in the sense that stability and productivity are essential to continued accumulation, and those would require an obedient and productive work force; and, it was political in the sense that certain groups needed specific conditioning, and

government could play a part in that. To maintain its legitimacy and its democratic character, however, the state must devise policy that does not look biased.

The content of *A Nation at Risk* was informed by the papers that were commissioned and the public hearings that were held, along with the testimony of the expert community. Some papers carried more weight than others in the final recommendations, however, and some testimony was relied upon more readily. This information helped the authors of the report to clarify and flesh out their interests during the policy-formation process. The conservative political and economic context of the 1980s helped promote a conservative ideology that worked to the detriment of working people, women, and people of color; it helped individual authors, affiliated with the dominant class, develop their consciousness in conjunction with those of capitalism; it made it easier to silence or convert interests that might be contentious; and, it supported a specific set of material interests.

The report was a product of a relatively unified power elite rather than a product of some sort of widespread, public consensus. A class power analysis puts into perspective the policy-formation process as part of a class struggle. Future efforts to analyze education reform may be more robust if augmented with power structure research and interpreted through a Marxian lens. These analyses may be necessary, if not sufficient, for this task. *A Nation at Risk* should be seen as an important step in the redesigning of education debates to support dominant class interests. Viewing *A Nation at Risk* in this context allows education researchers to understand the connections between NCLB and the ways in which the terms of contemporary debate have historically been determined by specific interests.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Several reports issued that year made similar connections. See especially, Task Force of the Business-Higher Education Forum, *America's Competitive Challenge: The Need for a National Response*, (Washington, D. C.: Business-Higher Education Forum, 1983); Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy, *Making the Grade*, (NY: Twentieth Century Fund, 1983); and, Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve our Nation's Schools*, (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1983).
2. *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years After A Nation at Risk*, (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 1983) is a case in point. The volume is a collection of essays, edited by David T. Gordon, that, for the most part, do not approach questions about political and economic roots of reform.
3. W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56, 1955-1956, and Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with our Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Both emphasize the historical contingency of the terms.
4. Although Issac does not define himself as a Marxist, his definition of power is relevant for this essay.
5. Domhoff emphasizes that his perspective is not Marxist.
6. It is important to note that simply because an individual received a grant or fellowship from a specific corporation, university, or foundation, interest alignment with the goals of the granting agency should not be inferred. It must also be noted that not all affiliations are equally influential in developing class interests. This essay does not attempt to precisely measure the relative influence of diverse institutions on establishing class interests.

7. Fiske, 1983, B-6. Referring to Kirk as the parent representative is highly misleading. Annette Kirk was the wife of Russell Amos Kirk, a friend and colleague of William F. Buckley, Jr., a well-known and highly respected conservative. Russell Amos Kirk authored several books and articles about conservatism; held meetings, dinners, and weekend retreats for young conservatives at the family residence; supported many young conservatives' endeavors; and, had a remarkable impact on the perspective. (See *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*, (NY: Devin-Adair, 1957) and *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Gateway, 1989). This is not meant to imply that Annette, as his wife and business partner, unequivocally shared his perspective. It would be naïve to assume, however, that Russell had no impact on her views given many of the conservative remarks Annette made in the NCEE meetings. In this essay, Annette's initials are combined with Russell's (AYK-RAK), but some of the organizational connections were his.

8. See, for example, Domhoff, 2002, 83-88.

9. A copy of this letter and all citations from the NCEE public hearings can be found in Bell's personal papers housed in Special Collections in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. For this letter, reference August 26, 1981. Hereafter, references to hearings will cite only author, city in which the hearing was held, and page number embedded in text. Commissioned papers are listed in the references.

10. Campbell, Denver, 59.

11. After the report was issued, Representative Carl D. Perkins (a Democrat from Kentucky and Chairperson of the House Labor and Education Committee) conducted an informal survey of the authors of *A Nation at Risk*. Eight out of the 10 members who replied to Perkins' survey disagreed with the interpretation offered by White House. The respondents said that there was a need "for more---not less federal support for education." Perkins also asked whether the members "backed the president's proposals for reduced spending and abolition of the Department of Education." The answer was an "emphatic" no. See *The Washington Post*, August 5, 1983, A-19.

12. Seaborg, Stanford, 10-11.

13. Sjogren, Chicago, 24.

14. Kinsbourne, Cambridge, 33.

15. Baker, Cambridge, 89.

16. Forbes, Denver, 29.

17. Crosby, Denver, 54-55.

18. Smith, Denver, 83-84.

19. Cox, Chicago, 42, 112-113.

20. Sjogren, Chicago, 26.

21. Brownlee, Denver, 42-43.

22. Crosby, Denver, 59.

23. Kirk, Stanford, 259, 289.

24. Kirk, Atlanta, 78.

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