

EDITORIALS

Spirit of Memorial Day
lives in those who mark it

On Monday we will observe the 131st Memorial Day, our opportunity to recall and honor those who have died defending our freedom. "Decoration Day" was started May 30, 1868 by Gen. John A. Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in tribute to the brave soldiers who died in the Civil War, our bloodiest conflict and one that leaves scars to this day. While a Federal holiday, Memorial Day is not sanctioned by some Southern states.

The original meaning was derived from the habit of families to place flowers and wreaths on the graves of their fallen loved ones in late May, when the chance of frost had passed. When it became a universal holiday, the meaning was changed to reflect remembrance of everyone who died in all wars.

We are now engaged in the most modern of wars, which thus far has claimed no U.S. men or women, and has stirred scarcely a trace of emotion beyond worries about how to fund the bombing of Serbia. And it has been more than 20 years since the close of the Vietnam War, the last time our forces suffered heavy casualties. That means more than a generation of Americans has grown up without direct experience in the tragedy of war — for all sides — regardless of the ultimate outcome. On the whole, this is a good thing; surely everyone who has been in a battle has wished it was the last, and that his children could avoid a similar fate.

Some people say that along with relative peace has come a loss of focus on the values our men and women died for over the centuries, and a degradation of the will to do what is necessary to protect our nation and our people. But if you attend a Memorial Day service this year, you will see those values and that will, clearly evident in the faces of the participants, whether grizzled veterans or youthful Scouts. And you will leave with renewed respect for our nation's principles, and for the men and women who paid the ultimate price to defend them, and for those who will be prepared to do so again, if necessary.

Publisher's notebook

Ron Bartizek



For all the talk, the pace of progress is . . . well, slow. We were talking around the dinner table the other night, and for some reason the subject of vaccinations — shots — came to mind. I confessed to my kids that I had been terrified of shots as a child, and recalled an embarrassing trip to the doctor at about 12 years of age in which I cried relentlessly over a tetanus booster. Let's not even get into my reaction to having blood drawn, in the days before it became a regular occurrence. Anyway, I remember clearly that shots were to have been a thing of the past by now, replaced by a device that shoots the medicine through the skin in less painful fashion. I think only the military, where crying would be quite out of place, uses this system.

That's one example of how much more slowly change takes place in reality than it does in the minds of dreamers and headline writers. Look at the movies. It's beginning to appear the producers of "2001 A Space Odyssey" missed their target by a few hundred years. And cars? At the 1964 World's Fair in New York, we saw visions of a future that has never arrived, such as cars that would take us to our destination guided by sensors buried in roadways, relieving us of the chores of driving so we could read a paper or enjoy a show on the television built into the dashboard. Then there's the infamous Year 2000 computer bug, which is a problem only because programmers working 30 years ago never imagined in their wildest dreams we'd be using the same programs at the turn of the century.

Perhaps most fascinating is the fact that all these advances and many more are technically feasible, and in some cases have been for years, but we haven't had the desire to implement them. I can't tell if that's because we don't really appreciate what could be, or because the payoff doesn't justify the trouble and expense required.

So, take a grain of salt with the next article you read about the looming high-tech future. Instead of rapid advances, we're more likely to live in an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" world for some time to come.

Do you agree? Disagree?

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Would this by any other name smell sweeter? Skunk cabbage, pretty but pungent. Photo by Charlotte Bartizek.

LETTERS

Huntsville can be enjoyed by all golfers, says President

Editor:

Thanks so much for the wonderful article on Huntsville Golf Club. We appreciate your excellent coverage, and can relate very well to the risk-reward decisions that your golfers faced at each hole of the course. I congratulate your staff members on their scores, which were very good, and agree that if they were more familiar with the course, they could reduce those good scores by a few more strokes.

However, I think that your writer may have described the course to be far more intimidating than it really needs to be. It should be clearly noted that while they played from the green tees, there are three other tee positions at each hole that would have made the course easier to play, just as there are two other tee positions at each hole that would have made the course even harder to play.

Rees Jones was specifically selected as the course architect for

Huntsville because he has a reputation for designing golf courses which challenge the good golfers, but are also playable by the high handicap golfers, as well. At Huntsville, we have many expert golfers, but also many beginning golfers. Additionally, we have a children's golf program. Our course is played and enjoyed by all of these different levels of golfers.

The course is challenging, that's what makes it fun. But when a

golfer plays from the tee position which is appropriate to his or her skill level, it is not an unusually difficult course.

I'd like to set aside the misconception that "Huntsville is too hard to play unless you're a really good golfer." We have a large number of beginning and novice golfers who play this course and enjoy it immensely.

Richard Maslow
President

Are charter schools the answer?

certain predetermined results. The charter specifies the operational and educational objectives and is strictly a performance based contract.

In its purest form, the charter school concept is designed to give schools maximum freedom from state and local districts. Advocates of the charter system believe such freedom releases schools from bureaucratic control that hinders learning and innovation. Positive guidance and support is sought through the increased involvement of parents, the community, and the private sector.

The charter school movement has received such a positive reputation because it claims to offer more parental choice and greater accountability. Democrats and Republicans alike are taking credit for this reform. Since 1991, 22 states have put charter school laws into effect, and about 1,100 schools are up and running throughout the country. President Clinton in his most recent State of the Union Address vowed to expand the number of charter schools to 3,000 by next year.

So where does the debate begin? With the very premise the charter school concept is based on, freedom from bureaucratic regulation. This freedom allows charter schools to follow their own idea of public education. However, such freedom demands a high degree of accountability. If a charter school does not meet the expectations outlined in its contract it will lose funding and be shut down. This clearly contradicts the very principle of freedom upon which the charters are based. The pressure to maintain funding itself undermines any room for growth or constructive reorganization outside the initial educational objectives of the charter. In reality this creates a very limited learning environment, with no proven record of success.

A charter school's educational effectiveness is determined by its fiscal management. The heaviest

burden charter schools bear is the absence of start-up money and capital funding. The lack of funding means charter schools are having to make do with considerably less money to accomplish all of their goals.

There are other highly controversial issues involved in charter school funding. For instance, there is no consistency among charter schools in assessing the necessary funding to finance public education. In this respect, a charter school can be easily compared to a small business venture. Capital funding is a key and problematic issue. Most charter schools encounter problems with start-up funds for facilities, equipment, planning, teacher training, etc., and once established, operate on a very limited budget. There are no guarantees that a charter school will succeed. In many cases, shifting dollars away from traditional public schools to an untested experimental school is risky and irresponsible use of state and federal funding.

Charter schools claim to provide increased options for parents, children, and teachers. In most cases, this means increased responsibility from parents and flexibility among teachers to instruct in non-traditional areas of education. Most students in need of further options are those who have special needs, such as learning disabilities or mental or physical handicaps. Existing charter schools are relatively small and isolated, serving a limited, and at times elite group of students. Their focus is on specialized academic or artistic interests, such as science or music. This can hardly be considered an educational system capable of serving the majority of students in our public schools and certainly leaves limited resources for students with special needs.

The argument that public schools need more community involvement and support from the private sector is a valid one. But the assistance available to char-

ter schools is likely to mirror the socioeconomic status of student enrollment. Children in communities that are economically deprived, or that do not have charter schools, would be left out of the equation. Charter school enrollment does not provide an accurate representation of the public student population.

If community involvement or assistance from the private sector is to be put toward public education it should go directly to the public school system already in place in that community. This would help expand community and parental involvement, while increasing support for public schools.

The future of charter schools is dependent upon their ability to fulfill their respective contracts. But, what does this really say about the quality of education being provided? It is not freedom from bureaucracy that the public school system needs, but a more concerted effort from educational reformers, parents and the community to address problems within the system. Diverting funds to new, experimental programs, such as charter schools, will not increase the quality of public education.

Charter schools do not provide public education because their academic agendas don't apply to the majority of students and are further hindered by the fact that they must apply to the contract (which is too dependent on funding), they are elitist in their enrollment and do not represent the average student. They do not provide for special needs students, and any outside assistance will still result in increased bias towards those families who already have the advantage of sending their children to a charter school. Charter schools are too risky an investment and there is not enough evidence they benefit the general public.

Lynn McLaughlin teaches the middle grades at Gate of Heaven School in Dallas.

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