

**The big lie in 1983 that put K12 education policy on a trajectory ending in total chaos 40 years later—  
The Nation At Risk Report. James Harvey, a staffer for the commission that produced the report  
reveals the chicanery involved in that specious report.**

### **Background to Nation at Risk**

1. Libertarian Economist Milton Friedman in the 1950's advocated that the government's role in education should be limited to providing vouchers. (In 2006 Friedman suggested to the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) that the government should have no role whatever in education.)
2. President Reagan championed school vouchers, prayer in school, and the elimination of the U.S. Department of Education.
3. Reagan appointed the National Commission on Excellence in Education. At that time, there was a perception that Japan was outperforming the U.S. economically. (Of course, this was the fault of public schools according to the commission)
4. The resulting Nation at Risk report trashed public schools.
5. President Reagan praised the Nation at Risk report for its call for school vouchers, prayer in school and the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education. The report said nothing about any of these items.
6. Nation at Risk was totally misleading.
7. A later report issued by the U.S. Department of Energy's Sandia Laboratories debunked Nation at Risk but President Bush 41 sequestered the Sandia Report.

James Harvey, the Chief of Staff at the National Institute of Education in the 1980's helped with the establishment and staffing of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Following is Harvey's report of the flaws inherent in the Nation at Risk report and how the commission took a fatal wrong turn and embedded serious partisanship therein. His article appeared in Valerie Strauss's "Answer Sheet" blog at the Washington Post. Valerie Strauss wrote the introduction.

*In April 1983, a commission convened by President Ronald Reagan's education secretary, Terrel H. Bell, released a landmark report about the nation's public education system, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." It famously warned:*

*"Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. ... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."*

*As I wrote in 2018, the authors used statistics to paint a disturbing picture of the country's public system, though it turned out that a lot of the data was cherry-picked to confirm previously decided conclusions about the awful state of America's schools. The piece I published, by James Harvey and David Berliner, explained how the report — and its aftermath in waves of school reforms — was bungled. It said, for example:*

*“The bumbling began immediately. Reagan startled the commission members by hailing their call for prayer in the schools, school vouchers, and the abolition of the Department of Education. The commission hadn’t said a word about any of these things. Indeed, the commission had been launched by then Secretary of Education Terrell Bell to fend off the president’s 1980 campaign proposal to abolish the department. In its report, it laid out a strong argument in favor of a vigorous federal presence in education to support vulnerable students, aid higher education and research, and protect civil rights. These suggestions were quickly relegated to the dust bin of history.”*

*Here is a piece about how the report was created and its impact. It was written by Harvey, who was a senior staff member of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which wrote “A Nation at Risk”; Harvey contributed to it. He retired in 2021 as executive director of the National Superintendents Roundtable, a nonprofit organization that supports its members of approximately 100 school superintendents from 30 states.*

*By James Harvey*

*I recently came across Stephen Weir’s “History’s Worst Decisions and the People Who Made Them” and looked through it to see if “A Nation at Risk” and the 40-year educational disaster that is the modern education reform movement following its publication made the cut. Inclusion in his list, Weir wrote, demanded “idiocy” on a scale that “exacted a very high price, in lives or livelihoods.”*

*Compared to such appalling blunders as Napoleon’s 1812 decision to invade Russia, the little 36-page report that was “A Nation at Risk” was very small beer and wasn’t included. But just as most of Weir’s “worst decisions” rested on ignorance and pride, so too did the rhetoric and recommendations of “A Nation at Risk.”*

*The public and policymakers, by and large, have gone along for the ride.*

### **National Commission on Excellence in Education**

*Early in his tenure as President Ronald Reagan’s education secretary, Terrell Bell, a former Utah state superintendent of education, visited the department’s research arm, the National Institute of Education (NIE), where I served as chief of staff. He wanted to talk about his hopes for the future. Bell, an experienced and canny bureaucrat, was taking over the very education department that Reagan had vowed to abolish during the 1980 presidential campaign. How to proceed?*

*Bell told us that he wanted to create a National Commission on Excellence in Education that would be charged with examining the state of America’s public schools. He asked Milton Goldberg, acting director of NIE, to get the commission off the ground and serve as its executive director. Goldberg turned to me and to another NIE aide, Peter Gerber, to help with establishing and staffing the commission.*

### **Commission makeup**

*We went all in with creating a commission that represented the stakeholders in American schools. The 18-member commission included four college or university presidents, seven members representing K-12*

*school constituencies (from such groups as state and local superintendents, school principals and school boards), one teacher, two retired business leaders, a former governor, an entrepreneur. The chairman of the commission was David Pierpoint Gardner, who in 1983 was the University of Utah's president before becoming the president of the University of California, but it was two other academics who had the biggest impact on the report-writing process. One was Gerald Holton, who served as a highly distinguished physics professor at Harvard University. The other was Glenn T. Seaborg, a Nobel laureate in chemistry who helped discover 10 elements on the periodic table many of us studied in high school, and who had advised the White House and State Department on the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.*

### **Development of the report**

*By my count at the time, "A Nation at Risk" ran through 13 drafts before it went to the printer. The staff thought the report would be based on the evidence we received during the first 12 months of the committee's life from hearings and some 40 papers commissioned from academic experts. It wasn't.*

*Without any real guidance from the commission members about what they wanted to say, I developed two successive white papers reflecting on what we had heard from experts on the complexities of the school "system" in the United States. The essence of the two lengthy papers was that American schools had accomplished great things for the United States and were now faced with the joint challenges of (1) successfully educating a more diverse and lower-income population through high school, and (2) improving standards or we risked becoming mired in mediocrity. Virtually every reference to the accomplishments of American schools and the challenges of diversity and poverty disappeared from the succeeding drafts.*

*At the meeting to discuss my second draft, Holton showed up with a brilliant polemic, a handwritten draft he had developed on the plane on the way to Washington from Boston. He read it aloud to the assembled commissioners. Castigating American public schools for the failures of American society and in particular the nation's declining economic competitiveness, it became the foundation of "A Nation at Risk."*

*There were at least three problems with what the commission finally produced. First, it settled on its conclusions and then selected evidence to support them. Second, its argument was based on shockingly shoddy logic. And third, it proposed a curricular response that ignored the complexity of American life and the economic and racial divisions within the United States.*

### **Cooking the books**

*Holton's draft went through 10 revisions as the commission cherry-picked and misinterpreted data to fix the facts in support of its argument. As James W. Guthrie, an academic who admired the report and thought it was on balance a good thing, put it: The commissioners "were hellbent on proving that schools were bad. They cooked the books to get what they wanted."*

*The public was told that American students lagged seriously behind in international comparisons of student achievement, even though Sweden's Torsten Husén, chairman of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), warned the commission not to do that. He said*

*international achievement comparisons were an exercise in “comparing the incomparable” due to enormous differences in enrollment, curriculums, objectives, goals and the organization of school systems.*

*Seventeen-year-olds in the United States, the commission said, showed a steady decline in science achievement on tests administered in 1969, 1973 and 1977 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. (Known as NAEP, the system of assessments is seen as the most consistent, nationally representative measure of U.S. student achievement since the 1990s and is supposed to be able to assess what students “know and can do.”)*

*What the report didn’t say was that the steady declines had been eliminated in the 1982 NAEP assessment, according to assessment expert Gerald W. Bracey. He also thought it odd that scores for 17-year-olds in science were highlighted while eight positive NAEP trendlines — for ages 9, 13 and 17 in reading, math and science — were ignored.*

### **Shoddy logic**

*But it was the introduction of an argument based on appallingly shoddy logic that was the commission’s gravest sin. “Our nation is at risk,” declared the commission in the opening paragraph. And it went on, in a line I provided: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.” I included it because I was worried about standards and about maintaining the commitment of pioneering educational philosophers such as Horace Mann and John Dewey to schools as the fundamental engine of social progress.*

*But according to the commission writing the report, public schools were responsible for Japan eating our economic lunch and for “one great American industry after another falling to world competition.” This language transformed schools from engines of social progress to engines of economic competitiveness. Mrs. Smith in fourth grade and Mr. Brown in Grade 11 had a very heavy burden to bear. (Japan was actually in an economic downturn in 1983 when the report was released.)*

*In an excess of bombast, the report declared, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” This language came perilously close to defining teachers and administrators as enemies of the United States.*

*What surprised me watching the individual members of the commission absorb this argument is that not a single public school educator in the group objected as the report with their names on it trashed their profession and cast educators as among the great economic villains of the United States. When I pointed out to Holton that our report ignored the appalling poverty, destitution and segregation in which so many American students lived, he shrugged. [Note: The Washington Post sought a comment from Holton but he could not be reached.]*

*Even amid the height of the Cold War, this was just a preposterous diagnosis of the ills of the American economy. As the eminent educational historian Lawrence A. Cremin had told the commission, the nation’s economic competitiveness depended on trade and monetary policy and on the decisions made in*

*the White House and on Capitol Hill and by the departments of Treasury and Commerce long before it depended on public schools.*

*The sad truth is that the commission spent 18 months to produce a flawed report. In just a few weeks, a task force on education that was created for President-elect John F. Kennedy's transition issued a 1961 report that came closer to the mark when it also called for excellence in education with the notation: "Millions of children, particularly in certain rural areas and in the great cities, are deprived of an opportunity to develop talents that are needed both for society and for their own lives. The Task Force Committee concludes that priority should be given to a vigorous program to lift the schools to a new level of excellence."*

*The rhetorical differences between the measured tone of the Kennedy task force and the polemics of the excellence commission are noteworthy. Kennedy's task force then went on to make recommendations about funding for all schools and specifically advocated for additional funding for schools in low-income rural and urban areas.*

### ***Misguided curricular response***

*As the commission polished up its analysis of how the nation was at risk and why schools were peculiarly at fault, how to address this crisis was a conundrum. Several drafts went by without any recommendations.*

*The comprehensive high school, which accommodated the educational needs of students interested in vocational education as well as those interested in pursuing college degrees, had long been hailed as one of the glories of American public education. But Holton arrived at a meeting with a series of curricular recommendations for all students that were slotted right in as the commission's major contribution. He called it the "new basics" — essentially the high school curriculum required for students interested in attending Ivy League colleges. The new basics contemplated four years of English in high school, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies and a half-year of computer science.*

*Everyone would follow this curriculum. For the college-bound, an additional two years of foreign language study was recommended. The commission was recommending that practically every secondary school student in the United States follow a course of studies in high school that serious scholars of American public schools (such as James B. Conant, a former president of Harvard), had recommended only for the 15 to 20 percent of high school students judged to be "academically talented." It signaled the end of vocational education, in which millions of students would have thrived.*

### ***Consequences***

*It is unfortunate that a straight line can be drawn from "A Nation at Risk" to the culture wars now consuming American public schools. The line runs as follows:*

***An undertow trashing schools and government.***

*The report, while putting education near the top of the national agenda, has served as an undertow helping undermine confidence in educators and public schools while trashing government generally. The argument of wholesale school failure has been an essential bulwark of the effort to privatize public education by diverting public funds into school vouchers and unaccountable charter schools, particularly the scandal-plagued for-profit charter sector.*

**Vocational education**, which flourished in public schools in the post-World War II era, in part due to the unflinching support of former Harvard University president James B. Conant, has withered on the vine. Both major political parties have essentially ignored the challenges facing working-class Americans by creating a school system that ignores their needs.

### **An obsession with achievement tests.**

*We have become an achievement-test-obsessed society. As Jack Jennings, a keen observer of K-12 policy for nearly five decades has noted, a promising standards movement was “hijacked” by standardized testing that emerged from “A Nation at Risk.” No Child Left Behind, the K-12 education law signed in 2002 by President George W. Bush, and Race to the Top, the multibillion-dollar grant program of President Barack Obama, put high stakes on student standardized test scores in math and English language arts, crowding out other subjects. The aftereffects mean that the major question teachers and administrators must answer these days is: What’s the effect on test scores in English and mathematics? The arts, physical education, recess, social studies and history have been reduced as scores in the two tested subjects have come to define what’s important in today’s schools.*

### **Villains in the culture wars.**

*“A Nation at Risk” also helped lay the foundation for 40 years of gaslighting Americans about the problems our society faces. Distracted by the false argument that most of our economic problems can be laid at the school door, policymakers have been able to ignore major problems including growing inequality, homelessness, drug addiction and the epidemic of gun violence in the United States.*

*Perversely, the report created the conditions in which, not content to blame teachers for school failure and the nation’s economic challenges, right-wing critics have now cast them in the role of villains in the culture wars. Leaders in many Republican-led states are restricting what teachers can talk to students about the real history of the country, race and racism, gender and identity, as well as restricting books and promoting curriculum that locks in their interpretation of American history.*

### **Funding**

*One of the tragedies around “A Nation at Risk” was not simply that it misdiagnosed the problem and put forth ersatz solutions, but that it refused to face up to the financial implications of its argument. Staff suggestions that there be some budget response to the definition of a national catastrophe were dismissed by university presidents on the commission, perhaps because they were unwilling to see funding for higher education threatened by increased funding for K-12 schools.*

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*Had the commission entered the treacherous waters of school finance — which promotes inequity in public education with a system that relies in large part on local property taxes — it would inevitably have had to deal with the troublesome issue of childhood poverty and unequal opportunity, a topic that commission leaders avoided.*

*In the end, this was a missed opportunity. The report was a product, like the other blunders identified by Stephen Weir, of decisions grounded in ignorance and pride. In this case, commission leaders, isolated from the real problems of the society about which they pontificated and arrogantly convinced that the answers they sought could be found in the faculty lounge, misread the nature of the problem, misinterpreted the cause and misled the American people.*