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## **Planting Land Mines In Common Ground: A review of Charles Glenn's review of Short Route To Chaos**

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**Abstract** Arons responds to what he considers to be Glenn's misrepresentations of the tone and content of *Short Route To Chaos*. He writes that Glenn "appears to be attempting to construct the book's message into just one more salvo fired in the endless school wars. It is anything but....Reading Glenn's review, one is left with the impression that the book is a Christian-bashing, left-leaning, work of communitarian fuzziness in which a legal scholar unaccountably refuses to confine himself to ... technical explication of existing constitutional doctrine." In his response, Arons affirmatively sets out some of the book's main themes of political /cultural conflict over standardized schooling, corrects some of what he sees as Glenn's misunderstandings, and notes that the book itself invites readers to eschew partisanship and recognize that there are deep structural problems in American public education. In closing, Arons uses an example of Glenn's partisan misunderstanding that leads Arons to recommend to the reader that it would be better to read *Short Route to Chaos* for oneself.

One of the central themes in *Short Route To Chaos* suggests that unless Americans step back and get some perspective on the current school wars and the endless rounds of school reform fads, we are destined to keep repeating the nearly neurotic cycle of conflict that has characterized public schooling since the mid-nineteenth century. This conflict is unnecessary, culturally corrosive, and increasingly destructive of school quality; and the book discusses frankly the ugly side of these battles. Having done so, *Short Route To Chaos* invites the reader to put aside partisanship long enough to see that there are deep structural problems in American public education which are themselves a primary cause of this perennial conflict over the content of schooling.

Early in the book, while stories of the school wars are still being told and the analysis

of their causes has not yet become the focus of the work, I try briefly to deal with the problem of holding a mirror up to the unseemly spectacle of the American preoccupation with school wars. Noting that the Christian Right has been very successful at exploiting the weaknesses in public education structure, the book states:

But the Christian Right meets its match in an education establishment artful at demonizing its opponents and willing to resist virtually any attempt to change the ideology and practices of the public schooling to which it owes its existence...

So effectively do these two giants demonize each other, and so distorted has the public debate over schooling become as a result, that it is difficult to discuss the attack by the Christian Right or the defensiveness of the education establishment without seeming to insult large numbers of well-intentioned people on both sides. 'Right-wing Christian' is to most Christian fundamentalists, for example, as 'tax-and-spend liberal' is to many other Americans of good will: a label, a stereotype, a mischaracterization of citizens trying to improve the quality and meaningfulness of public schooling for their children and their community.

It is essential to get beyond the demonization and polarization, and to put in perspective the partisan attacks on public schooling and the hackneyed defense of the status quo there. Americans with conflicting but sincere views about schooling need to admit that some leaders on each side have been willing to misuse the legitimate concerns of their constituents....

But it isn't easy to escape the lure of immediate self-interest and ideological commitment in these conflicts, as [Professor Glenn's accompanying review](#) of *Short Route To Chaos* makes clear. When what is at stake is so important, and when both the school wars themselves and their spoils seem to provide so much satisfaction, even the most astute may find it difficult to see beyond the end of their own agendas. If the book is an invitation to cease politicizing American education for a moment and to look squarely at the structural problems of public education, then Glenn has either not understood this invitation or has intentionally chosen not to take it up. This is an unfortunate posture for a scholar, though it is completely understandable in a partisan.

The U.S. Supreme Court warned of the problem of politicized schooling and the chaos of conflict long ago in *West Virginia v. Barnette*:

As governmental pressure toward unity becomes greater, so strife becomes more bitter as to whose unity it shall be. Probably no division of our people could proceed from any provocation than from finding it necessary to choose what doctrine and whose program public educational officials shall compel youth to unite in embracing.

More than fifty years later, as the state and federal governments begin trying to standardize American education along the lines of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the bitter, predictable strife continues and increases. Among its chief casualties has been freedom of conscience in education--the individual liberty to follow an internal moral compass in setting a course for a meaningful and fulfilling life. Undermined as well has been the building of community, which most teachers and families believe to be essential to successful schooling. Hence the subtitle of *Short Route To Chaos: Conscience, Community,*

*and the Re-Constitution of American Schooling.*

I argue in *Short Route To Chaos* that schooling has become so burdened with unnecessary conflict that it is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. It is therefore in all our interests--not just the Christian Right or the secular left--to reduce the level of political/cultural warfare over schooling. This is analogous to reducing the level of conflict over religion 200 years ago when the Bill of Rights adopted the requirement of separation of church and state.

Another important theme of *Short Route* is the importance of focusing the public debate on the principles by which public education should be organized, rather than on the specific programs or proposals advanced by one partisan group or another. That is why the book stresses the "constitutional" level of reform, suggesting an extended national dialogue on an education amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Under the present conditions, to debate vouchers or charter schools or decentralization or home schooling would be to fall back into the old cycle of partisan conflict. But once we agree on fundamental principles--or at least start discussing them civilly--the appropriate mechanisms for achieving them are likely to become clear and to come within our reach.

Glenn ignores this theme as well, apparently preferring to criticize *Short Route* for not providing a detailed defense for what he imagines I would advocate as a suitable program, vouchers. Given Glenn's past thoughtfulness about matters of education policy, it would have been more useful for him to have joined instead in a discourse about the basic principles underlying vouchers, rather than the programmatic details of this or any other program that might eventually be advanced. Here is what the last chapter of the book says about the difference between principles and programs:

...a constitutional amendment for education cannot spell out a particular program for schools. It must, like the Bill of Rights, be based upon a few principles which specify government powers, secure fundamental freedoms, and establish the ground rules under which particular programs may be created, put into service, and judged for their constitutionality. (p.149)

Perhaps professor Glenn took umbrage at the book's introductory comment that "It is...my intention to suggest how the American people themselves--not limited by the current views of their political representatives, education experts, and constitutional courts, and quite apart from 'politics as usual'--may achieve a re-constitution of schooling adequate to strengthen both conscience and community in public education." (P.10)

Glenn's misunderstandings and misrepresentations extend still further. He claims that *Short Route* does not make "an especially convincing case for the dangers of government control of education through national standards." Glenn can be forgiven for not agreeing with Theodore Sizer's estimate that "Arons' argument is politically very incorrect, but devastating." But it appears that he has not read the chapter in which the argument he dismisses is centered, "Renouncing Our Constitutional Heritage." More interesting, however, is what Glenn would consider to be the basis of a convincing argument: "it would have to show how such standards would enforce more conformity than already exists as a result of professional norms and the economics of textbook publishing." By this standard, I suppose that a theocratic state would be acceptable as long as the majority of its citizens shared the religious beliefs of their rulers.

The primary danger of government control of school content--through politically-defined education standards, testing programs, or other means--is not conformity. The danger is that in giving government at any level the power to control school content, we invite endless and destructive political conflict over whose idea of good education will be

adopted by the state. That, in effect, is what the Supreme Court meant when it declared, in the Barnette case, that the "ultimate futility of...attempts to compel coherence is the lesson of every such effort...Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard." Moreover, in empowering government to control school content we risk renouncing a constitutional heritage which holds that, in matters of intellect and belief, government has no proper role beyond protecting individual liberties. That, to quote professor Glenn, is "what freedom's about."

There are other themes in *Short Route To Chaos* that Glenn either ignores, misunderstands, or misstates--that American public schooling has already been re-constituted by state and federal laws adopted without meaningful public debate; that conscience and community are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent; that schooling is much more like religion than it is like economic policy or public policy; that the Christian Right and the Education Empire are equally destructive and unattractive in their campaigns to get or hold power over schooling; and that the Education Empire--including Glenn--is more a part of the problem than of the solution.

Reading Glenn's review, one is left with the impression that the book is a Christian-bashing, left-leaning, work of communitarian fuzziness in which a legal scholar unaccountably refuses to confine himself to the kind of technical explication of existing constitutional doctrine that a conservative Christian could use for partisan purposes in the school wars. I don't mind controversy; and argument is my stock in trade. But knowing Charles Glenn's past commitment to freedom of conscience and to equality of educational opportunity, I expected a more thoughtful dissent. In closing, therefore, I offer one example of partisan misstatement that particularly galled me and that, I hope, illustrates why it would be better to read *Short Route To Chaos* for oneself than to be satisfied with Glenn's dismissive and combative review.

Glenn criticizes the book for trashing the Christian Right but admiring the Satmar Hasidim of New York "who can be romanticized because they are exotic and do not relate to anything that can be perceived as threatening potentialities in American life. But not conservative Catholics and Protestants,..." Here is what *Short Route To Chaos* actually says about the Satmar and the Kiryas Joel case:

The Court simply could not accommodate the legitimate claims of the Satmar and simultaneously uphold the principles of the Establishment Clause. But had it been parents instead of governments that chose where each child attends an approved school, the Court's dilemma would have dissolved.

Without such a structural change in schooling, however, any accommodation acceptable to the Satmar and approved by the Court would have been so narrowly drawn that it would likely be virtually useless to other communities--including many Christian fundamentalists, who are no less entitled to respect for their community and religious values than the Satmar [emphasis added]. The lesson of this long struggle therefore seems clear. Public schools are presently structured so that they become the enemies of private conscience and the building of communities of belief. Making it easier for schooling to be consistent with any community's most basic beliefs is a problem that can be solved by restructuring public education, not by reinterpreting the First Amendment.

Whether by design or by inadvertence, Charles Glenn has misrepresented the tone as well as the substantive themes of *Short Route To Chaos*. In so doing he appears to be

attempting to construct the book's message into just one more salvo fired in the endless school wars. It is anything but. The school wars are ugly; and they do bring out the worst in many well-intentioned Americans, as they undermine the quality of schooling and the vitality of both conscience and community. If we are ever to ameliorate this destructive conflict, we must have a truce just long enough to see how needlessly we are pitted against each other by a school structure that simultaneously apportioned freedom of choice according to wealth and requires majority consent for the exercise of individual conscience.

There are pragmatic and principled solutions available if we can just stop planting land mines in what could be our common ground. Perhaps Charles Glenn would rather fight than solve problems. But that approach will get us nothing more than another 150 years of school wars. But if he so chooses, Glenn has the ability and the experience needed to help call a truce and to find solutions that respect diversity. Perhaps he still will.

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Stephen Arons, B.A. Univ. of Pa., J.D. Harvard, is professor of Legal Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a member of the Massachusetts Bar. For the past 25 years, Arons has been involved in issues of schooling, public policy, and constitutional law from a number of different perspectives. He was one of the founders of an alternative school for street youth, worked as a staff attorney concerned with civil rights at the Center for Law and Education, was an early participant in the federal study of school vouchers, wrote extensively about education policy for the *Saturday Review* and other magazines, has litigated issues ranging from state aid for private schooling to parental rights in home education, and has consulted for state and federal departments of education and legislative committees concerned with the constitutional implications of various school finance mechanisms. Arons has written numerous articles in professional journals and two books on schooling, culture, and the U.S. Constitution: *Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling* (1986) and *Short Route To Chaos: Conscience, Community, and the Re-Constitution of American Schooling* (Univ. of Mass. Press, 1997).

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