
May 17, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Hard Roads Ahead

By **BOB HERBERT**

Walt Disney would have been proud of John McCain's presentation on Thursday of what the world might look like at the end of a first McCain term as president.

Listening to the speech was like walking through the gates of Fantasyland, which Disney always said was the happiest kingdom of them all. The war in Iraq will have been won. Crack intelligence work will have led to the capture or death of Osama bin Laden. Taxes will be lower and the U.S. economy will be swell. And maybe best of all (I'm not sure for whom), work will have begun on 20 brand-new nuclear reactors.

Senator McCain never bothered to mention how we were to reach this wondrous state, and he bristled when a reporter suggested he was offering a "magic carpet ride."

Elisabeth Bumiller of The Times had the best line when she wrote in Friday's paper that "there were no real checkable facts in Mr. McCain's divination."

On the same day that the senator unveiled his candy-coated vision, a former governor of West Virginia, Bob Wise, came by my office to talk about a much more prosaic matter — the terrible job that the nation is doing in getting its high school kids ready for the real world.

At a time when the nation is faced with tough economic challenges at home and ever-increasing competition from abroad, it's incredible that more is not being done about the poor performance of so many American high schools.

We can't even keep the kids in school. A third of them drop out. Half of those who remain go on to graduate without the skills for college or a decent job. Someone please tell me how this is a good thing.

Mr. Wise is president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a policy and advocacy group committed to improving the high schools. The following lamentable passage is from his book, "Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation":

“International comparisons rank the United States a stunningly unimpressive eighteenth for high school graduation rates, a lackluster ranking of fifteenth for high school reading assessments among 15-year-olds in developed countries, and an embarrassing 25th for high school math.”

Those are not the marks of a society with a blissful future. Four years of college is becoming a prerequisite for a middle-class quality of life and we’re having trouble graduating kids from high school.

Mr. Wise believes (as does Bill Gates) that America’s high schools are for the most part obsolete, inherently ill equipped to meet the needs of 21st-century students. The system needs to be remade, reinvented.

“It’s not that our system is getting worse,” he said. “It’s that other countries are coming on harder and faster.”

More than ever, high schools need to be a conveyor belt to college. In 1995, the United States was second in the world (behind New Zealand) in its four-year college graduation rate. “We’ve actually increased the percentage from that time,” said Mr. Wise. “The difference is we’ve gone from being second in the world to 15th because others have come on so strong.”

The chief executive of AT&T, Randall Stephenson, said his company, based in San Antonio, has had trouble finding enough skilled workers to handle 5,000 customer-service jobs he had promised to bring back from overseas. A month ago, the AT&T Foundation announced that it was sponsoring a \$100 million initiative to address the high school dropout problem and improve the readiness of American teenagers for college and the real world of work.

Said Mr. Stephenson: “We have an issue of education quality in this country right now. ... We’re not giving our children or our young people all the opportunities they need to succeed.”

The role of the federal government in improving secondary education should be one of the major issues in the presidential campaign, but it’s not. The U.S. has stopped dealing honestly with difficult and complex problems. Politicians (and not just John McCain, by any means) spin fantasies of a wondrous, cost-free future. No investment and no sacrifice necessary.

Our high schools are a perfect fit for that kind of backward, self-defeating approach to matters of extreme national importance.

An issue that is front and center in the campaign is the economy. We’re looking for ways to

turn things around for the short and long term. One of the answers in this technologically advanced, highly competitive, increasingly globalized environment is staring us right in the eyes.

As Mr. Wise put it, "The best economic stimulus package is a diploma."

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