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Book Review - Urban School Chiefs Under Fire

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BOOK REVIEW

URBAN SCHOOL CHIEFS UNDER FIRE. By Larry Cuban. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1976. Pp. xiv, 223. \$12.50.

This generation of social scientists has found The City, and a stream of writing issues forth on urban plight and blight, on the socio-economic-political structure of the metropolis, on the failure of transportation, of human services, of housing, and even of aesthetic stimulation. Most books on the urban environment treat the city itself as an entity, a corporate structure with its own personality and character, its own hopes and disappointments; seldom do authors identify the persons whose private habits and public styles go to form the basis of those decisions which, collectively, comprise city life.

Dr. Larry Cuban does, in fact, invite the reader to meet and live a while with three giants of the largest of enterprises, the public school system. Drawing upon primary documents and personal interviews, he has done intensive research into the speeches, the decisions, and even the informal conversations of three former superintendents of schools: Benjamin Willis (Chicago); Carl Hansen (Washington, D.C.); and Harold Spears (San Francisco). These three legendary figures exerted great influence on the life of their communities in the troubled decade of the 1960s. Though one of their number has dubbed them all "dinosaurs," Cuban, through his lively narration, makes their leadership come alive again. One can share the tense meetings of Dr. Willis and Mayor Daley, while pickets were marching in front of the Mayor's home and mobile classroom units were burning.¹ One can join Dr. Spears in his drive to outflank his critics² and make peace with "eight academic professors" on the warpath for school reform.³ One can sit in the Board Room and listen to Dr. Hansen signal a new era in Washington's education, one in which the teacher "'returns to the front of the room . . . with chalk in hand. . . .'"⁴

1. L. Cuban, *URBAN SCHOOL CHIEFS UNDER FIRE* 14-17 (1976).

2. *Id.* at 59-62.

3. *Id.* at 66-70.

4. *Id.* at 32, quoting Dr. Carl Hansen.

In producing a stimulating, well-documented biography of three powerful urban leaders, the author has permitted the public a rare view of what goes on behind the frosted-glass door of the Establishment, a scene which children, parents, and even teachers rarely survey. Because all three men reached points of crisis resulting in their separation from office diminishes not at all the prodigious efforts each made while in charge.⁵ Each served about ten years in a period of great urban sensitivity to ethnic imbalance and economic decay. The demands for additional services mounted exponentially, even as tax dollars diminished. It is noteworthy that a figure as visible as the superintendent of schools could have survived his initial employment, much less a decade of struggle. Cuban's account is testimony to the persistence and inventiveness of humans under stress, and the personal vignettes he presents add still further to the stature, as well as the fallibility, of these three remarkable persons.

If Dr. Cuban had stopped with his finely drawn portrait of three humans under community siege, one might applaud the effort and only wish that the biographies had been extended to embrace even more fully the events before and after that decade of crisis. *Urban School Chiefs Under Fire* was written with a second objective clearly in mind, that of identifying common elements which reasonably account for the outcome of each man's career:⁶ Why did they respond similarly to community pressure? What differences can be found in their leadership styles? What pervasive dysfunction led to their resignation and retirement?

At this point Dr. Cuban seems to leave the *person* and study the *territory*. Social issues, educational crises, leadership conceptions, and role models become the subjects of discussion. The "heroic" gives way to the "deterministic," and the author seeks to build inductively a theory of educational leadership, starting from a shared professional ideology, and ending with those modest adjustments which shorten or extend the season of influence.⁷ The superintendent, it would appear, is an individual model composed of elements of the teacher-scholar, the negotiator-statesman, the cor-

5. See *id.* at 29, 55-56, 79-80.

6. *Id.* at xiii.

7. *Id.* at 140-64.

porate administrator, and the rational school chief.⁸ The big-city superintendent is able and resourceful, yet vulnerable and insecure.⁹

While the impressive array of empirical facts gleaned from government and professional reports lends itself to such classification and descriptive generalization, the biographical detail already eloquently displayed makes clear that situations are unique as well as similar, that persons as well as laws influence behavior, and that administration, no less than teaching, is an art as well as a science. Why, for example, did some city superintendents of schools survive the decade of the 1960s without sharing the fates of Willis, Hansen, and Spears? What is the significance that some in their first superintendency are young, some old; that some come from rural backgrounds, others from urban? Why has the tenure of big-city superintendents ranged from less than one year to more than twenty?

To extrapolate from three examples to the class of persons holding comparable offices in other metropolitan areas is speculative and potentially misleading. It is the unique configuration of personal leadership, rather than its descriptive resemblance to others, that makes leadership understandable and, therefore, humanly common.

Dr. Cuban seems to be engaged in a methodological struggle between the *personal* and *institutional* approach to understanding behavior. As a school superintendent, he lives as a *subject*, and he clearly regards the superintendents about whom he writes as *persons* and as *friends*. As a scholar, he has accepted an objective account of people, and in thus treating lives as *objects* he has removed most of the information that makes his account convincing.

Superintendent Cuban has brought to the big-city school superintendency a flavor of the "living law," that reality which infuses school statutes and regulations with a sense of the dynamic and the operational. He has invited the reader to proceed further toward an understanding of the "personal law" of leadership, and he has made an important exploration along that path.

School administration is, to Dr. Cuban, more than folk wisdom applied to "catastrophies, disorders, demonstrations, and strikes." The professional biographies and autobiographies yet to be written

8. *Id.* at 114-28.

9. *Id.* at 111-39.

may further reveal the urban superintendency as an operational statement of personal conviction about life and its meaning, a fusion of facts and values. The big-city school superintendent is, after all, a beneficiary and contributor to the quality of that life, as is the youngest pupil in his system.

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