# II

## *Education in the Second Decade of A Divided World*

As the title of this chapter indicates, I do not believe we can divorce a discussion of our schools from a consideration of the kind of world in which we live. And let us be frank about it — it is not an entirely pleasant world. Quite the contrary. Those whose memory goes back to the days before the first World War will probably agree that when we were young the present international situation would have been for us literally inconceivable. Even those who remember only the early 1930's would probably assent to the proposition that in their youth few, if any, would have credited a prophecy of a future in which two powers faced each other armed with new weapons, a single one of which could destroy a large-sized city. Yet that is the kind of world in which we live, and I see no prospects of an amelioration of the situation, at least for many years to come.

This picture, which would have seemed too terrible to be believed by my generation thirty or forty years ago, did not develop overnight. We have had time to accustom ourselves somewhat to the horrors. The atomic bomb became a reality in the closing days of World War II. The fusion bomb and the possibility of its delivery by an intercontinental rocket came later — after we had a chance to become used to

learned professors debating the probability of the continued existence of civilization. I wonder how many readers recall the best-selling pamphlet of the immediate post-war years — "One World or None"? And how many recall Elmer Davis' reply to the authors — "If necessary, none"? By which he meant if it came to a choice between capitulation to the Soviets or an atomic war, he, for one, chose the latter.

In the late 1940's we learned to live with the failure of our first hopes about atomic energy. No agreement could be reached with the Soviets as to the control of the manufacture of atomic bombs. And just as the fearful prospects of a gigantic armament race loomed over the horizon, all doubts were resolved about the Soviets' intentions in Europe. The coup d'état in Prague and the Berlin Blockade opened the eyes of almost all who still clung to the belief that cooperation with our erstwhile ally was still possible. Furthermore, a new and menacing phrase was added to our vocabulary — "Red China." Yet hopes for what some called a "People's Peace" died hard. I recall that when in 1948 I ventured to predict that the world would remain deeply divided for many years to come, I was considered far too pessimistic. Of course, there were others who felt that my second forecast of a period of high tension without a global war was far too sanguine. It happens that both prophecies have so far been correct. This is no warrant, of course, for their validity for an indefinite future. But I shall take them nonetheless as premises for my present discussion of American education.

In most respects, the international situation is the same now as it was when I wrote *Education in a Divided World* ten years ago.[1] To my mind, the replacement of atomic bombs carried in airplanes by fusion bombs attached to rockets does not introduce a really novel factor. It was clear that the

destructive power of the new weapons was going to increase with the passing years and that both sides in the armament race would have to devote increasing amounts of manpower and money to the development of offensive and defensive weapon systems. What is new, it seems to me, are the political developments in areas of the world which in the late 1940's seemed not to be the focus of our troubles. I refer, of course, to the growing nationalism in many underdeveloped portions of the world and the successful infiltration of Soviet influence in vast areas heavily populated with impoverished people. The struggle for the uncommitted countries, on the one hand, and the increasing ferment in the Middle East and Africa, on the other, have time and again in the last few years presented the governments of the free nations with a choice between only thoroughly bad alternatives.

During the first decade of the divided world, it was obvious that the United States was for the first time in its history a world power with vast responsibilities for leadership. Opposed stood a second world power bent on global domination and whose strength was growing. It was clear that we had to be strong — economically, politically, and militarily — and, at the same time, build solidarity among the free peoples. The Marshall Plan was a blueprint for such building. Now in the second decade we realize we must do still more. We must help the peoples in the uncommitted nations to resist the encroachment of the Communist doctrines. For if the Soviets should be able to repeat in other parts of the globe their success in China, we in the free world would be very near disaster. Can anyone look at the map and the population figures and question this conclusion?

Do we Americans in our thoughts and acts respond to the stark realities of the situation? I doubt it. As I have traveled around the United States during the last two years, visiting

schools and talking with educators and many other people, I sense no feeling of urgency in most places. People are for the most part remarkably carefree and complacent. Yet few would challenge the correctness of the broad outlines of the grim picture I have sketched. Even during the recurrent periods of high international tension, few seemed to worry about what would happen. That there has been no panic when the international outlook blackened is, in one sense, excellent; collectively, we have proven to have steady nerves in the darkest hours of an atomic age even in the face of threatened military action. Not many would have predicted such behavior when the atomic bombs first entered our calculations. But there is the other side of the coin. Are we worried enough about those matters which deserve attention if we are to survive the ordeals ahead — if we are to continue strong, keep our allies among free nations, and prevent the present neutrals from drifting into the other camp? My answer would be "no"; we are not worried enough about the future and about areas of action where we could do more to insure our meeting the Soviet competition. And, of these areas, I have in mind particularly education.

In describing the present scene and indicating what requires action, we must be cautious about generalizations. Our colleges and universities are so numerous and so diverse that I fail to see how anyone can generalize about them. I am sure a foreign observer would wonder why there was not more agreement among the nearly two thousand institutions as to ways in which effective cooperation could be attained. And he would be surprised to see how much competition among colleges and universities now exists even in the face of the wave of increased numbers. He might be surprised that so few states seem to have planned effectively for cooperation between the various tax-supported two-year

and four-year institutions.[2] But foreigners never can understand our higher educational chaos. They likewise fail to understand our pattern of public education, with the responsibility for our schools largely in the hands of thousands and thousands of local school boards. And I have gradually come to the conclusion that many Americans do not understand the pattern either, and some at least will not take the trouble to understand it. For example, it has been amazing to me since the Russian success with rockets how many thoroughly ill-informed persons have taken it upon themselves to criticize *the* American high school. They speak as though it were possible to characterize the typical American high school, or to cite meaningful national statistics about the number of youth studying trigonometry, or the percentage of high schools offering a course in physics.[3]

There are 21,000 American public senior high schools. (I mean schools which graduate a senior class.) I would not know how to go about trying to answer the question: Are these schools doing a good job? I can only say that I know of some that are and many that are not. But it would take a truly mammoth study to get an answer about all 21,000 that would have any chance of being valid. One bit of reliable information about these schools, however, is available. And I think it points to a serious national problem that nine citizens out of ten ignore when they criticize our tax-supported schools. I refer to the size of the high school and the percentage of the youth of high school age in each state attending high schools of insufficient size.

I am prepared to demonstrate that high schools with a graduating class of much less than one hundred cannot do justice to those enrolled except at exorbitant expense. This fact follows from the comprehensive non-selective nature of the American high school, about which I shall have more

to say in subsequent chapters. A good high school in an average American community should offer a variety of elective programs occupying about half the students' time; these should include a variety of courses designed to develop skills marketable on graduation (carpentry or auto mechanics for boys, stenography for girls, for example). For the academically talented, there should be courses in physics, chemistry, twelfth-grade mathematics, and one or more foreign languages. But in a small high school there are so few who would enroll in the different programs that providing the equipment and adequate instructors is prohibitively expensive. As a consequence, in these schools few elective courses are usually available, a watered-down academic program is the fare provided for all pupils. Such a situation is bad for the entire student body, but let me first concentrate attention on the nation's loss because of the neglect in the small high schools of those boys and girls (particularly the boys) who have the capacity to study advanced mathematics, science, and a foreign language.

In some states, as many as two thirds of the youth of high school age are attending schools with a graduating class of less than one hundred. The country over, something like a third of our youth are attending high schools that are too small. As a result, one of the most precious assets of the nation is being squandered — the potential talent of the next generation. It is almost impossible for students graduating from many of the small schools later to become members of the learned professions. Medicine, engineering, and science are careers practically barred to those who have had inadequate mathematics and science in high school. In many states, each year a large fraction of the able students graduate from high school without having had a chance to study physics, or trigonometry, or a modern foreign language.

For example, only 12,000 of the 21,000 senior high schools offer a course in physics. It seems like a hopeless task to find another 9,000 high school physics teachers; indeed, one can argue that we need even more because some of the physics courses offered in the 12,000 schools are not taught by adequately trained teachers. Yet if all the states would proceed with district reorganization and consolidation so that not more than ten per cent of the youth instead of thirty percent were attending small schools, the number of senior high schools might be reduced to something like twelve or thirteen thousand. The problem of providing this number of schools with well-trained physics teachers is by no means a hopeless undertaking. There may well be almost enough such people now teaching physics to man all the high schools of the nation if the citizens would act to eliminate the small high school in most sections of the country.[4]

To a large extent, this present situation is a consequence of the failure of citizens to act. There are areas in the nation, of course, where the population is so widely scattered that it is impossible to have a high school of sufficient size, and in these areas special solutions must be found.[5] But the percentage of the population living in such areas is much smaller than is often thought. Geography is far less of a limiting factor than is often claimed. I know of a school which is serving 3,000 square miles; the pupils come in buses and travel an hour each way. California is not a densely populated state, yet in California ninety-five percent of the youth attending high schools are enrolled in schools of sufficient size — only five percent attend schools with a graduating class of one hundred or less. How much of our academic talent can we afford to waste? This is the question that must be considered state by state. If the answer is "none," then in each state the

citizens must discover whether they have done all they can to prevent the waste. In most states this means that the elimination of the small high school through district reorganization and consolidation should have top priority. The state legislature should be urged to pass the necessary laws, the state department of education must provide leadership, and the citizens must respond by reorganizing the high school districts to provide schools of sufficient size. There is no doubt that a drastic reduction in the number of small high schools is possible if citizens desire it. If we really wish to improve public secondary education in the United States in order to meet the national needs in this period of a global struggle, surely district reorganization is a matter of urgency in almost every state in the Union.[6]

Here is one specific set of actions in which citizens could become engaged if they were sufficiently aroused. Yet, with few exceptions, I am not aware of any concerted movement in any state to get forward with this badly needed educational reform. Indeed, in a few states, there are organizations to block any move to reduce the number of small schools. One can only conclude that many people are quite unconscious of the relation between high school education and the welfare of the United States. They are still living in imagination in a world which knew neither nuclear weapons nor Soviet imperialism. They believe they can live and prosper in an isolated, insulated United States. This is true even of some teachers, school administrators, and professional educators who write about public education.

I have met a few professionals who talked as though we were living in the 1930's; they tend to resent any references to the struggle between the free nations and Communism and the consequent existence of a special national interest which ought to affect educational planning. Some teachers and ad-

ministrators I have met object at once to any line of argument which starts with such phrases as "the nation needs today." Their attention has been centered for so long on the unfolding of the individuality of each child that they automatically resist any idea that a new national concern might be an important factor which should be considered by a parent and a student in planning a high school program. Yet, of course, they would be the first to say that a traditional public concern — education for citizenship — should weigh heavily in the planning of the curriculum. In other words, some of the professional people concerned with public schools seem to me behind the times.

As an example of what I have in mind, let me refer to the resistance to the emphasis on the study of modern foreign languages — a resistance to be found in certain quarters. Few will attempt to justify the existence of courses in foreign languages which run for only two years. Almost all freely admit there is no permanent residue left from this short exposure to a foreign language. The two-year course in Latin, or French, or Spanish (or all three) to be found in so many high schools today is a desiccated residue of what forty years ago was a four-year course. Some parents like a short course, for they can boast that their children have studied a foreign language. Pupils, however, are rarely enthusiastic, for they realize that what is needed is a sufficiently long course so that something approaching a mastery of the language can be obtained. Not many public school officials I have met care to argue strongly for the two-year course of French, for example, but some do question the wisdom of a four-year course. Some would even abandon completely foreign language instruction in the high school. They suggest that Americans just are not interested in learning a foreign language because, unlike Europeans, they will

probably never have a chance to use it. This would have been true twenty years ago, before transoceanic airplane service had begun! But with jet planes, it is now a fact that a city in the middle of the United States is nearer London, or Paris, or Rome than those cities were to each other a century ago. Many high school students I have talked to are well aware of this fact. The more able want to study a language long enough to obtain some lasting benefit. These young people know they are living in a new era of transportation. Some of their elders, unfortunately, do not. Of course, part of the blame for the existence of so many two-year courses in high school must rest with the colleges. I have been shocked to discover how many college catalogues state that two years are required or recommended. It would be better to be silent than to encourage high school pupils to study an almost worthless sequence.[7]

The purpose of studying a language is to master it. And for able students something approaching mastery of a modern foreign language can be reached in four years. I am talking about the boy or girl who has the capacity to handle a foreign language. There are many students studying two years of a language who can get nothing out of it and who would get little no matter how long they tried. These students should drop the subject as soon as their lack of talent is clearly indicated. I know that there are some students in many schools whose study of a foreign language is a waste of time. But those who have the capacity should be urged to acquire something approaching a mastery of one modern language by the time they graduate from high school. If they do not, the chances are they never will, and doors are closed to them forever. This is particularly true of boys who are headed for an engineering school. These are able boys who, if properly advised, could and should obtain a command of a