from Phyllis Schlafly

February 6, 1992

Are U.S. Workers Really Illiterate?

It took the Japanese Speaker of the House to say out loud what American politicians are afraid to say: 30 percent of U.S. workers “cannot even read, so managers cannot convey their orders in written form.” Cast in the unlikely role of the little boy who dared to say that the emperor has no clothes, 79-year-old Yoshio Sakurauchi's comments have stirred up a firestorm of Japan-bashing.

Most of the newspaper and television comment quoted Americans as indignantly retorting that U.S. workers are not “lazy,” that the Japanese school system is not superior to ours, that our productivity compares favorably with Japan's, and that Sakurauchi shouldn't have said what he said. one had to search hard to find any mention of the crucial issue.

After all, the real question is not what Japanese politicians think or say, but whether it is true that nearly a third of U.S. workers are illiterate.

The New York Times reported a long denial from the U.S. Department of Education, but it, included the admission that only 21.1 percent of Americans aged 21 to 25 years old can understand the main argument in a long newspaper editorial. It is interesting that the news report failed to say that 78.9 percent canNOT.

I recently taunted a newspaper reporter with the accusation, “How does it feel to be working for a dying profession, since so many young people can't read?” She replied, “We know that. Our surveys show that the average age of our readers used to be 27, but now it is 42.”

Sakurauchi's 30 percent figure can be easily corroborated from many sources. For example, Lauro Cavazos said while he was Secretary of Education in 1990 that “13 percent of our citizens are illiterate, 27 million are functional illiterates, and another 40 to 50 million could be called marginally illiterate.”

What in the world is wrong with the U.S. public schools that they can’t teach children to read? That is the schools' number-one mission, and if they can't do that, nothing else really matters.

After years of watching the schools fail at this task, all the while prevaricating about what they are doing, I have come to the conclusion that they don't want a nation of readers. Consider, for starters, a 1981 speech given by Harvard Professor Anthony Oettinger.

He said, “The present ‘traditional' concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the rear question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? Do we really have to have everybody literate -- writing and reading in the traditional sense -- when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?”

A couple of other well-known Harvard reading researchers, Harman and Sticht, said in 1987: “Many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. what may be crucial is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained -- not its general educational level, although a sma1l cadre of highly educated creative people is essential to innovation and growth.”

They added, “Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading and moving low-income families into the middle class.” So much for you, poor little fella! Just stay illiterate, and you'll never move up into the middle class!

This attitude explains the irrational and intolerant determination of many of the public schools to refuse to teach first-grade children to read by the proven best method, phonics, and instead to force them into the dead-end system called “whole language.” Under this procedure, the child is not taught to read, but instead is taught to memorize stories after they are read to the class by the teacher, and to guess at or to predict what the text probably says by looking at the pictures on the page.

The “whole-language” virus is spreading through the public schools faster than AIDS, and it is being insulated against parental objections by fraudulent tests that merely test what the child feels or guesses instead of reading skills. Professor Marie Carbo, a leading proponent of “whole-language,” told teachers at a conference in Portland, Maine in l988 that “new tests better suited to whole-language teaching methods are being introduced into the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).”

The failure to teach first-graders to read over the last couple of decades has resulted in a high percentage of children being diagnosed as having dyslexia. A new research study published in January in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine reports that 72 percent of children classified as dyslexic in the first grade showed no signs of dyslexia in the third grade even though they had been given no remedial programs, and by the sixth grade 83 percent were okay.

It looks as if dyslexia is just another way of trying to exonerate the public schools for their appalling failure to teach children to read.