

Deaf Education and American Politics-- Part 1: The Dynamic Unity of a Free Society

By Brian Riley

This article is the first in a series of articles which will examine how current federal and state laws which relate to the education of Deaf students were designed and how they function as a part of American society as a whole. The history of the education of the Deaf will be touched upon in order to give a fuller explanation of today's social circumstances, which will help parents understand how they can become better advocates for their children when making arrangements to set up their child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Deaf education in the public schools in the United States is subject to complex laws--laws which arose out of complex historical circumstances. Yet there is one document that was written in the middle of the 20th century which served as a tremendously important "social blueprint" that set the goals and general direction of what came after on the American education scene. That document was actually hundreds of pages long and was issued as a report in six volumes over the Winter of 1947-48. It was the result of a commission appointed by President Truman and was titled: "Higher Education for American Democracy," and is often referred to as being the "Truman Commission Report."

Although higher education reform was the specific purpose of the Truman Commission, the Commission addressed itself to the larger issue of education in general and the role that education plays in a democratic society. Historically, the term "democracy" simply referred to the idea of "majority rule." In that older, or historical sense of the term, the US was not established to be a democracy, because our Founding Fathers were fearful of the possibility of the tyranny of the majority, and they wrote the Constitution in a way that sets limits on the types of laws that the majority can enact. But in the 20th century the term "democracy" came to take on a new meaning.

With the rise of Communism and Fascism in the early 20th century overseas, many felt that there should be an "-ism" type of word used to help bring into clear focus the difference between our way of life as contrasted with Communists' and Fascists'. Instead of an "-ism" word, the term "democracy" came to be used in a new way to refer to the concept of "equal treatment under the law" and the central role this plays in a free society. According to the principle of equal treatment (also called "equal protection"), when it comes to the relationship between an individual and the government, no individual should be given any special status over any other individual. This fosters equal opportunity and goes along with the idea that individuals need to respect each other's rights. Each individual is free to act in ways that do not encroach upon the rights of others. So the United States is a democracy, in this newer sense of the term, and that's what defines and sets us apart from authoritarian or totalitarian systems. That is our political identity as a nation.

The Truman Commission Report was breathtaking in the scope and power of its message. It served as a rousing call for responsible civic participation on the part of everyone, in response to the social emergency the world was facing due to the gap between the fast pace of our technological development compared with the slower pace of our social development. As the Report stated in its preface: "The American Nation is not only a union of 48 different States; it is also a union of an indefinite number of diverse groups of varying size. Of and among these diversities our free society seeks to create a dynamic unity. Where there is economic, cultural, or religious tension, we undertake to effect democratic reconciliation, so as to make of the national life one continuous process of interpersonal, intervocational, and intercultural cooperation."

In effect, President Truman, by establishing the Commission, had initiated the process of a nationhood journey of discussion, introspection and personal and community development. After the end of World War II, the US was now playing a leading role in world politics, and one of the main points of the Truman Commission Report was that we needed to get our act together at home if we wanted to be able to be a good example to the world and be a responsible and effective participant in world political affairs.

It's impossible to overstate the pivotal social and political importance of World War II and its aftermath. By winning the war, along with its allies, the US proved to the world that freedom was the way to go. Previously, some people thought that a dictator might be able to mobilize a country toward productive achievement by being able to issue orders from the top that avoided supposedly unnecessary duplication of effort. But the key to productiveness and prosperity in society is not obedience to authority. The key is the dynamic nature provided by the diversified creativity of a free society's members.

Many Black soldiers, sailors, and pilots had fought heroically in the war. They were actually fighting for a "double victory" that included not only fighting for victory overseas, but also at the same time proving their worth in order to bring about the end of racism at home. Their efforts began to be rewarded in July of 1948 when President Truman issued the famous executive order that desegregated the US Armed Forces. In addition, President Truman also called for the end of other types of discrimination in the military, including discrimination based on religion, color and ancestry.

So the Truman Commission was grappling with the unique historical circumstances that existed at the end of the war, including the pressing problems created on the international scene due to the development of the atomic bomb. Also, multitudes of veterans were returning home to resume their normal lives, and the Commission supported the idea of the G.I. Bill that had been created to encourage them to attend college. Many Americans were undereducated, and the commission foresaw that millions more could be attending college if they had the opportunity to do so. The US needed a more highly educated populace because of technological development and the complexity of modern life. In order to meet these challenges, it was important that we be able to shed the backwards practices of racial, sex, and religious discrimination.

One of the major downsides which was part of implementing all these plans was the problems inherent in the nature of large bureaucracies. Congressman Graham Barden of North Carolina summarized the problem fairly well several years later during a May 5, 1954 hearing of the House Committee on Education and Labor. Gallaudet President Leonard Elstad was testifying before the committee and had hinted that White House bureaucrats in the Bureau of the Budget (now called the "OMB") were taking over effective control of determining Gallaudet's future path. Speaking in reference to the Bureau of the Budget, Rep. Barden remarked in response that that agency had: "in recent years, taken themselves too darned seriously," and had "set themselves up to direct, supervise, guide and control." Barden went on to explain: "But that is not so unlike a lot of agencies in the last many years, who after they had bedded down and trimmed their nests and so forth, they get pretty haughty."

President Elstad wanted to expand Gallaudet, in order to make accommodations for more students, without realizing that there was going to be a "bulge" in the population of Deaf students down the road due to an epidemic of the German measles which was to come in the early 1960s. And the way that state-level bureaucrats reacted to this temporary "Rubella Bulge" in the population of Deaf students was going to set the stage for major trends in the field of Deaf education that continue to this day.