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M E E T   T H E   P R E S S

Sunday, May 29, 1983

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GUEST:           ALBERT SHANKER  
                  President, American Federation of Teachers

PANEL:           Bill Monroe - NBC News  
                  James J. Kilpatrick - Syndicated Columnist  
                  Emily Feistritz - Feistritz Publications  
                  Christopher Connell - Associated Press

MODERATOR:     Russ Ward - NBC News

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MEET THE PRESS

MR. WARD: Our guest today on MEET THE PRESS is Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. As head of a union with more than half a million members, Mr. Shanker is a leading spokesman for American teachers at a time when education is under fire. A former math teacher, he is also head of the New York City Teachers Local.

Our reporters today are Christopher Connell, of the Associated Press; Emily Feistritz, of Feistritz Publications; James J. Kilpatrick, syndicated columnist; and to open the questioning, Bill Monroe, of NBC News.

MR. MONROE: Mr. Shanker, there's a national debate going on, as you know, about what is seen as a crisis in education. Teachers and students in large numbers flunking skill tests. A Commission on Excellence called it a tide of mediocrity. Do you agree that our public schools are bad and getting worse?

MR. SHANKER: I agree with most of the criticisms that were made. I think certainly the problem is as serious as they say. Any report that tries to bring about change tends to neglect the good side. I think we did a lot for people at the bottom in the last 20 years. We did a lot for the handicapped. We did a lot for minorities. We did a lot for people that we used to push out and neglect. But at the same time, I think we're doing a lot less for gifted and I think what we're getting back to is what we've realized. Namely, that if students are not compelled to learn math, and are not compelled to learn science, or foreign languages they won't. And if you give them a choice of watching movies or reading comic books instead of reading

Shakespeare or Dickens, you know what's going to happen there, too. So I welcome this criticism and I think we are going to get improvement.

MR. MONROE: There's also a widespread feeling that teachers' unions are standing in the way of reforms that they find uncomfortable. The National Education Association, for example, your rival union, is flatly opposed to the idea of merit pay for teachers, an idea which a lot of governors are interested in, a lot of educators are interested in, recently got endorsed by President Reagan.

Does your union stand as equally opposed to merit pay as the NEA?

MR. SHANKER: Well, it depends on what you call merit pay. There's a tradition -- There are traditional merit pay proposals in this country which have been tried and which failed. Some of the proposals that are being made, for instance the one made in Tennessee by Governor Lamar Alexander, meets many of the objections which teachers have traditionally raised. And therefore, I have urged teachers, not only in our own union, but across the country to have an open mind. We are inviting Governor Alexander to the AFT convention the first week in July. I'm sure that he will have a receptive audience. And for our part, we are going to listen carefully and we're going to have an open mind. We will not have a knee-jerk reaction rejecting these new proposals. We think that there are parts that are quite exciting and that we may be able to go with.

MR. MONROE: What parts do you find acceptable?

MR. SHANKER: Well, they do talk about large numbers of --

First of all, they talk about the question of who is to receive raises will not be made by immediate supervisors, which eliminates a good deal of the question of favoritism and subjectivity. There is peer review involved in it.

The additional money will not go to a handful of people. It will go to about 50 percent of the teachers. So a very large number of people are involved with very huge increases, 30 to 60 percent. The people who get the additional money will also have a career ladder. They will help with curriculum development, with teacher training and they will remain in the classroom.

Now these proposals are very, very different from proposals that we've had in the past. I might also say that all the money for this would come from state funds, so that it doesn't use up local funds to give one teacher more and another teacher would get less.

Now there are still some very serious shortcomings in terms of this plan. It has -- One of the parts of the plan is that every teacher would be subject to losing the teaching license every five years without any kind of review. I can't think of attracting anyone into a profession where they think that every five years they could lose their livelihood.

And I think there's a second problem here, too. And that is that teachers have to wait eight years before they get these big rewards. I do not believe that if you offer brand new college graduates an entry salary like nine, or ten or eleven thousand dollars and then ask them to wait eight years before they can have a big reward that you're going to get many talented people. So, there's still

problems. But nevertheless, here's a willingness on the part of a Southern Governor to put through a huge tax increase to give very large rewards to teachers, and to sit with teachers and to -- and to really meet most of the objections we've had.

I think it's a positive step and we're willing to meet and discuss the plan, and I would hope cooperate in the long run.

MR. WARD: Let's continue the questioning with Mr. Kilpatrick.

MR. KILPATRICK: Mr. Shanker, I infer from your response to Mr. Monroe's questions that you do agree with most of the criticism. You accept the hypothesis that there is a rising tide of mediocrity?

MR. SHANKER: Yes, I think there is. And I think part of the reason is that we've fallen behind in terms of the rewards in recent years, but also one of the big reasons is that we've lost the crop of outstanding people we got during the Depression of the 1930s who found their way into schools, and we're losing all the talented women who had no other place to go. And the result is that we're getting -- First of all, we're just going to have an overall teacher shortage because nobody wants to come into the field at all. And then we find that a lot of those who are coming in really shouldn't come in because they can't read, write or count themselves.

MR. KILPATRICK: Well, I was about to ask if it is not the fault of the teachers, whose fault is all this?

MR. SHANKER: It's the fault of the people who offer salaries like that. I fail to understand why Ronald Reagan feels that the average businessman in this country won't produce unless he has

economic incentives. That's the basis of his whole economic program. But yet he thinks that you can get good teachers and offer them nothing. That's absolutely ridiculous. Why doesn't he follow the same philosophy in terms of providing a market strategy. That is, why not pay people what you have to pay them in order to get talented people.

MR. KILPATRICK: So you put the monkey on the back of the parsimonious taxpayers.

MR. SHANKER: I think there's no question about it. If you pay people \$9000, you get \$9000 worth of teacher, for the most part.

MR. KILPATRICK: If money is not the whole answer, money then, to you, is the main answer.

MR. SHANKER: No, it's one part. I think there are other parts, too. I do not think that you're going to get teachers into classrooms unless you do something to stem the violence that exists in many schools, the inability to remove disruptive students. I don't think you're going to get teachers who are really interested in subject matter if a high school math teacher has to do remedial arithmetic because the curriculum wasn't strong enough, because we didn't have a good homework policy, because we didn't hold students over if they didn't make it. I think it's a combination.

I think you can give people money and you can still not solve the problem. You've got to do both. You've got to work on the curriculum. You have to have high standards for teachers. You have to have high standards for students. And you've got to pay people enough to bring them in and to keep them.

MR. KILPATRICK: But you acknowledge there are incompetent

teachers.

MR. SHANKER: There sure are, just as there are incompetents in every other field.

MR. KILPATRICK: As head of a union, how do you weed them out of the school system? Wouldn't your union stand up and defend a teacher against charges of incompetence?

MR. SHANKER: Well, we'd defend them, but we defend murderers in our society, too, and rapists, and everybody else. The fact is that you're innocent until you're proven guilty. And I think a teacher has a right to a presumption of innocence. After all, they were hired by the school board and superintendent. They had a probationary period where they could have been dismissed practically at will. So somebody gave them the stamp of approval. Now, of course, people can deteriorate later on. They can become alcoholic. They can -- They can just go. They can become lazy. And I think that we have to have procedures which do two things. I think that the public has to -- I think the public has to be guaranteed that teachers who shouldn't be there are being removed, and I think that the teacher has a right to a fair trial.

MR. WARD: Dr. Feistritzer?

DR. FEISTRITZER: Mr. Shanker, you've been advocating standards of excellence for a long time and the time seems to be ripe for seeing that standards are set in this country. Who do you think should be taking the primary responsibility for setting standards of excellence in our educational system?

MR. SHANKER: Well, there's no question that our system is

largely a state system and I hope it remains that way. I don't look forward to having a national system of education in our country and I think -- I really like a lot of these reports, because I've been saying for twenty-five years that one of the best ways of finding out if you've got a good teacher is give the entering teacher a test. You won't know if they're great teachers, but at least you'll find out if they know their own subject matter, and that's -- that's a good part of it.

I think that the Federal Government can offer certain incentives. In the past, we have offered incentives in other areas, and I think that perhaps in the future some federal aid ought to be tied to states' and local education agencies that do have examinations for teachers, that do have promotion policies, that do have procedures for maintaining academic excellence within their schools.

DR. FEISTRITZER: Do you feel that the competency testing for teachers should continue on a state-by-state basis, or should we have a national proficiency exam for teachers?

MR. SHANKER: Well, you know, giving an exam is -- I still favor a largely state system and I think that -- I would worry about the Federal Government getting into the business of a single national exam. However, I'll tell you, giving an examination is only one thing. You've got to somehow make sure that the people who are doing the hiring at the local school district make use of the test results.

There are a lot of places where local school administrators and school boards do not hire the teachers with the highest scores on examinations. There was a recent study that was done where tests were

given to teachers and then the testers followed them up to see who was hired. Well, they found that 36 percent of all of these teachers who were about to apply, 36 percent were not competent in their subject areas. But when he came out who was hired, which of those teachers, 55 percent of the people who were actually hired to be teachers in that same group were the incompetents. In other words, local administrators tended to select those teachers who were weaker in subject matter.

DR. FEISTRITZER: How do you account for the fact that there are fewer and fewer people choosing the teaching profession other than money? And how would you reverse the trend?

MR. SHANKER: Money is big. I agree with the President and with economists. That's a very important thing. Nobody's going to take a beating of six or seven thousand dollars a year unless they're moving toward the priesthood rather than toward teaching. I think the other things -- The other things are that the education course in many of our teacher training institutions are boring and deadly and repel a good many students. I think that the failure to deal with disruptive and violent children is another one. And then I think that the fact that many teachers who are very much interested in a given subject matter either don't come in, or when they come in leave very quickly because they find that they're really not doing algebra, or geometry, or Shakespeare, or Dickens because -- because there's a mushy curriculum. I think all of those -- All of those have to be changed.

MR. WARD: Mr. Connell.

MR. CONNELL: Mr. Shanker, President Reagan's main response to the Commission on Excellence and its call for reform has to been to reiterate his support for tuition tax credit for private schools, restoring prayer in public schools, and dismantling the U.S. Department of Education. How do you grade him on that response?

MR. SHANKER: Well, I never wanted a U.S. Department of Education in the first place, so I think he's wrong, by the way, in saying that there shouldn't -- that Education shouldn't be anywhere in the Cabinet, but I -- I don't want to refight that war. I think that all these reports constitute a repudiation of Ronald Reagan's program in education. You bring together outstanding businessmen and governors and not one of these groups has come out in favor of prayer, or tuition tax credit, or vouchers, which is kind of interesting. So the President is all alone and what he ought to be doing is to use the -- the moral suasion of his office to, at least during this period of time, when we're going to find it very difficult to get teachers because we're into the baby bust and we're not going to increase salaries tomorrow -- The least he ought to be doing is saying good things about teachers, and schools and what a noble calling this is to at least try to attract bright and good people in. What he's done is exactly the opposite. He's dumped on the public schools, said that we're not getting our money's worth, that it's a failure, and created the impression that teachers are only interested in money.

I would say that what the President has done in the last few weeks is to discourage tens of thousands of bright young people

who might have been thinking of teaching as a career from going in. Why should I not only sacrifice money, but go into a field where the President of the United States is creating the impression that everyone who's in that field is an incompetent. I think what he's doing is a disaster.

MR. CONNELL: The President reached into your own union staff this week to choose a new staff director for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in which he removed three liberals and appointed three Democrats who believe -- who do not believe in using quotas in jobs or in schools. That's your stand, too. Could you explain it?

MR. SHANKER: Sure. It's what we used to call the liberal stand. It used to be called taking ability into account and being fair to all people, and not discriminating against people or for people on the basis of race. That's also the Constitution, as I read it.

I think these are the best appointments the President has made. They're also very much in accord with what the American people want -- I might say white people, and black people, and Hispanic people if you read the polls. The people he's appointed are liberal in the traditional sense and they are outstanding. I know three out of the four appointees. I think that that's one of the things the American people voted for when they voted for Ronald Reagan. I think that they are overwhelmingly opposed to the imposition of racial quotas. I think they are in favor of affirmative action insofar as we recognize that slavery and racism have left us with a legacy where people cannot compete on an equal basis, so you've got to do something. But quotas, no.

major issue in the 1984 political campaign. Your union has been screening candidates already. What would you ask from a Democratic president, or any president to do for education at the federal level?

MR. SHANKER: Well, I think basically the federal role in education is limited. And we're not only interested in their educational perspectives. If the economy turns around, the state and local governments will have a lot of money to support education and there will be a lot of taxpayers out there who instead of putting money into unemployment insurance and various welfare measures would be able to fund our schools again. So we're concerned with a lot more than education.

As far as federal monies in education, there are basically two things that the Federal Government has to do in elementary and secondary education. One is to take care of the constitutional issues as far as discrimination and the deprived. And I think that the second thing that has to be done is to take care of those things which are items of urgent national interest. That is the way we responded after Sputnik and it may very well be that now in terms of certain areas of shortage that the Federal Government can play a role.

It has to take care of those urgent needs which will not be taken care of by 50 separate states or by 16,000 separate school districts.

MR. WARD: We continue the questioning with Mr. Monroe.

MR. MONROE: The National Education Association plans to endorse a presidential candidate in October. People think it will be Mondale. Do you have an endorsement timetable?

MR. SHANKER: No, we do not. We are meeting with the presidential candidates and we most likely will endorse somebody. I don't know who it is right now and neither does our Executive Council. We don't see the -- We may endorse by then because our timetable, to some extent, will be geared to that of the AFL-CIO. We will be voting, the full strength of our membership, in terms of that endorsement. So if that endorsement comes in December, we'll do it later. If it comes in October, we'll do it earlier.

MR. MONROE: You arouse my curiosity by something you said a little while ago. You cited an instance indicating that school administrators tend to hire the least competent teacher candidates. Why is that?

MR. SHANKER: Well, maybe they feel less threatened if a teacher has less on the ball rather than more on the ball. Maybe they have been ideologically brainwashed in teachers colleges in earlier days where they were told that subject matter doesn't make any difference as long as you have the right personality and you love children. Maybe they just don't have very sophisticated tools in terms of hiring. But I found that to be a devastating result and I think -- You know, a lot of teachers take exams, but I see very few school districts across the country that advertise and say to people we're looking for bright people; we're looking for sharp people; if you're really great in English or mathematics; if you've got high SAT scores, come here, this is the kind of school system. I don't see many school districts across the country even saying that they want that.

MR. WARD: Mr. Kilpatrick.

MR. KILPATRICK: Let me ask about the propriety of a union of teachers endorsing a presidential candidate. Do you see any risk in that, that the teacher in his or her classroom may engage in propaganda?

MR. SHANKER: Well, I've always -- Well, there's a risk of it. We certainly would tell teachers not to do it. By the way, we've criticized our rival organization for putting out a set of lesson plans on the nuclear issue which are completely one-sided and which are propaganda. I think a teacher is in a very sensitive position of trust. Students and parents have a right to know that controversial issues will not be avoided, but that they will be treated fairly and that we're not indoctrinating children. We're teaching them to think for themselves.

Now there's no way of avoiding -- Teachers are human beings. They are taxpayers. They are either Catholics, Protestants, Jews or athiests. They have their own views about abortion, about nuclear issues, and they undoubtedly will have them about presidential candidates. And I would hope that on all of these issues that the way they act organizationally and in their own lives will not affect what they do in the classrooms.

MR. KILPATRICK: I read that in the 1980 election, about 40 percent of the members of the NEA, I believe it was, who -- which came out for Carter, voted Republican. How persuasive is the AFT's endorsement of a Democratic candidate somewhere along the line?

MR. SHANKER: We've done some polls. As a matter of fact

Mr. Lou Harris has done a number of polls of a good part of our membership around the country, and we'd be glad to make those available. We have found that in answering that question, do you follow the endorsements and advice of the American Federation of Teachers in your voting, we have a response of between 80 and 85 percent of our members who say that they do.

MR. KILPATRICK: You're going to deliver 400,000 votes?

MR. SHANKER: No, we don't deliver anybody. We engage in a very extensive process of internal deliberations and consensus building. If I were to turn around and say vote for so-and-so, we wouldn't deliver anybody. But if you sit, and talk, and discuss, and hold hands, and if by the time you're finished, everybody inside feels that they have had an opportunity to participate, quite a few people agree.

Of course, last time the 85 percent was easy. When you've got a president who's for tuition tax credits and is dumping on teachers the way he is, it was pretty easy to go the other way, even though we weren't very thrilled with Jimmy Carter.

MR. WARD: Mr. Shanker, time is running short. We have less than three minutes. Dr. Feistritz.

DR. FEISTRITZER: Mr. Shanker, President Reagan has also been arguing that we have been spending substantially more for education very rapidly over the last decade. It is true that in the last ten years per pupil expenditures for students has gone up, even in adjusted dollars, one-and-a-half times. And that's the same decade that test scores plummeted in this country. How do you account for the inverse correlation between more money spent on education and

less achievement?

MR. SHANKER: Most of that more money went to the underprivileged and to the handicapped. Education for the handicapped is very, very expensive and the scores of those students have gone up. I just find it very interesting that the President of the United States says that federal dollars have resulted in destroying public education and standards. Why is he trying to destroy the parochial and private schools of this country by giving them those same tainted dollars? Won't they start going downhill once they get those dollars?

MR. CONNELL: Mr. Shanker, American schools went through this cycle of criticism and reform back in 1957 after Sputnik. By 1963, the SAT scores started falling. Will this reform movement be as fleeting, or is there something to make it more permanent?

MR. SHANKER: Well, you know, we've done the same thing in education as we have done in industry and to our infrastructure. We neglected rebuilding our auto and steel plants, and we neglected doing our roads and our bridges, and eventually they start falling and you've got to do something about it. And the same thing is true of education. We cannot live with the continued neglect and that's what I miss in Ronald Reagan's speeches, that instead of -- All these reports really say is that we're getting exactly what we asked for when we started neglecting education. Now here are the results, the same as not fixing your bridges or your roads.

I think that the American people have gotten quite a shock and the shock is having other countries run rings around us in terms

going to happen to us in defense. I think that it's an important national issue and I think we're going to stay with it.

MR. CONNELL: But are taxpayers, who've been voting down school bond referenda for years, ready to hand out \$6000 raises to teachers?

MR. SHANKER: Yes. The polls show that if you don't just throw money around, but if you base it on improving instruction, if you base it on tightening the curriculum, if you're going to say that you're going to test teachers before you bring them in, if you have a way of removing incompetents. And, yes, with the public, it's very popular to reward better teachers more money.

I think that what Lamar Alexander has found out, and what other governors are finding out, is that education is a very popular issue and that people are willing to spend the money if it's done in the right way.

MR. WARD: Let me tell the panelists that we're out of time and let me thank you, Mr. Shanker, for being with us today on MEET THE PRESS.

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