

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## War and Peacenik

**Clinton,  
and liberalism,  
in combat**

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**PLUS:** Charles Murray, Rob Long,  
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NOTE:

It was this quote in the National Review as Texas Governor George Bush was preparing to run for the President of the United States that was the beginning of the end for the Harris County based non-profit research organization that had placed the Texas public education system under intense scrutiny – in Houston ISD, Harris County, and including the Texas Education Agency.

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# Status Quo Report

An education governor?

KATE O'BEIRNE

**G**EORGE W. BUSH may not have taken controversial positions, or any positions, on many national issues. But the Texas governor does have a record after four years in office, and his conservative critics at home are convinced that at least one part of it will hurt him. "Bush's Achilles' heel won't be the social issues like abortion. It will be education," declares David Guenther of the *Lone Star Report*, a conservative newsletter.

Education has been central to Bush's agenda, and he does receive plaudits for his performance. But many of them are coming from the wrong party. Bush has been a "lifesaver" for school reform in Texas—according to a former Democratic county chairman. He's done an "outstanding job"—says the Democratic chairman of the Texas house education committee. "I'm sure he wouldn't like me saying this, but he is a Texas Democrat," says Texas Federation of Teachers president John Cole.

Cole would not be so enthusiastic if Bush championed school choice. The governor supports a modest pilot program for choice this year, but he spends his political capital on less market-oriented reforms that enjoy more bipartisan support, such as ending "social promotion," and on popular non-reforms, such as raising teacher salaries. There is little chance that Texas will follow Florida, where Jeb Bush is governor, in enacting a voucher plan any time soon.

George W.'s supporters note that neither Jeb has the support of a Republican legislature in Florida, while Democrats control the house in Texas. A fair point. But Democrats didn't force

Bush to appoint education officials with no interest in conservative reforms.

In 1995, Bush named Michael Moses, a former teacher and school superintendent, education commissioner, head of the Texas Education Agency. According to Allan E. Parker of the Texas Justice Foundation, Moses "has had to be pushed hard by conservatives for conservative reforms." David Hartman, a bank president and CEO who writes on education reform for the *Lone Star Report*, says that Moses's "mindset appears to be typical of the education cartel."

During Bush's first term, the state's elected board of education was sharply divided over curricula, standards, and testing. In 1996, Bush labeled the proposed curriculum standards out of the Texas Education Agency "mushy." Conservatives on the board agreed and backed an alternative set of standards. These standards were endorsed by E. D. Hirsch, author of *Cultural Literacy*, and other believers in a core curriculum that stresses basic skills and knowledge.

But Bush's appointed chairman of the state board, Jack Christie, supported the education establishment's standards, which were ultimately approved. And although the Texas GOP's platform called for the alternative standards, Bush didn't stick up for the conservative board members. Instead, some of his closest allies among Republican legislators joined the Democratic attack on them as religious extremists. Karl Rove, Bush's top advisor, took a swipe at them in the *New York Times*.

Bush touts his "accountability system" for the schools as the best in the country. But many conservatives remain opposed. Donna Garner, a high-school teacher who led the fight for tougher standards, argues that the adopted standards are based not on objective knowledge but on subjective evaluations of student progress. The pressure on teachers who criticize the establishment, she says, is "fearsome." Her ultimate boss, Commissioner Moses, recently sent her a "nasty" handwritten note telling her to stop sending him letters detailing her concerns about the standards.

Has academic achievement risen, as the governor claims? The Tax Research Association, a small outfit in Houston funded by business, says no. Looking at the last four years' worth of state test

results, its analysis indicted the state tests themselves, which are the foundation of the "accountability system." The tenth-grade math test, for instance, would be "more appropriate as a target for the sixth grade." The reading tests, too, were found to be below grade level, and to have become easier over the past four years. George Scott, president of the association, argues that these tests therefore mask fundamental shortcomings in Texas schools: "There are campuses in Texas ranked acceptable where there are significantly high levels of illiteracy."

Margaret LaMontague, the governor's advisor on education, agrees that standards should be higher. But, she asks, "is there any other state doing better with accountability and assessment? At least we know where we are." Neoconservative education guru Chester Finn confirms that other states are indeed worse than Texas at measuring their students' achievement. And a recent national assessment credited Texas and North Carolina as the two states showing the most student improvement. (Critics of the Texas testing regime want to examine these national data, which contradict their own findings.)

The pattern of Bush's education policy has been to mollify the teacher unions and the education bureaucracy. Former Republican national committeewoman Susan Feldman speculates that Bush appointed Moses because it's "what would get him the most points" with the Texas Education Agency. And last year, Bush appointed a critic of charter schools to the state board. Bush has addressed conservatives' concerns only when they have made trouble, and always with an exaggerated fear of being seen to cave in to them. So, for instance, Bush named Chase Untermeyer, a conciliatory veteran of his father's White House, the new chairman of the board. Untermeyer has bought peace by being open to conservatives' views.

Still, there is no shortage of local conservative critics of Bush's education record—as his Republican rivals for the nomination will discover when they do their opposition research. It may be difficult to sort out whether his reforms have lived up to his claims. But an examination of his record on education appointments demands no sophisticated analysis: Conservative reformers need not apply.

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