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THE SAD STATE OF SPELLING

"A Nation at Risk," the title of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was the subject of a debate in which I participated in front of several thousand elementary school teachers attending a state convention on reading in one of our nation's largest states. I expressed general agreement with the Commission's conclusions that today's high level of functional illiteracy (23 million adults) is a major problem.

A functional illiterate is someone who cannot read the "help wanted" sections of the newspapers, fill out a job application, or read traffic signs or the label on a medicine bottle. Anyone who cannot do those things is truly "at risk" in modern society.

I argued for the use of phonics in the first grade as the best proven method of teaching children to read, write and spell the English language. Phonics means teaching children to read by first teaching them the sounds and syllables of the English language; with these skills, they can put the syllables together like building blocks and quickly acquire a reading vocabulary as large as their oral vocabulary.

My opponent, a professor well-known in the education field, disagreed. It wasn't clear what method he advocated, but it was evident that he thinks today's schools are doing a splendid job and that critics of the schools are just plain wrong.

When it came to the question time, I asked him: "When a state textbook adoption committee selects seven elementary reading series from which local school boards can choose the one they want, don't you think that one out of the seven could or should be a phonics system?" He answered flatly, "No."

The censorship of first-grade phonics books is one of the most curious quirks of professional educators today. They are not willing for local school systems even to have the option to choose a phonics system; they must be afraid that the non-phonics systems cannot stand the competition.

The phonics-first system and the non-phonics system produce vast differences in the number of words a child can read. In a typical non-phonics elementary reading series, the

child can read 350 words by the end of the first grade, 1,000 words by the end of the second grade, 1,250 words by the end of the third grade, and 1,550 words by the end of the fourth grade.

Using a typical phonics-first system, by the end of the first grade the child can read the estimated 24,000 words in his speaking and listening vocabulary, and 40,000 words by the end of the fourth grade. Yet only about 15% of public schools use a phonics-first reading system.

My follow-up question at the debate was, "If everything is A-OK with current reading methods, then how is it that spelling is such a terrible problem among young people looking for a job?" He simply denied that spelling is a problem.

The same week as that debate, I received a packet of letters written by members of a course in Rhetoric at a large midwestern state university. Apparently, the instructor had given the students the assignment to read and to comment on an article by me. After they turned in their papers, she put them all in a big brown envelope and forwarded them to me.

The teacher must have been proud of her students' work. There was no other reason to send them to me. I never would have otherwise known about her assignment.

All the papers were written by college students who presumably had graduated from high school. Here is a sampling of the misspelled words: ellimination, exspecially, discribing, predujicing, opertunity, ment (meant), amoung, eviroment, interfear, posative, attension, uncanning (uncanny), cruxify, femenist, wether, exspect.

One student didn't know the difference between to and two. Few students used apostrophes, either for contractions or for possessives (typical examples: "mens leadership" and "its just a vicious circle"). "More easier" was another typical mistake.

Even more depressing than the spelling, the syntax, and the grammar was the lack of ability to communicate clear thoughts. Here is a typical example: "I don't think that woman liberation movement reason for doing everything is to be against man. Men aren't thought of as enemys just equals. That all they want from them and that what they can exspect from us."

The year 1984 is a good time to quote from George Orwell. He said that, if people cannot write well, they cannot think well. If they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them.