

Opinion

Some students' defense of our new barbarians

Robert Maszak, an English teacher at Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights, Ill., has sent me a stack of angry letters written by his students as a classroom assignment.



Mike Royko

The students were reacting to a column I wrote about 11 people being trampled to death at a rock concert in Cincinnati.

In that column, I said those who would climb over people's broken bodies to reach a seat in an auditorium could be called "the new barbarians."

The dictionary definition of barbarian that I used is "the opposite of civilized." And I think anyone who tramples someone to death can wear that definition.

In sending me the letters, teacher Maszak, apparently proud of his students' efforts, wrote: "Some 'barbarians' do write."

Yes, they do. But frankly, if I were an

English teacher and they were my students, I'd lock the letters away where no one could see them.

I'd be embarrassed if this many juniors and seniors not only wrote incoherently, but also apparently have not been taught to read or to think. I'd also be alarmed at their tribe mentality.

Also, every letter said something like: "Why are you picking on us teenagers?" and "What have you got against rock music?"

The fact is, I did not use the word "teen-ager" anywhere in that column.

Nor did I say that new barbarians are found only at rock concerts. I wrote: "Rock concerts aren't the only mass-gathering place for the new barbarians. They've become visible at sports events, too." And I described the sometimes violent conduct of sports fans of all ages.

The point of the column was that in many places we now see more and more mindless mob violence and mob mentality. This behavior isn't limited to teenagers or rock fans, although there's probably less of it in your average nursing home.

I shouldn't be surprised that these

students didn't notice that. Any kid who gets to be a high school junior or senior and writes like Mr. Maszak's students isn't going to absorb details. An example, exactly as written:

"Dear Tenage hater

"I was disappointed by you written on the Who concert. From what you said I can see you have know so called barbarism. You used some strong words in there with very little fact, you say everyone was numbed in the brain. I will say from concert experience mabe half or three forths were high on something or nether but I allso know that theres not one forth to half that weren't. You say everyone was pushing and throwing elbows, did you ever think that some of the thrown elbows were from people who didn't like getting pushed. You said something about when you were a kid, well times have change since then."

Mr. Maszak, is that the best you can do? If so, have you thought of another line of work?

Another sample:

"In Tuesday Dec. 5th addition of Mike Royko you clearly stated that all teenagers and people who go to rock concerts are barbarians."

I clearly stated nothing of the kind. You really should try to teach them to read, Mr. Maszak. Or this: "For one think there were no real big popular bands when you were a kid."

If you are going to let them babble about music, Mr. Maszak, spend a few minutes giving them a little musical background. Or maybe you haven't heard of the big band era either.

Then we have this gem. Mind you, it is written by a young man who has spent almost 12 years attending school:

"When you talked us in your paper you called us barbarians. It is even more rude than when you call us delinquents. You cant compare us to 50 years ago because we don't wear knickers' and deliver newspapers. All you Old Farts are the same. At Cominsky Park we were just expressing our feelings about disco, because disco sucks. If you write another column like that you will have to answer to me in person."

And ther was the lad who denied being a barbarian. But he spelled it "bar-bian."

I can't go on. It's too depressing, and not only because most of them can't write, read, spell or think and it's getting a little late for them to learn.

It's depressing because almost everyone mentioned the fact that 11 people were trampled to death, none sounded concerned about grotesque fact.

They became highly indignant someone would be less than worried about rock music. They became emotional - even menacing like the writer in their hatred for disco. Some became obscene over images slights against teen-agers.

But that 11 people were trampled a music-hungry mob?

One of the few who mentioned deaths saw it this way:

"If there were someone yer looking an yer went to see them in person, thier were thousands of people just you and wanted to see him up, would you fight yer way in?"

And as another breezily put it:

"People die every three seconds would you do if you paid \$15 for it?"

You're no barbarian, kid. Be a zombie.

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What is education, anyway?

William J. Bennett this week announced he was leaving his job as secretary of education in the fall. A good many educators think that is a blessing. Some think it's too bad. It is both.



Lewis Grizzard

Bennett's great achievement has been to spark a national debate on the subject of education at a time when the nation's mind seemed on other things. Not since the days of Sputnik, that Russian wake-up call, has the topic of what we teach our kids and how been more vigorously argued.

Bennett himself has challenged the educational establishment at every level, charging it, in various ways, with being greedy, cowardly and lazy. Like him or not, Secretary Bennett has been impossible to ignore.

Which is all to the good. Establishments need to be challenged and made to justify themselves; it keeps their blood moving. The only real quarrel I have with Bennett is that he's wrong so often.

He seems to think of education as a body of sacred knowledge which, once mastered, produces an educated, civilized person. If schools don't seem to be doing a good job of passing along this mass of knowledge, all you have to do is teach more Latin and everything will be hunky-dory.

The faculty of Stanford University recently voted to change the reading list of a required Western Culture course, introducing some black and women writers to broaden its perspective. Bennett and his buddies on the intellectual right responded as though they'd just leveled the Acropolis and all it stood for.

In an address at the school, surely one of the great universities of the world, he said it had been "brought low by the very forces which modern universities came into being to oppose — ignorance, irrationality and intimidation." An odd charge for someone in the Reagan administration to be making, but there it was.

In any case, it misses the point. It is important for an educated person to know something of Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine and Aquinas, Dante and Shakespeare, but it is important for him of her to know other things as well, things a black writer or a woman might be able to help them understand.

The Bennett stance is the precise opposite of Jesse Jackson, who last week gave the commencement address at his alma mater, North Carolina A&T State

University, a predominantly black school. Twenty-four years after receiving his degree there he was back to compare himself to two other men running for president, George Bush and Michael Dukakis — graduates, respectively, of Yale and Swathmore, two schools of the Stanford sort.

He noted their advantages, then gloried in the apparent irony of this graduate of a small black school competing with them on an equal footing and he exhorted the students there to do the same. By the end of the speech he had the students up and roaring, which is not unusual for Jackson.

But there was more to it than that. Two members of the graduating class were his sons, Jesse Jr. and Jonathan. Jonathan had gone to public high schools in Chicago as a youngster and had never shown much scholastic aptitude until he got to A&T. Jesse Jr., however, had attended the best private schools in Washington and was a good student. When he graduated he got offers from Harvard and Brown. But the Jacksons insisted that he go to little North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, N.C., because, they said, they wanted their son to learn that there was more to life than grades and career, that life goes deeper than that.

That is a remarkable commitment to egalitarian education ideals, one that is, I would imagine, totally incomprehensible to a man like Bennett.

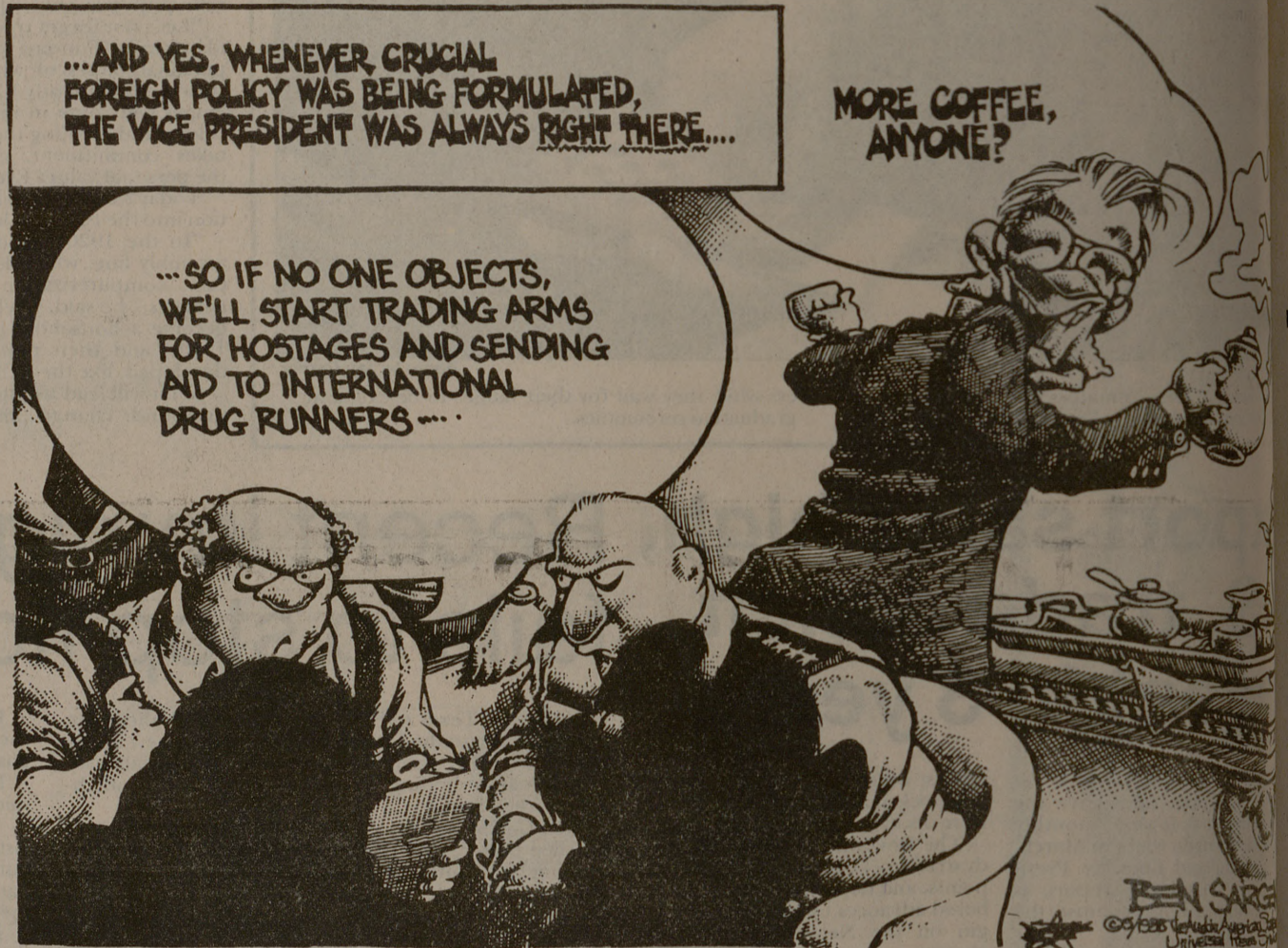
Education is a curious commodity; it ensures nothing, least of all good sense. We were reminded of that yet again the other day with the death of Kim Philby, the Soviet spy. Philby, along with his fellow traitors — Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean and Anthony Blunt — were the products of the kind of classical education so admired by Bennett.

Yet what Cambridge succeeded in teaching them was a contempt for their countrymen, a sense that only their own exquisitely cultivated minds could decide what was good and bad for society. It was a turn of mind that led them first to support Hitler in Germany and finally the Soviet Union, both societies run by people who know what is best for the common folk.

I'm not arguing against a high-class education, but it's not the only kind and it may not even be the best. More importantly, you can't gear your entire educational system to providing that kind of education to your best students and ignore the others. That's not what this country is about and I'm not sure Mr. Bennett understands that.

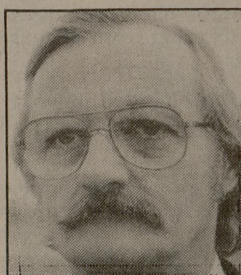
Still, I'm going to miss disagreeing with him.

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Just another stargazer picking up babes

Some people might think it strange that President Reagan allegedly consults with an astrologer before making tough decisions or arranging his schedule.



Donald Kaul

Not me. I've been an ardent stargazer for years. Had it not been for astrology, I might have lived a terribly lonely life.

Before I became interested in astrology I couldn't get to first base in a singles' bar. It was because my come-on lines were flat and lacked any originality.

Friday night would come and I would don my tightest jeans, open my shirt collar to show my abundance of chest hairs and then set off my outfit with a gold chain around my neck, the one I ordered from television along with my Party Ring with a stone that changed color with my moods.

My standard opening lines were the following:

"Lew's my name, love's my game." That either got a drink poured over my head, or worse, a laugh in my face.

"I hate these sort of places, don't you?"

That usually was followed by, "Then, why'd you come here, Creep?"

"Say, what are you doing the rest of my life?"

The reaction to that was, "Nothing that includes you, Four-eyes."

After a long period of rejection, I began coming on defensively with, "I don't guess you'd want to go out with me, would you?"

The reply to that was either, "You got that right, Buster," or "What's that on your shirt?"

I'd look down and she would tweak my nose and then laugh hysterically at my stupidity.

But then it came to me. I knew a lot of girls were interested in astrology, too, so I decided to attempt to engage them in conversations regarding the stars.

Yes, I am the first person ever to use, "What's your sign?" in a singles bar.

This opened up an incredibly new for me.

"Say, what's your sign?" I would begin after I had wedged my way into her at the bar.

"Capricorn," she says. "What's yours?"

"Me? Libra."

"What a coincidence. My first band was a Libra."

"What happened to him?"

"He shaved his head and joined a religious cult. Why don't we get out of here and find a place a little more intimate. My apartment, for instance?"

It was sensational. I never spent another lonely weekend, although I begin to have strange urges to go to ports and bang on a tambourine and beg for money.

So, what's this got to do with President Reagan? A couple of things. For instance, we know where the president first got the idea for Star Wars.

And ask yourself this: Who had rather the president consult on the questions — his astrologer or Ed Me... Copyright 1988, Cowles Syndicate

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BLOOM COUNTY



by Berke Breathed

