

June graduations beg the question: What is our future?

Joan Chittister | Jun. 25, 2007 From Where I Stand

It's happening everywhere, I know. But I learned last week not to take it for granted. In fact, it may well be our major problem and it is hiding in plain sight.

With a measure of curiosity short of nostalgia but greater than personal interest, I found myself watching a series of local high school graduations on the public service channel last week. Why I paused -- and stayed -- on that particular channel, I'll never know. But I'm glad it happened.

It was, in fact, a veritable "taste of America" moment that I haven't seen too often since I left the scholastic world years ago. The graduates were combed, washed, heeled and proper. No goon show kids here. They wore their mortarboards flat and undecorated. Their gowns were pressed and glowing. Their smiles were broad, proud, satisfied.

One group of these graduates was from a collegiate prep school; the other from a local comprehensive high school that stresses technical proficiency and professional skills. Both groups were attentive, well mannered and, as teachers love to say, "a credit to their schools." If such a display of achievement and conduct has any meaning to it at all, it must indicate that our schools are putting out young adults who will fit into this society well, who will surely succeed in life as we have shaped it for them.

But that is exactly what made the whole scene so uncomfortable, even troubling.

According to researcher Christopher Swanson using data collected in 2003 and released June 6 by the national daily, *USA Today*, this country graduates only 69.6 percent of the four million students admitted to its high schools yearly.

What's worse, he points out, the largest school districts in the United States graduate even less than that of every potential graduation class every year. Three of them -- Detroit, Baltimore and New York City -- graduate fewer than 40 percent of the pupils they enroll in ninth grade. Eleven other urban school districts, the same research reports, have on-time graduation rates lower than 50 percent; they include Milwaukee, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas, Denver and Houston.

There are those who dispute the figures, of course. Lawrence Mishel of the Economic Policy Institute argues that Swanson's numbers fail to take into account the number of students held back in order to complete state exit exams or to take advanced work. Whether they actually ever do that or not he does not report, but he does insist that U.S. high schools graduate at least 80 percent of a four year student body. On the other hand, the *New York Post* reported May 22 that Mayor Bloomberg was ecstatic to be able to announce that New York City graduation rates had reached 60 percent this year.

Whatever the precise national figures, the question this year's graduation videos raised in me remains: Where are the rest of the graduates? Where are the one million students we lose every year who do not get diplomas, who do not graduate, who are not prepared for any kind of higher education or professional advancement? What do they look like? What do they read? How do they vote? What issues concern them? What are they going to do in life? And what does that have to do with the rest of us?

There are lots of things to worry about in this world. If you have any kind of insight at all you know that the Middle East can blow sky high at any moment. The first battle of World War III, some called the invasion of Iraq and who would deny that tag with any degree of confidence now.

And the war in Iraq gets worse by the day. Did we really liberate these people or did we simply unleash the factors within that country that had been held in check by Saddam Hussein for years and that are free now to destabilize the entire Middle East?

Is war the only way forward in this tinder-box world? And if not, who is there who will develop a better way?

The immigration situation is no small issue now, as well. Is the question of undocumented aliens only a new kind of indentured servitude? Are illegal workers simply one more population of people held hostage to an economic system that pays them little for their service and keeps them hidden in a system that uses them but refuses to recognize them.

The loss of the middle class, the increasing number of families falling below the poverty line, the lack of universal health insurance, the outsourcing of U.S. jobs to other countries are all domestic matters that signal a change in the quality of life in the United States. What will life look like in a few short years for those who are not the mega rich?

And most of all, in what way will the 7,000 students who drop out of school in the major cities of the United States every day of the school year influence any of those answers?

Maybe instead of spending more money on weapons, more money on walls designed to seal our borders, more money on high tech spying and technological Big Brother houses, we should spend more money on teachers, more money on schools, more money on day care and Head Start programs, more money on tutors, more money on organized inner city youth programs, more money on adult training centers, more money on subsidized higher education.

Then, maybe we wouldn't have to worry so much about our borders. Then maybe we wouldn't have to complain so much that we have to struggle to understand our computer technicians because they're all in India now. Then maybe U.S. culture would become as desirable to the rest of the world as U.S. money is. Then maybe we'd really have a culture worth sharing with the rest of the world instead of the daily reruns of Dallas and the menu of masochistic murder stories that are our hallmark around the world now.

It looks to me as if our enemies are not so much from outside of us as from within. What we have ignored for the sake of military superiority -- the education of a population capable of bettering the rest of the world as well as ourselves -- is costing us dearly now.

From where I stand it seems as if history may indeed repeat itself. Especially when we're not looking. Ask the Romans.

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