

GRANDTOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



A VIBRANT DEMOCRACY IS dependent on many factors. Two of the most important of these factors are public education and economic opportunity. Without their strong presence in a free society, democracy will cease to exist. More than a century ago American industrialist Andrew Carnegie recognized the vital importance of literacy and education as the cornerstone of free society. He set about building public libraries, hundreds of them, across the great American frontier. Carnegie, with his own fortune, brought books to small town America at the dawn of the 20th Century. America subsequently took its place as leader of the world, launched from a platform that embraced freedom of thought as a central aspect of a literate society.

Education—then, now, always—is not simply the rhetorical cramming of societal norms down the mental throats of citizens. In the Socratic sense, education must be free of restraint enabling people to reach for the intellectual stars, to explore, expand horizons and discover truths, both personal and possibly universal. America, as much or more than any civilization, has proven that such lofty goals are completely within reach. And in reaching the stars we have also created a complex democracy based on individual and collective freedom of thought and behavior.

Not all people on earth understand this axiom. In Iraq, and in most of the Middle East, as well as in many parts of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and beyond, free education and a society fostering economic opportunity are unknown commodities. For that matter, there are enormous segments of the American landscape, including massive population centers in both urban and rural sectors of this nation, that do not grasp the equation that education and opportunity equal freedom.

Where then does America stand today on the importance of literacy in a free society, a free world?

It seems that one significant aspect of our difficulty in meeting the educational needs of citizens is a matter of numbers. In America, and in many nations of the world, the burgeoning population of people, exposed via technology to the wonders of life, are unable to integrate the reality of their existence with the promise of a new age. As the disparity between those with access to education and those with little or none widens, a two-tiered, dual society fuels friction that leads to conflict.

In a perfect world, America would serve the pursuit of freedom far better by foregoing bombs and spending tax dollars to build schools and libraries in lands where none exist. But it is not a perfect world. It never has been. And despots, including polit-

ical and religious leaders, insist on enslaving the minds of citizens by keeping them in the dark. After all, education opens minds, and open minds refuse to be controlled. This is the ultimate promise of the American value system.

It is also part of the paradox of American involvement in Iraq and elsewhere. Clearly, so complex. It is not just a regime of tyranny that enslaves human beings. It is the absence of enlightenment among the populace. Just as water grows the seed in the field, freedom must have literacy and opportunity by its side in order to flourish.

On the subject of literacy, education and their impact on the course of freedom, Americans must ask the tough question: how can the people of Iraq be expected to embrace free and open education and the pursuit of a literate society for men and women when we are failing at home?

And make no mistake, on many levels we are failing. We have managed, over the past two decades, to take the best public education model in the world and turn it into a disjointed system of privilege and unfulfilled promise. Priorities placing social engineering in classrooms over and above basic learning are being re-evaluated. In the not too distant future, if we do not correct that path and level the playing field, we will undermine the very freedom, the democracy, that we cherish right here in America—let alone fail in our efforts to introduce democracy over tyranny outside our borders.

The good news is that many communities recognize the serious nature of the problem and they are working on improving education one student, one school, and one tax dollar or private sector dollar at a time. The overall challenge is, once again, a numbers proposition. How do we provide for a massive population base if all participants do not contribute to the goal? Otherwise stated, a free society cannot bear the weight of overwhelming numbers expecting entitlement. A majority must be involved, do their fair share, participate in the tax burden, and work together to provide education and a substantial level of literacy for all people. This is true in America, and it's true in Iraq and elsewhere if progress is ever to be made.

To be fair, it is a far greater challenge for the leaders of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine and so many other nations struggling to find their place in the 21st Century. Without education there can be no freedom. Without freedom there can be no peace. Without peace life has little chance of finding greater meaning. We can do better. We must do better. Our lives and the lives of our children depend on it. **GT**

Bruce Cook is the creator of Grand Tour Magazine. He is a twice-weekly columnist for the Los Angeles Times/Daily Pilot, and serves as Editor of the prestigious Bay Window Magazine. Cook has been heard on San Diego radio for the past five years, and is an Emmy nominated television writer and producer responsible for such programs as Entertainment Tonight.