

AMERICANS' GROUNDHOG DAY

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Media stories about public schools show us and the reporters as non-Bill Murray characters in "Groundhog Day." In the movie, the same Groundhog Day repeats itself over and over but only Murray sees the repetition. About schools, the media report the present with no apparent awareness that it's the same story repeating itself. As a consequence, Americans keep waking up to headlines declaring that, apparently for the first time ever, the public school sky is falling.

On December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, papers dropped bombs saying "U. S. Lags Many Nations in Math" (*Dallas Morning News*); "U. S. Teens Have Weak Practical Math Skills" (*USA Today*); and "In a Global Test of Math Skills, U. S. Students Behind the Curve" (*Washington Post*). The *Christian Science Monitor* produced the scariest headline of the day: "Math + Test = Trouble for the U. S. Economy." The *Monitor* quoted Susan Traiman of the Business Roundtable, "It's very disturbing for business if the capacity to take what you know...and apply it to something novel is difficult for U. S. teenagers."

It's a common myth: low test scores = economic perdition. In 1998, the headlines over stories about the Third International Mathematics and Science Study read: "U. S. Seniors Near Bottom in World Test" (*Education Week*); "U. S. High School Seniors Rank Near Bottom," (*Washington Post*); "Why America Has the World's Dimmest Bright Students" (*Wall Street Journal*).

Once again, our awful schools were leading us to economic ruin. No one seemed to remember the headlines of early 1994: "America's Economy, Back on Top" (*New York Times*), "Rising Sun Meets Rising Sam" (*Washington Post*), "America Cranks It Up" (*U. S. New & World Report*). We did not know it at the time, but those headlines chronicled the early stages of the longest sustained economic expansion in the nation's history.

Had the schools improved? Did that improvement explain the turnaround? Not according to the critics. A mere three months after "America's Economy, Back on Top," then-IBM CEO and perennial school scold, Lou Gerstner, took to the op-ed page of the *Times* with "Our Schools Are Failing." They are failing, said Gerstner, because their "products" can't compete with the products manufactured in European and Asian factories, er, schools.

Gerstner's argument repeated a theory that arrived fully formed in 1983's mostly forgotten "A Nation At Risk." A nation with low test scores is doomed. That report

enjoyed phenomenal popularity. The *Washington Post* carried no fewer than 27 articles about it in the month after publication. “There was a steady decline in science achievement scores,” the report argued. “Average achievement of high school students is lower now than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.”

As for those all-important evaluations against other countries, Risk contended, “International comparisons reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.” No longer was the threat that the Soviets would vaporize us. Given these poor rankings, we risked having our friends, especially Germany, Japan, and South Korea take away our profits. “If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system....”

Shortly thereafter, Japan’s economy slumped. It has yet to recover. Japanese kids still ace tests, but they can’t jump-start Japan’s economy. If you break the chains of the myth, this is no surprise. Only the very, very foolish would think that 13-year-olds’ skills at bubbling in answer sheets would mean much for a nation’s economic well being. As if to prove that contention, the other “Asian Tiger” nations, also atop the world in test scores, tanked in the mid-1990’s

At least “A Nation At Risk” noticed history, although the media coverage of it did not. Its reference to Sputnik took the tale back to October, 1957 when the Russians launched the first man-made satellite. The schools took the hit for letting the Soviets get into space first.

In red ink, the cover of the March 24, 1958 issue of *Life* screamed, “Crisis in Education.” Two high-school juniors stared out from the cover, a stern-faced Alexei Kutzkov in Moscow and an easy-smiling Stephen Lapekas in Chicago. Inside, Alexei was seen conducting complicated science experiments, reading aloud from *Sister Carrie* in his English class, and using his free time to learn even more skills. By contrast, pictures showed Stephen walking his girlfriend home, rehearsing for the school musical, practicing his swimming stroke and otherwise having an easy time because “the standards of education are shockingly low.” In one picture Stephen retreats from a geometry problem on the blackboard. Says the text, “Stephen amused class with remarks about his ineptitude.”

(I tracked down Lapekas. He became an Air Force fighter pilot, then a commercial pilot. Not bad for a slacker. I enlisted National Public Radio’s Anne Garrels, then NPR’s Moscow correspondent in the search for Kutzkov. Several months later she called to say that, in spite of my many specific facts about Kutzkov, his school and his teachers, she had been unable to find any evidence that he had ever existed).

For almost 50 years, the media have played the schools-are-failing tune repeatedly, but neither they nor the public seems aware that it’s an old refrain. It’s Groundhog Day all over again.