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Transcripts

THE OPEN MIND.....

"NEW NEWS FROM THE TOP"

GUEST: ALBERT SHANKER

HOST: RICHARD HEFFNER

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## THE OPEN MIND

MR. HEFFNER: I am Richard Heffner, your host on The Open Mind. I have at least wanted to believe that among educated Americans, and who else after all would be familiar with it, the frequent use of George Bernard Shaw's cruel little ditty "Those who can; do. Those who can't; teach" really reflects a basic uneasiness about doing, not about teaching; about churning up dollars and things, not about churning up minds, for who among us after all, doesn't look back with affection, with admiration and gratitude, to the teachers who challenged our minds and molded our thinking about ourselves and the world around us; who chartered for us paths that perhaps we strayed from, but who we maintained as key to the good life; who in truth made 'teachers' an honored title."

Well, it was Doc Guernsey for me at DeWitt Clinton; other teachers for you; indeed, even persons of great moment and place in our society: presidents and Nobel laureates alike frequently recalled those who in grade school or high school loomed so large in their lives, who touched them in their teaching, and not in Bernard Shaw's words

"their doing."

Yet, measured in terms of the most common American calculus: material well-being, we continue too often treat or mistreat our teachers with indifference and miserliness which, of course, has been the over-arching concern for many years.

Now for today's guest: Albert Shanker, the long-time President of the American Federation of Teachers.

I have always enjoyed and admired Lincoln's pithy observation about if and when he would proclaim slavery to be the prime issue of the Civil War. "When new views prove to be true views I shall adopt them," and he did. And so has Albert Shanker about many key issues concerning teaching and teachers and the taught in America.

So let me ask him about some of those newer and truer views developed on his odyssey from union militant to educational statesman.

Thanks for joining us, Mr. Shanker. I wondered whether you object to my putting my emphasis upon your new views and upon this metaphorsis if I may call it that? Does it seem to some to mean that you are no longer the militant

now that you are a statesman?

MR. SHANKER: Well, that doesn't bother me. I think the job of a person who is the head of America's teachers is to do what is good for public education and for its members, and I think in the '60s the major agenda was to give teachers enough power so that they would have a say in things, so that they would be listened to. They are listened to today.

I think the issues today are very different. I think there is a real question as to whether we will have public education in America in the near future.

MR. HEFFNER: You mean that there may be the privatization of public education?

MR. SHANKER: I think that is a real danger. We have a much more educated public and if you look at the polls over the last five, six, or seven years, about half of the people in this country are now so fed up that they feel they ought to give parents the right to send their children to private schools with public money, and I think that the public schools need to face up to that challenge.

I don't think the private schools are that great. I think we may have people running from one set of

schools to another which are very much alike. Nevertheless, I think we need some very basic changes.

MR. HEFFNER: Well, we were talking before the program about your son who is about to be married. If you were the parent of young children now would you consider the privatization of schools a good thing?

MR. SHANKER: No, I wouldn't, because I don't think the private schools do things that are that much different, but also I have another commitment. I think that over and above what you do for the individual child in terms of whether that child would do a little better or a little worse. This country is a very different country. Germany is for Germans. When the Turks come there as guest workers, they never expected to become Germans and they will never be Germans, but everyone who comes to this country is expected to become an American and the public schools of this country have served the country for 200 years.

Who would have thought 200 years ago when you saw people of so many different races and nationalities and religions, who would have thought this country could make a go of it? Nobody would have predicted it.

You put different nationalities and religions together, what do they do? They kill each other.

Well, the public schools had a lot to do with the ability of the American people to live together. When you put children of different peoples together -- it is not perfect. We have neighborhoods that are racially isolated and that are stratified by class, but basically that is what the public schools do. And I think it would be a terrible thing for the country.

We might teach children to read and write and to count just as well in separate Jewish schools and Protestant schools and Catholic schools and a few LaRouche schools, and a few Ku Klux Klan schools, but the thing we would never get them to do would be to live together as Americans. So I think preservation of our public schools is essential.

MR. HEFFNER: In terms of what you just said, what is your own fix today in terms of bilingual education?

MR. SHANKER: I was a child who entered the schools not speaking any English. I grew up in a home where my parents spoke Yiddish. And when I entered school I had

some very embarrassing situations. I didn't know how to ask how do you go to the toilet. There were no other children in the class, nor was there a teacher in the class who spoke my language.

I feel very strongly that no child should ever be put in a situation like that where a child is so alone -- just look at children entering school who do know the language. Just look at them crying when they leave their mothers when they are six years old. It is a very, very tough thing to do, so I would never put a child in a situation where they feel so alone and isolated where there is nobody that they can talk to.

But I also feel if the teacher in the class had spoken Yiddish and if the class had been conducted in Yiddish and if I hadn't been pressured to learn English as quickly as possible, I wouldn't have the same command of the language that I do.

So I think you need a transitional approach. You need to feel for the child, make sure that he doesn't feel alone, but education should be a bridge and the main emphasis should be to have an educational program which allows

the child to be successful in our country and in our culture.

MR. HEFFNER: Politically, can that bridge be successful just as a bridge?

MR. SHANKER: Oh, I think so. I think these kids will learn English no matter what. The only way people in our society don't integrate is if you persecute them. If we were to persecute people, they would more and more huddle by themselves and keep to themselves. But any society that allows people in and it is open to them, the people will integrate in our society and it is just a question of how quickly.

I think the schools ought to help them do it more quickly.

By the way, I think most parents of children who come from other countries, Hispanics, Vietnamese, and others, most of them want for their children what my parents wanted for me. They want them to become Americans, or in the old-fashioned phrase, to become Americanized. They don't have to lose what they had before.

MR. HEFFNER: You know, I have heard -- we are taping this program, though it is seen in many parts of the



country, we are taping it in New York.

My understanding is particularly on the West Coast where children are entering school, and to a large extent, at the levels of higher education that the youngsters from "other" cultures are doing extremely well, indeed, are doing better than native born Americans.

Has that filtered down to you or filtered up to you?

MR. SHANKER: Well, some of them are and some of them are not. Orientals, for instance, are now about 27 percent of all the graduate students at Berkeley. That is an amazing percentage given their percentage in the population, and it shows a level of achievement, academic achievement, which is far above average.

On the other hand, Hispanics in our society have not done as well and have not yet made it, so we do have differential rates and different groups sort of catching on and moving at different times.

MR. HEFFNER: How do you explain the phenomenon of the Oriental and success in school?

MR. SHANKER: Well, a good deal of it may have to do with the fact that the Oriental students are coming from a culture where the emphasis is on education and on the fact that the student should be a good student. I think that is one of the reasons why they do so well. I think that is one of the reasons why they do so well.

to do with what their own achievement was before they came to the United States. Many of them may have been middle class and fairly well educated within their own societies with a very strong family push.

You have different attitudes on the part of groups. Some groups come with the view that this is going to be a tough place. And in order to make it, we will be discriminated against and we have to work harder in order to make it.

Others take the view, we are going to be discriminated against so maybe why try? I think it makes a very big difference.

I am very much in favor of government programs and government support and assistance to people who are down and out, but ultimately I think what the individual family does, what it is that they do to instill strong character in their children, if you tell a child life is going to be <sup>t</sup>ough and you will have to work twice as hard because they are all against you, that tends to work for you.

If you do the opposite and say, well, there is no point in working because they are going to get you,

then a child won't make it.

MR. HEFFNER: Given that point of view, what does that lead you to determine should be the proper role of government? What should we be doing as a society?

MR. SHANKER: I think the government has to create opportunities for people. I think we have to be very careful that we do not have government programs or that we get rid of government programs that destroy characters, and I think there have been some.

We have had many discussions of the welfare system over the last 10 or 15 years. It is ironic, nobody wants anybody to be without housing or clothing, or without food, and yet, there is no question that a system which sends a message out and says: "Well, if you have 13 years old and you have children, everything is all right, you will be taken care of," gets people to change their behavior, and it gets them to change their behavior in a very bad way, in a way which is destructive of their own future, and which is very bad for society in general.

MR. HEFFNER: What message would you send out now?

MR. SHANKER: Well, I think what we have learned, I certainly have, and as I do a lot of reading, our society in general has.

In the 1960s, we used to think the government could fix anything, and that if you had the right political program and a couple of economic game plans, everything will be fine.

I think we realize unless there is individual character development, that is that you could have any government or economic or political programs you want if you have got a society in which a large number of people are just out there to take advantage and play the game it is not going to work whether it is in education or whether it is in welfare, or whether it is in crime prevention, or anything else; I think that there is a strong movement back to the notion that what we give children at a very early age, what parents do with children, what they do in terms of educating children to know that sometimes you have got to do something that is tough -- you don't enjoy it now, but you have got to delay gratification. It is going to be important for you later on.

You don't always do the thing that you enjoy

at the very moment, that you have an obligation to others around you.

These very simple notions, if they are not inculminated by mother or father, grandmother, whoever does it, but it has to be done at a very early age.

It is not going to be done by institutions, it is not going to be done by schools or teachers. It is going to be done by parents or grandparents, or someone else in the community. If that doesn't happen, nothing else will work.

MR. HEFFNER: Then, of course, the question comes up, and Charles Murray, of course, has directed this question to so many of us: What happens if that influence isn't there, if the home doesn't provide the kind of insight or the kind of character-building that you are talking about? What happens then?

Do we say: Sorry fellow, our society, our governmental actions can't be based upon lack of character.

What happens to those youngsters who have young youngsters?

MR. SHANKER: I think there are things that can

be done, but I don't think we should repeat the mistakes we made in the past.

[ There are many programs that government has undertaken which have not been successful. And we have to admit that many of them are not successful. There are many of them that have worked.

I think the terrible thing is that in a society of ours that all programs gain strong constituencies whether they work or not. I think the job of government and of statesmen is to be strong enough to be able to continue and expand those that work and to abandon those programs that don't.

There are programs that have reached out to people who were down and out later and have successfully worked. You know all across the country back in the 1960s there was a program of employing paraprofessionals: some of them in hospitals and some in other institutions. Most of those who were employed were high school dropouts and welfare recipients, and they were in most cases given an opportunity to take fairly low level jobs in public institutions, and the job was contingent upon completing their high school equivalency. And then in many of these jobs they were given

the opportunity in summers, after school and evenings to go to college.

Do you know that of the 10,000 paraprofessionals who were employed, 6,000 went to college? One of them just became a principal. Two of them are now college professors. A number of them became AFL-CIO organizers in other parts of the country.

But here were people who were down and out who were not only given an opportunity, but were also put in a structure -- that is, they were in a union with teachers, they sat with them in the same lunch rooms, they were in the same union, they developed a camaraderie. They became part of a different society.

This isn't the only place -- New York City. This has happened all over the country. It is a successful program and it should be expanded.

MR. HEFFNER: But you are concerned about those that weren't successful, the welfare programs that diminished individual initiative, if I understand you correctly.

MR. SHANKER: I am very much concerned with government programs that increase dependency or any programs --

and I think Murray has some very strong points, programs that actually encourage people to engage in actions which are bad for themselves and bad for society.

MR. HEFFNER: Shanker in the '60s wouldn't appreciate that point of view, I gather?

MR. SHANKER: No, but Shanker wasn't the only one. Quite a few people then were much more optimistic about the ability to push simple buttons and get very effective solutions. I changed my mind on that. I think a lot of other people have too.

I don't say that we should abandon those who are down and out. Far from it. I think if one thing you have done hasn't worked, then have the guts to abandon that program and look for something else, because we are going to live with all the people in our society.

You can abandon them today and say I am not going to do anything for them, but they will be your neighbors and --

MR. HEFFNER: Therefore, effectively, don't you feel we are basically going to continue the welfare program effectively?



MR. SHANKER: Well, if we continue the one we have, I think it will be too bad. You know what is about to happen. When the first person retired on social security not too many years ago, there were 17 people in the work force supporting that person.

Now, a few years from now, there will be three adults for every person on social security and one of those three is going to be black or Hispanic. If we don't do a better job of educating minorities and bringing them into the economic mainstream of our society, then we will have a society where you have got two people working and one person not working and being supported on social security, and another person on welfare. That means one person who is working is going to be supporting one person who is not.

What is that going to do to our standard of living? What is that going to do to the basic fabric of our democracy? What faith will people have in our society if each person ends up supporting one other person who is not working?

MR. HEFFNER: I got the picture. I got the message.

Let me turn, however, to another page, and it has to do with what you said before about parents being fed up with what they don't find and what they do want in the school system.

You have commented at other times of the role that parents must play. When you appeared on "The Editor's Desk," you talked about changes in education, but you said, "Look, it is not the schools alone that are responsible. Parents must do their bit."

I wonder how that translates for you when you consider the people who are very much impressed with what Phyllis Schafley says about the role she and other parents want to play in determining what books their children should read in public schools, what kinds of courses they take.

You want this parental permissiveness, or permission I should say, to extend to what is taught too?

MR. SHANKER: Well, I don't very much like what Phyllis Schafley is doing, but I think --

MR. HEFFNER: But she is a parent and there are a lot of parents --

MR. SHANKER: But there is a certain point which

she has made and I think it is a very important one.

[ We have a great many people in our society with different convictions, they have different political convictions. They have different religious views. We have a public school system which is not there to further any particular religion or any particular set of political views, but I do think it is important that what we do in public schools not destroy the values or the religious views that the family is trying to preserve with their children.

I think it is necessary for the schools to be sensitive about that. For instance, I am not very much bothered if some parents say I want my child not to be in the class when they read this particular short story for one or two periods.

I would be very concerned if they said they didn't want them to be there all that year.

But you have all these crazy fights going on where some public school people say that the child must be there every minute of the time, must read every one of these stories, no matter how much it conflicts with the values of the parents. I would be more flexible in that. First of all,

I think it affects very few people. Take fundamentalists in many parts of our country. I certainly don't want to change the curriculum of the schools so that we are teaching fundamentalism. That is not what the public schools are about.

But if there are particular lessons that are taught in the course of a year in the public schools that a given parent feels I don't want my child there. I don't know that I would want to run to court to insist that the child be there for that particular hour.

MR. HEFFNER: And sex education?

MR. SHANKER: That is another one. What do you teach? The overwhelming majority of the American public wants sex education taught at schools. You know why? Because they don't want to teach their own children. They want someone else to do it.

But then what does the teacher teach? Do you teach it is all right to have sex when you want it? Do you teach that it is not all right? Or do you just view it as technology, it is up to you and if you like to do it, go ahead? And if you do, here are the ways of -- here is how conception takes place. And here are the means of birth control.

It is very, very difficult for public schools to get into this because there are parents who are teaching their children it is wrong and don't do it, and they don't want anyone in school to tell them how to do it safely if they told them not to do it.

MR. HEFFNER: Then what do we do? You have posed these as problems. I recognize them as problems. You are the President of the American Federation of Teachers. You have great influence on what happens in American schools. What do you want to have happen?

MR. SHANKER: Well, we have local control of education. We have 15,000 school districts. And those school districts, the people there elect school boards. And you will have one school board which doesn't teach sex education and you will have another one in which they will, and that is going to politically reflect the majority in that community.

What I am saying in each of those communities there may be a minority that says, hey, the majority has decided to teach the children about everything.

MR. HEFFNER: And then?

MR. SHANKER: I don't want to, and I don't want

my children in that class. I would respect the wishes of those parents not to have their children in that class.

MR. HEFFNER: You are not concerned about fractionalizing the schools and what is offered?

MR. SHANKER: Well, you are going to fractionalize a lot more if you don't allow the parents to do that, because they have nowhere to go but to private schools. And if all your children start going off to private schools, then you will get the real fractionalization. The fractionalization you get when everybody is in the same school and they grow up together, but once a year five students don't take this class and another time three don't take that. That is not much fractionalization.

I would like to look at the big picture of what happens over the entire lifetime of a child and not what happens over one or two or three periods of instruction when some parent objects to something.]

MR. HEFFNER: You know a great deal more about the school systems, obviously, than I do. Is this a very practical point of view, given the numbers of parents who take exception now to override the things that have gone on...

on in the schools? How practical is that?

MR. SHANKER: I think it is very practical for another reason. I think what is not practical is to teach children the way we have been teaching them.

MR. HEFFNER: What do you mean?

MR. SHANKER: Suppose this country had been a very poor country up to now, so poor that we could not afford to educate our children except for a few wealthy people? Suppose that we had done what a lot of the Third World countries do, that is, you take a child at the age of three and have them tie knots for rugs or send them out to the rice paddies, or have them out begging, or doing all sorts of things?

Suppose that just last week or last month we discovered great wealth and we were sitting here as a committee and deciding how to educate our children in the future? Suppose someone came up with the idea that we would build buildings and we would put 30 or 35 students in a class and they would come in at 8:45 in the morning and they would sit still and quietly until 3:00 in the afternoon, and we would put a teacher in front of them to talk to them from 8:45 until

3:00 in the afternoon. Probably someone would say what makes you think that they will sit still that long? That is very hard even for adults to do.

Someone else would say, what makes you think that any adult would want to be locked in a room with a bunch of kids for that many hours?

And the teacher is always faced with one group of children who don't understand what he or she is saying, and another group who had been through it before, so there is always somebody that you are missing. If somebody was absent yesterday, they don't know what you are talking about today. This whole system doesn't work very well.

MR. HEFFNER: That is a very impressive thing for the man who is the head of the American Federation of Teachers to say -- depressing, too.

MR. SHANKER: Well, in the past, just think of what we are doing now. We are in a period of big educational reform. We have had 30 reports. I like most of the reports because I do think we got too soft in the '60s and I don't think schools are all about letting every kid to take what he likes to do and not take the subject that he doesn't like.



I like the idea that you test students and teachers, and that there is a core curriculum whether you like it or not.

I never met a child who opened Shakespeare and said: Oh, great. Finally.

They open it up and say, Ugh, I don't understand it, it is too hard. It is old-fashioned, what do I need it for?

So I like the idea that we are back to educating. But what will we get if it works? We will get right back to the schools that we had in 1950. For how many students was it successful? Thirty percent? Twenty-five? Thirty-five percent of the students? We need a system in which students are more engaged, in which they are not just sitting there listening to the lectures of teachers.

We need a different system and we also need one that uses more technology. It used to be the only thing you had was a teacher talking to the kids.

MR. HEFFNER: Mr. Shanker, obviously, we are at a point where we discuss the future and now I am being told that the program is at an end. You have to come back and talk

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about the future.

One question: Shall we anticipate seeing you as President of the AFL-CIO sometime in the future?

MR. SHANKER: Not if I have anything to say about it.

MR. HEFFNER: That is a fair answer.

Thanks so much for joining me today.