

EDUCATION WEEK

Of Common Core, Conspiracies and Coups d'Etat

By: Paul Horton – April 26, 2013

To those defending the Obama administration's Race To the Top and Common Core Curriculum initiatives, opponents tend to be placed in one very tidy box: "conspiracy theorists."

Long a critic of overzealous federal intervention in education, Chester Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute that promotes educational excellence and supports the president's education agenda, charged opponents of these initiatives as conspiracy theorists and flippantly suggested that the United Nations might be behind the Common Core as a part of its efforts, apparently, to create a one world government .

As if taking his cue from Finn, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, has recently made similar accusations in a Department of Education Press release: "The idea that the Common Core Standards are nationally imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy."

In an e-mail I recently received from Mr. Duncan's Press Secretary, Daren Briscoe, he repeated the assertion for the record. So, the new mantra coming from DOEd is that all opposed to the DOEd's initiatives from any angle must be conspiracy theorists. To reporters who have little knowledge of the Education beat (according to one recent study only 1.4% of all stories in major American print media are Education related), the critics-as-conspiracy-theorists line is easy to digest, especially when the aim of the conspiracy theory charge is to associate any critic of "Corporate Education Reform" with Glenn Beck, who has recently devoted an entire show to issues surrounding the Common Core Curriculum. Critics of the CCS (Common Core Standards) are thus quickly associated with a crackpot of the libertarian right and can thus be easily dismissed. Sensible people, after all, would not make the same sorts of assertions as Glenn Beck and his crowd. Indeed, this charge, when leveled at a critic from the left, is intended as a threat.

To be sure, Glenn Beck is full of conspiracy theories. Media Matters has even constructed acatalogue of his biggest whoppers.

Beck's conspiracy theory most related to Education issues is his assertion of the "Progressive plot," the idea that late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Progressives were hell bent on creating a one-world government. This, of course, has much to do, from Beck's perspective, with the overregulation of business and President Woodrow Wilson's failed attempt to get the American people to buy-in to the idea of the League of Nations.

The Progressive conspiracy trope is important to Beck and other right libertarians because Obama has labeled himself a progressive who supports a "square deal" for the American people in a time of expanding income inequality.

When it comes to education, however, Obama asserts a policy that has nothing to do with progressive ideas about education. While progressive ideas of education emphasize

children as individuals who must be given opportunities to stretch their innate capacities within an organic context for learning, the President and Mr. Duncan have embraced the data-driven high-stakes-testing-model retooled from President Bush's No Child left behind days.

Not to be fooled, Beck and company have not surprisingly insisted that the CCS comes not from a failed policy approach initiated by George Bush, but from radical leftist co-conspirators, Linda Darling-Hammond, and that devil himself, Bill Ayers, formerly of the Weather Underground and a "domestic terrorist."

While I make no apologies for Mr. Ayers' activities in the late sixties and early seventies, I am fairly sure (dare I say I have known him for over twenty years and taught his kids?) that he and Darling-Hammond are not behind the RTTT and the Common Core Standards. Because they are Progressive educators like me, they do favor radical ideas like student choice, an inquiry approach to learning, and education as a foundation for teaching students about how to participate in the Democratic process. Contrary to the accusations of Beck and other right-libertarians, Bill Ayers does not advocate for Federal control of local districts. In Chicago, he was a strong advocate for local school council control of schools before CPS was taken over by the mayor.

Darling-Hammond and Ayers are also firm advocates of what is called "authentic assessment" that seeks to measure learning by giving students opportunities to transfer concepts that they have learned to writing, building, or creating models that have the potential to do some good. This means, for example, that they would advocate for building robots that demonstrate a concept of an improvement over what other robots have been able to do in the past. In short, they favor the application of innovative thinking over standardized tests and robo-graded essays as measures of learning.

But getting back to the Obama administration's use of conspiracy theory charges against its' critics on the left: in leveling such charges against its own potential supporters, Mr. Duncan and his press secretary walk a slippery slope at best.

There are very legitimate reasons for very reasonable Americans, conservative and liberal, progressive and libertarian, to be concerned about increasing top-down control of Education.

First, RTTT and the CCS were not the product of initiatives from the states. And these two policy initiatives had little teacher input as David Coleman repeatedly insists. Anthony Cody's analysis of the authors of the Common Core Curriculum reveal that only one of sixty of those gathered to construct the standards was a teacher. Most authors were from Education vendors and test writers from the Education Testing Service and from the ACT:

Second, RTTT and the Common Core Standards represent a joint corporate, foundation, and government effort to create a nationalized curriculum. An Educational "shock doctrine" has been created by this group (listed in this document) in much the same way that the Sputnik launch was used to increase spending on science education in the late 1950s.

The American people have been led to believe that there is a crisis in American Education because our scores don't match scores in Singapore and China. Never mind that educators and decision makers in Singapore and China are abandoning their "kill

and drill" approach to education in favor of the American progressive model of Education.

Since this effort was launched and has been run from the top down, it is fair to call this a coup d'etat in American Education. One could, with good reason, call this a conspiracy launched by people with huge financial resources to impose its ideas about American Education at all learning levels, K-20. If you don't believe me, take a gander at this blueprint: "Smart Options: Investing Recovery Funds for Student Success." Please take some time to do some research on this document's authors, a virtual who's who of the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations and big Education vendors who have megabucks at their disposal.

Thirdly, all American citizens should be concerned about the proposed gathering of data on students mandated by the RTTT mandates. These concerns don't just come from conspiracy theorists, they are voiced all around the political spectrum, from Diane Ravitch on the progressive left to the CATO Institute on the libertarian right. One need only mention that a company owned by Rupert Murdoch is given the right to collect and secure the data under RTTT to get most people's attention.

Finally, the Department of Education seems to be more concerned with creating digital opportunities for Education vendors than it seems to be concerned with the quality of Education that students are going to receive under RTTT and the CCS. These are the words of Joanne Weiss, Arne Duncan's Chief of Staff and principal architect of the RTTT:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.

Shades of Emma Lazarus from the DOEd: bring us your software, hardware, networking, and servers and unlimited federal dollars will come your way! We can make you rich!

Before we jump to any conclusions about conspiracy theories chasing conspiracy theories, perhaps most of us reasonable citizens of a Democratic Republic need to get Arne Duncan to look in the mirror. Maybe he should share the same mirror with Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, and a bunch of other characters who can get meetings with big city paper editorial boards at the very lite snap of a finger.

There are plenty of reasonable Americans who can think beyond talking points and sound bites. We don't necessarily take what we read on the editorial pages of the New York Times or the Chicago Tribune as the truth, especially when we know that the big corporate bucks behind "Education Reform" can frame any argument in suitably Orwellian terms.

What do you think? Is this a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy? Or doth Secretary Duncan protest too much?