

'Separationists' Seek to Close Public Schools

BY WILLIAM MURCHISON

Marshall Fritz blew into town recently, prodding comfortable dogmas in the ribs, making them yap and snarl. Fritz wants to abolish the public schools. He said so on local television in front of God and everybody.

You have to understand: He's from California. They get excited out there in ways the rest of the country sometimes never imitates—but sometimes does. Which is why California always bears watching.

Fritz's Separation of School and State Alliance is campaigning for abolition of the compulsory attendance laws and indeed of government support for education. The alliance would replace government support with private support. Things would be as they were in the early days of the republic. The system that educated Bill and Hillary Clinton would go; back would come the kind of system that educated Washington, Jefferson and Hamilton.

Fritz doesn't even want to fool around with vouchers—government scrip that parents would hand in at the schools of their choice, private or public. Vouchers would enlarge individual choice, but Fritz, who formerly ran a Christian school, thinks they

would entangle the recipient schools in a web of government controls.

Fritz carries about with him a proclamation for which he solicits signatures. It proclaims: "We cannot have a society that is both free and peaceful when government legislators and regulators use our schools to shape attitudes or control the content of anyone's mind. No conceivable 'reform' of state schooling can ever resolve the conflicting values in education."

The solution, suggests the proclamation, resembles separation of church and state. "Similarly, government must be prohibited from compelling school funding, attendance and curriculum. By ending the politically determined imposition of value, we can protect parents' rights and enable schools, teachers and students to flourish in an environment of full educational freedom."

It's not as though Fritz and the separationists were slamming a hugely admired institution. Hardly anyone anymore thinks the public schools are up to snuff. The separationist view is: Why try to fix them? We can't even agree these days on the values schools are to impart. Let individual schools decide. America's 85,000 public schools should be turned over to "consortiums of teachers, principals, parents, churches, businesses, colleges and

other independent entities as appropriate."

And the poor—what would become of them? As it happens, large numbers of poor children attend private school right now. Parents sacrifice for them, or businesses—the institutions that liberals seem to hate worse than any other—provide scholarships. The abolition of school property taxes would free up money that could go to tuition. Private schools, in any case, have lower per-pupil costs than public schools.

Assume, for argument's sake, the reasonableness of the separationist analysis. Is such a scheme as theirs doable? That may be the largest question here. Logic doesn't always beat down illogic; good ideas aren't necessarily practicable ideas. A century and a half of memory—personal and ancestral—binds Americans to their public schools. Few, as of now, can conceive of dismantling such an institution.

There are going to be individualized concerns. How can we be sure, if some of these kids don't go to school, they won't be out running drugs and mugging homeowners? Don't the schools help keep troublemakers at bay? And, if the public schools go, what becomes of the Corsicana Tigers and the Highland Park Scotties, the drill teams and bands, and school anthems

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The Separation of School and State Alliance is a national, non-profit education group founded to "inform Americans [regarding] how education can be improved—especially for the poor—by the full separation of school and state." For more information, write or call: The Separation of School and State Alliance, 4578 North 1st, #310, Fresno, Calif. 93726 (209-292-1776; fax: 209-292-7582).

played andante maestoso, with rich brass chords and soaring trumpets?

I do not raise these points to ridicule them. Different things matter to different people. Radical reformers—you would have to put the separationists in that class—should never discount the power of myths and symbols.

But the separationists' point is that it's a free country. They want to make it freer still. Those who prefer the present system will find themselves, in the not-too-distant future, obligated to explain why what we've got today is the best and freest possible. ■

Mr. Murchison, who writes for the Dallas Morning News, is a nationally syndicated columnist.