Mission Creep: The Federal Government and America's Schools

James A Bryant Jr

Assistant Professor for Curriculum and Instruction, Appalachian State University

Mission Creep: The Federal Government and America's Schools is a historical overview of the progressive encroachment of the United States' federal government into the area of education. This involvement began as a way to compete with the Soviet Union in the areas of science and technology but has since morphed into virtually all areas of curriculum and instruction. Dr. Bryant discusses the political and pedagogical implications of this encroachment with an eye towards reclaiming local control of education within the United States and as a cautionary tale for other nations witnessing similar developments within their own educational systems.

On October 3, 1993, American servicemen in the elite Rangers and Delta Force units came under fire from armed men, women and children in the streets of Mogadishu in the remote West African nation of Somalia. It was the single most violent firefight that US armed forces had encountered since the Vietnam conflict of a generation before. When the smoke cleared after seventeen hours of bloodshed, eighteen Americans had been killed and eighty – four had been wounded ('Ambush in Mogadishu,' http://www.pbs.org/wgbn/pages/frontline/shows/ambush).

United States military forces had been sent to the war – torn region by the administration of the first President Bush ostensibly for the purpose of safeguarding and delivering humanitarian aid. Ravaged by civil war and famine, Somalia was a country in dire trouble, and the US stepped in to help as part of a United Nations contingent. When Bill Clinton assumed the

presidency in January 1993, the purpose of the mission began to change gradually. The soldiers killed that day in October 1993, were not taking part in any humanitarian effort. Rather, they were seeking the arrest of a notorious Somali warlord named Mohammed Farah Aidid. The soldiers were now being asked to take part in an exercise ambiguously labelled 'nation building' (Crocker, 1995, p.2). Ill prepared and armed with poorly defined goals and objectives, the soldiers walked into tragic events that early October day.

A new term was coined to describe the debacle that occurred in Somalia, and it soon made its way into the national consciousness. The term, *'mission creep,'* was used to designate what occurs when the federal government intervenes in a situation and then, midway through, changes the overall objectives of the mission. This derisive phrase has colored the way we now approach foreign intervention and is a buzzword for critics of policy initiatives that are poorly defined.

The United States military establishment is, however, not the first institution to be the victim of this type of mission creep. Our educational system, historically an area of power reserved to the states, has increasingly been the victim of federal interference. The original goals of this intervention have long since been redefined or simply forgotten. Education has become a political football, blown by contradictory winds of party and ideology. The purpose of this article is to examine the roots and progression of this federal encroachment upon the school systems of America.

While the details and particulars of this history are American, the outcomes of the federal government's encroachment upon local schools and individual teachers should be a cautionary tale for educators across the globe. The American federal government's growing influence and domination over education issues—from funding to pedagogical practices and curricular decisions—is something from which other nations can and should learn. History teachers in the former Soviet Union, particularly Russia, have begun to wrestle with their federal government over what will comprise the content of historical study in their schools, and the rhetoric sounds eerily similar to that of American educators in the past (Volodina, 2005, pp.179-188). The perfidious *mission creep* of the American federal

government's involvement in our schools is a situation that will no doubt sound familiar to many educators in different lands. It is my hope that this overview of how our government has drifted in its mission and purpose regarding education will help inform and enlighten all educators as they debate the role of governmental involvement in their school systems.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower took office in 1953 there was little attention or thought given to what his educational policy might be. In truth, there would have been no need for this type of query. It was understood that education was a topic handled by the states themselves and, to an even greater degree, the individual community. The most innovative idea for education at the federal level had been the GI Bill, which provided a means to pay tuition for the men returning from Europe and the Pacific following World War Two. Any idea that Eisenhower's administration might try and tell the states how to educate their children would have been folly at best.

Education in this post – war period was progressive. John Dewey was the most influential philosopher on the topic, and local communities rushed to implement his groundbreaking ideas in their classrooms. Dewey advocated a system that encouraged critical thinking skills and valued a society – centered approach. His focus was on 'giving fuller attention to the social development of the learner and the quality of his or her total experience' (Noll, 2001, p.2). Dewey sought to end the dogmatic style of teaching, which held that all the 'facts' had already been worked out, and needed only to be handed down to the students. His chief complaint about this mode of instruction was that 'the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience' (Dewey, 1938, p.17). Dewey placed the learner in a position of sifting through a set of information and drawing his or her own conclusions. America, high on its defeat of fascism and feeling imminently good about itself and optimistic about the future, by and large went along with the progressive education movement. The larger point, however, is that the mode of instruction, progressive or traditional, was left entirely up to the school and its community.

The glib optimism of the early fifties came crashing down as *Sputnik* went up. The Soviet satellite, sent into space on October 4, 1957, convinced

Americans and their federal government that we were falling behind our nemesis in the technology arena. The communists had beaten us into space, and that was simply unacceptable. Although the launch of the satellite was of dubious historical value, it was enough to inflame the fears and latent insecurities of the United States. As Barbara Barksdale Clowse pointed out, *Sputnik* made it seem 'that the Russians had made a coup in an area where many Americans presumed continuing superiority—the application of scientific research to technological production' (1981, p.7).

Faced with the news of the Soviet Union's supposed supremacy in the space race, Americans began to turn their attention to the national systems of education. The news media, ever vigilant in their quest for hyperbole, began rhetorically asking what the communists were doing better than we were. *New York Times* reporter Harry Schwartz assured his readers that the Soviet's prestigious view of science in their schools was the answer. The *Saturday Review* labeled *Sputnik* a 'sobering symbol of Soviet genius and power potential' (Clowse, 1981, p.15). Not content to leave the viewer to his or her own conclusions, the article concluded direly, 'Without mathematics, democracy cannot hope to survive'. The Gallup organization was soon on board with poll results announcing that '70 percent of [Americans] surveyed agreed that American high school students must now work harder to compete with Russians' (Clowse, 1981).

The importance of the launch of the *Sputnik* satellite for America's children should not be underestimated. The rise of the Soviet Union to a level of direct and serious competition with the United States in the field of technology suddenly made the education of American youth in the fields of mathematics and science a matter of national security—a matter of *federal* interest.

President Eisenhower soon directed his administration to look into the possibilities of federal assistance to local school systems to meet the Red menace. The president was extremely reluctant to send any such measure to Congress; feeling as he did that this was a matter in which the federal government had no business (or constitutional right to intervene). His political rivals in Congress, however, were scrambling to make an issue of the nation's educational decline, and Eisenhower was forced to answer the critics.

Even before *Sputnik* broke through the atmosphere, Democratic congressman Melvin Price, of Illinois, had sought to capitalize on the nation's fear of Russian gains in education. Price, chairman of the Research and Development of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy subcommittee, had gone public in 1956 with a report that 'claimed 80 percent of America's potential engineering and scientific manpower was.... wasted because of educational weakness' (Clowse, 1981, p.26). Price maneuvered quickly to hold open congressional hearings in an attempt to embarrass President Eisenhower in the midst of an election year. Price made the prophetic threat that soon, if nothing was done, the United States would find itself watching the Soviets rush ahead in the battle for technological superiority.

The star of Price's hearings was former United States senator William Benton. The senator had travelled to the Soviet Union in 1955 and returned convinced that 'Russia's classrooms and libraries, her laboratories and teaching methods, may threaten us more than her hydrogen bombs or guided missiles to deliver them' (Clowse, 1981). The national media made much of the hearings, and the belief that Progressive education had left our nation soft and suspect was firmly planted, making fertile the ground that *Sputnik* would harvest. Under these conditions, even a conservative constitutionalist like Dwight Eisenhower could not allow himself to appear aloof from the educational issue.

To be sure, this was not the first time in American history that Congress had become interested in what was going on in the nation's schools. Throughout American history, there had been sporadic attempts to send so – called 'general aid' bills to the states for educational purposes. As early as 1836, Congress had occasionally debated sending money to the states for their schools (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.18). Major attention, however, was confined to the years following the Second World War. Each time aid was proposed in general terms, which meant that block grants would have been sent to the individual states to spend on their schools in whatever way they saw fit.

None of these bills made it from Congress to the White House. There were three major obstacles. The first was the constitutional question. Many politicians at the federal level worried aloud that even general aid bills were but the beginning of a trip down a slippery slope that would lead to federal

control over local schooling. Clowse says, 'the objection—very hard to refute—[was] that any aid brought some form of federal control. When the federal government gave funds, the argument ran, it had the right to tell recipients how to spend those funds' (1981, p.42). Those who advanced this argument could not be convinced that general aid would be the end of the government's involvement. Their worries would prove to be prescient.

The second obstacle to federal assistance was the specter of race. The Second World War and America's struggle against fascism and oppression ignited a move for civil rights among African Americans. General aid bills in the post – war years were typically bogged down when congressmen like Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell added riders and amendments to the bills denying any funds be made available to schools that practiced any form of segregation. Southern leaders, voting en masse, always worked to kill the amendments and, of course, the bills themselves.

The third obstacle was a deep – seated anti – Catholic bias in the nation and, by extension, the Congress. Northern congressmen with many Catholic constituents (and many of them Catholic themselves) argued that, since Catholics who attended religious schools would still pay some of the taxes that made up these federal grants, these private institutions should also be eligible for some of the money. This argument managed to bridge the gap between political enemies on both sides of the spectrum. Conservatives and liberals (including the left – leaning Eleanor Roosevelt) united against any money going to church (particularly Catholic) or parochial schools (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.20). These three obstacles worked together to mute any hope for federal aid to schools.

Sputnik, of course, changed all that. The question was no longer 'should the government assist the states and their educational systems' but '*how* the federal government should assist the states and their educational systems?' It is one of the ironies of history that a man as conservative as the Republican Eisenhower would be caught in the vortex of this historical shift. The president was ambivalent at best about entering the educational debate. He had reluctantly sponsored school construction bills in 1955, 1956 and 1957, all in response to Democratic claims that the executive branch was allowing schools to crumble while the Soviets were expanding their own system of education. Sensitive to the charge, Eisenhower directed

his Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) to send answering bills to Congress. Still, he 'demanded that aid be temporary, strictly contingent on need, and merely a stimulus to state funding' (Clowse, 1981, p.46). Eisenhower's philosophy would not allow him to hand a blank check to the states, but he was also extremely worried about bureaucratic interference. He wanted to make sure that any bill sent to Capitol Hill by his administration had 'various kinds of protective devices'.... to ward off [the] 'threat of control by the Federal Government' (Clowse, 1981).

Ironically, it was this very hesitancy on Eisenhower's part that opened the door to direct federal interference. The president was adamant together with his cabinet, that the bill he sent to Congress should appropriate funding for mathematics and science *only*—there was to be no other federal money sent to the states. This was a reversal of his earlier insistence that he would agree only to construction money for the schools. It also placed strings, however indirectly, on the money coming to the states. Eisenhower wanted to make it clear to the Democrats that he was not buckling on his earlier ideological stance—he still felt the government should not meddle in education—but he was going to answer a national security need by allocating money for the study of mathematics and science. This was not a social program—this was a matter of defense. Congressman Elliot Richardson admitted that, if the money had been used for all areas of the curriculum, 'the President would have had a hard time swallowing it' (Clowse, 1981, p.57). That, however, was exactly the point. Eisenhower was agreeing to federal money for state schools—and insisting that the federal government determine how it was spent. The slippery slope became a reality. President Eisenhower also insisted that the program would end 'once the need is met' (Clowse, 1981). However, as Ronald Reagan once opined, the closest thing to eternity on this earth is a federal program. Eisenhower's similar fears would soon be realized.

The debate on the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), as the Eisenhower administration's bill was known, began in early 1958. There was a great deal of maneuvering in the Congress on the amount and how it was to be administered, but little doubt that some measure was going to be passed to send money to the states. The bill did not meet with universal agreement, however. Many educators were disappointed and even angered at the bill's provisions that only mathematics and science should receive

assistance. John K. Norton of Columbia Teacher's College complained that the bill did not 'meet the fundamental problems' which he viewed as 'shortages of qualified, well-paid teachers and adequate buildings' (Clowse, 1981, p.71). It is a familiar refrain that has been repeated over the ensuing decades. In addition to these complaints, the United States successfully launched an Explorer satellite at the end of January 1958, causing many to pause and wonder if the so-called crisis had been overstated. Nevertheless, the assistance advocates were not to be denied. After significant haggling and rewriting, H.R. 13247 was sent to Eisenhower's desk and the president signed it on 2 September 1958 (Clowse, 1981, p.138). The NDEA ushered in a new era of federal involvement in the education of America's children. Clowse has highlighted this watershed:

> To the historian—as to its backers—the National Defense Education Act was ultimately more important as a legislative precedent than as a response to the *Sputnik* crisis. Supporters of the measure had judged the issue correctly. As will be seen, they had pushed open the door of federal aid to education sufficiently so as to make the final breakthrough (which came seven years later with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) much easier (1981, p.147).

In its final incarnation, the NDEA applied far fewer limits and was less intrusive than President Eisenhower had feared. A report issued by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare even went so far as to assert that the NDEA was a pioneering program that operated 'in the spirit of leadership without domination, and assistance without interference'. Further, the report boldly stated that a 'firm and effective partnership' between the central government and the states had now been forged (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.1) But the language seemed permanent, as if this spirit of co-operation was already known to be something that would last long past the Red Menace from the East. Still, there were a number of federal mandates that would set the standard for later programs.

The NDEA incorporated a multi-faceted program that dealt with all levels of education, including post-secondary work. For example, Title II of the act was designated for 'loans to students in institutions of higher education' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.3).

The purpose of Title II was to assist low-income students to attend college. But there were a number of conditions applied by the Office of Education as to who was eligible for this assistance. In order to receive help (up to $1000 a year for five years) educational institutions had to show that selected students were of 'a superior academic background who express a desire to teach in elementary or secondary schools' and, more to the point of the provision and the law, itself, the student's 'academic background indicates superior capacity for or preparation in science, mathematics, engineering or a modern foreign language' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961). These provisions were to have far reaching implications for young people because they resulted in scholarships being given almost exclusively to males from backgrounds that had already granted them the benefits of a good secondary education.

Title V of the NDEA was the most intrusive of all the myriad components of the legislation. This section called for guidance, counselling and testing of students to identify 'gifted' students who could then be tracked towards mathematics and science and thereafter put to work in the cause of overcoming communism. A great deal of federal money was allocated towards this end, and the States would surely have benefitted from this philanthropy. There were, however, strings. In order even to qualify for money under Title V, the states were required to develop and submit to the federal government a 'state plan' that 'set[s] forth a program for testing students which will identify those with outstanding aptitudes and abilities' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.17). States also had to develop a program that would counsel and advise students about the appropriate courses that would lead to college and, presumably, a degree in mathematics or science. Moreover, any hope of receiving federal funds lay at the discretion of the Commissioner of Education under the umbrella of HEW, because the Commissioner had to approve a state's course of action before money was forthcoming. There were no specific guidelines in the NDEA for what this plan should look like, and no allocation to cover a state's costs in manpower and additional hours of work necessary in drawing up such a plan.

The most ominous area within Title V involved circumventing the power of state law wherever it became a nuisance. The NDEA included, to a lesser degree, private school students as well as public, which was often in

direct violation of state law. To get around this thorny problem, Title V stated:

> In those states which have approved state plans, but where the state education agency cannot under state law make payments to cover the cost of testing students in one or more nonpublic secondary school, the Commissioner of Education arranges for the testing of the students (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.17).

This clause placed private schools in a state in direct communication with the federal government and allowed them often to completely bypass state boards of education when they wanted or needed additional funding. It also, however, made these schools less than autonomous, because they, too, had to have guidance and testing plans that had been approved by the Office of Education in Washington. In addition, the federal government's role did not end once the state plan had been approved. Title V further stated that the state 'must provide for such fiscal control and fund accounting procedures as may be necessary to assure proper disbursement of, and accounting for, Federal funds paid to the state' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961).

Title VIII of the plan was an add-on—placed in the legislation after the original version had been passed. This section of the law provided funding for vocational training. In order to qualify for these funds, the states were now required to set teacher standards and qualifications that were acceptable to the Federal Office of Education. This implied that Washington was now involved in the hiring of teachers. State boards of education would now also report to the Commissioner of Education, 'in such form and containing such information as [is] reasonably necessary to enable the commissioner to perform his functions under this title' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.36).

The parting shot of the NDEA came on page 45 of the report, where it was stated that achieving 'the goals of this program involves fundamental and complex changes in the procedures and arrangements for recording, processing and reporting educational statistics' (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961, p.45). Although it is not explicitly stated, these changes typically involved funneling all such information through to

the federal government where the Commissioner of Education sat in judgment on a state's educational mission and level of success.

The NDEA did not fundamentally change state constitutional responsibilities for education. Faced with the perceived threat from *Sputnik*, the government in Washington acted on the need for national security. The worst fears of those who predicted that the central government would tell the states how and what to teach were not realized. The principal aim of the NDEA was to bolster the nation's mathematics and science capabilities through scholarships and grants that would encourage study in these fields, but it also signalled the first tentative step of the federal government into the world of education. It would be another seven years before the federal government's role in education was debated again, and this time there would be far-reaching constitutional implications.

Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency on November 22, 1963, following the murder of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. Johnson found himself burdened with the need to reassure a shattered public as well as the inheritor of a legislative agenda that had become bogged down in the United States Congress. The keystone of this agenda was the bill that would, in time, become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This piece of legislation would be the impetus for Johnson's 'Great Society', the most ambitious domestic program since Roosevelt's 'New Deal' of the 1930s.

The nation underwent a major sea change in the election of 1964, when Johnson was elected president in his own right. The choice before the American public was clear. Johnson, a Southern Democrat, ran on a platform of social change and expanded federal responsibilities. His opponent, Barry Goldwater, ran on the premise that the federal government was already too large and needed to be trimmed and leashed. Johnson sought a mandate to push through the programs of President Kennedy (who had defeated Richard M. Nixon by a razor-thin margin) and some of his own. The issue of education would be a major sticking point between the two presidential candidates - further evidence that the NDEA had changed even the course of electoral politics.

Goldwater was adamant that there was no place for Washington in education. He blasted elements of the NDEA on the campaign trail, and warned ominously that this program was but the beginning if Johnson was elected. 'It's nonsense,' the Arizona senator argued, 'to suggest that a government can guarantee a college degree, a good job, or the 'good life'....this is Washington-managed social engineering at its most hypocritical because no country can deliver on such promises' (Goldwater, 1988, p.502). He would go on to assert that 'federal education regulations would, if enforced, allow state and local school boards to do little more than police Washington's rules' (Goldwater, 1988, p.33). Goldwater asserted that he was going to take the election of 1964 because of the votes from Americans 'who were tired of Big Brother in all his forms' (Goldwater, 1988, p.242). Goldwater was blunter in a debate with then-Interior Secretary Stewart Udall when he said, 'I fear Washington as much as Moscow' (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.11).

Johnson carried the election in a landslide—the largest margin of victory in US presidential history up to that time. In addition, liberal Democrats swept into power in the Congress and the Senate. Lyndon Johnson had his mandate and he began work to implement his Great Society almost immediately.

Shortly after his inauguration Johnson sent the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to Congress. He told aides privately that this bill was the foundation for the rest of his domestic agenda (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.ix). The president viewed education as the key to all future civil rights legislation, and he was determined to force through a federal education plan that spoke to the basic human rights of all the American people through the myriad of Washington's special interest groups. Johnson was undeterred by the knowledge that no such piece of legislation had ever before been passed in Congress. A keen observer of political trends and a man of tremendous personal influence on Capitol Hill, Johnson seemed to understand that, following the acceptance of the NDEA, all bets were off regarding the lack of precedent for federal involvement in America's schools. The president also grasped the fact that the basic debate over education in the country had changed from one of public versus private to the more dramatic notion of how to fund local schools to compete in a global atmosphere.

Most importantly, Johnson knew that his election had, provided him with the political capital necessary to pass a landmark education bill like the ESEA. The choice between himself and Goldwater had been a clear one, and the American people had handed the Republicans a disastrous defeat. Even GOP congressional candidates had been trounced in 1964. As Eugene Eidenberg and Roy D. Morey point out in their study of the ESEA, this type of legislation 'can be enacted only at that point in time when public support (especially as expressed by the major groups) coincides with a sufficient level of support within the political system' (1969, p.3). The opponents of federal aid to schools had not changed their fundamental argument in the seven years since the NDEA was passed; they still argued that federal cash led inevitably to federal control. But Johnson was unconcerned with this line of defence—he now had the votes and he intended to use them.

The Johnson administration's opening salvo in the war to force greater federal control over school systems was found in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which in Title VI of the law authorized the Commissioner of Education to end any and all federal aid to schools practising segregation (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.24). While certainly noble in intent, this section of the Act showed an important development in Washington's role in education. Johnson was no longer arguing that the federal powers could only be brought to bear in times of national security emergencies such as the *Sputnik* crisis; he was now clearly using federal dollars to affect social change. The president viewed grants from the central government to the states for education as leverage in his administration's battle against poverty and discrimination. In the intervening years between the NDEA and the Johnson presidency, local schools had become reliant upon the assistance received from the federal government for buildings and materials, and Johnson was going to ask them now to give something back.

On 12 January 1965, President Johnson sent his bill to Congress while, as backup, Congressman Carl Perkins and Senator Wayne Morse introduced identical bills into their respective state houses of congress as a show of support for the president. The legislation cleared a major hurdle when both the National Education Association and the United States Catholic Conference gave public support to the measure. It was the first time in their histories that these two major organizations had been on the

same side of a school aid bill (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.60). President Johnson was reaping the benefits of couching the bill in terms of morality—not politics.

The measure was debated for two and a half months before final passage was secured on the evening of 9 April 1965. It was an incredibly quick passage when compared with the route of the NDEA. Johnson used that precedent to argue, successfully, that there was nothing to debate—the federal government was already involved in local schools and had been since 1958—when a *Republican* president had started the process. President Johnson commented that no bill he had 'signed or ever will sign means more to the future of America' (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.ix).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) changed the focus of federal involvement in local schools forever. The ESEA was tangentially about education, but it also had a serious component of social work in it. President Johnson saw education funding as a way for the government in Washington to force the social changes it desired—like desegregation and anti-discrimination laws that, although on the books for decades, had made little or no impact in areas of the nation like his own native South. No longer would these appropriations be tied only to curricular standards. Now they would also be intimately connected with the war on poverty and civil rights. 'The 1965 bill,' observed Congressman James O'Hara, '....does not make much sense educationally; but it makes a hell of a lot of sense legally, politically and constitutionally. This was a battle of principle, not substance, and that is the main reason I voted for it' (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.93). While few would argue that President Johnson's efforts to use schools to level the overall playing field for the poor and minorities and affect certain elements of social change were noble, it had the unforeseen consequence of placing the education of America's children on the front lines of the coming 'cultural wars.' Although Johnson sold the bill as the nation's first ever general aid education bill, it was 'in reality a categorical aids bill, albeit with extremely broad categories' (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.90).

The most ambitious section of the ESEA was Title I. With $1.06 billion in original allocations, this article was a powerful tool that the Johnson administration deemed the very cornerstone of their domestic hopes. Unlike

the funding for the NDEA, this money was earmarked for the poor in the nation—those school districts with a high concentration of families making less than $2000 a year (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.247). This money could be used as the district saw fit, providing only that it be spent on equipment, classroom construction or the hiring of additional staff. Title II authorized the Commissioner of Education to appropriate $100 million towards the purchase of library resources, instructional material and textbooks. Again, this money was to be given in the form of grants to low-income areas of the nation. Title IV gave the Commissioner the power to enter into contracts with colleges and non-profit foundations for educational research, and Title V provided for money to be spent strengthening state departments of education (according to federal standards). The ESEA greatly enhanced the duties and the power of the Commissioner of Education, and strengthened the level of dependency between the states and the federal government (Eidenberg and Morey, 1969, p.248).

Passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act strengthened the role of the federal government in education. Unlike the NDEA, this law was designed to bring about social change, not to meet some foreign threat. The ESEA also enhanced the power of Washington to bypass state law and regulations. Low-income areas, for example, now found themselves loyal to Washington and not their state capitols. Often, state boards of education could henceforth be bypassed when funds were needed and a direct appeal made to the federal Commissioner of Education. There were, of course, strings attached. Schools that were seen to be practising segregation could have their funds discontinued, even if they were in a poor area (an unintended consequence of this provision would be the controversial busing movement) and State governments using federal funds under Title II to purchase materials had to ensure that those materials, textbooks etc, met federal standards as determined by the Commissioner of Education. President Eisenhower's fears were being realized. The ESEA broke down the final barriers to federal involvement in education and finished the job began by the NDEA.

The liberal and activist spirit that followed the elections of 1964 and led to the passage of the ESEA would not last, but, the federal role in education remained intact - only the ends would now become endangered, not the

means. From 1968 to 1992, the Republicans controlled the White House for all but four years (the Carter administration of 1977-81), but the federal government made no move to extricate itself from involvement in local school systems.

The 1970s saw a backlash to the perceived liberalism of the 1960s and, specifically the Johnson administration and the Great Society but the presidency of Richard Nixon saw an expansion, not a reduction, of federal spending on education and social programs. In fact, in the Nixon budgets (1970-1975) 'spending on human resource programs exceeded spending for defense for the first time since World War Two' (Hoff, 1994, p.136). Nixon personally demanded that Congress broaden the mandate of the Civil Rights Commission to include sex discrimination (Hoff, 1994, p.110). The backlash was coming, however, and Nixon became embroiled in a battle over school busing. His attempts to stop busing show the newfound power that the federal government had acquired through the use of its funds for educational purposes.

The Education Amendments of 1972 sought to provide a three-year $19 billion extension of federal monies to higher education, Native American programs and help to desegregate local schools. Nixon was in favour of the spending, but he sought to use the money as leverage against busing. The president vetoed three bills that did not contain provisions ending school busing. The implication was clear (and was no doubt learned from Lyndon Johnson): you can have federal money *only* if you end busing, because this administration does not agree with it (Hoff, 1994, p.375). This battle put many local schools in a very awkward position. A piece of the $19 billion pie would help their students achieve dreams of higher education, but to end busing would effectively re-segregate their communities and thereby put them in danger of losing other funding secured under the ESEA. It was neither the first nor the last time that political posturing would place local communities in impossible situations.

The 1970s also heated up politically as conservatives began to reassert themselves in national politics. As Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and entertainer Anita Bryant began national campaigns against what they viewed as the decadence of the time, the conservative movement began by Barry Goldwater began to pick up steam and, more importantly, votes. The

New Right, called for a return to traditional values and morals. Falwell began a 'Clean Up America' campaign in which he urged Americans to 'turn back the tide of situation ethics' (Carroll, 1982, p.330). The political right, to this point excluded from the education debate, would reassert itself with a vengeance.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 should have spelled the end of federal involvement in education. Reagan ran on a platform of smaller, less intrusive government, one plank even calling for the abolition of the newly formed Department of Education. Reagan mounted his attack through 'a combination of deregulation and decentralization' (Spring, 2000, p.223). Faced with a recalcitrant Congress, the Reagan administration soon discovered that there were better ways to affect the change they desired—use federal money, as the Democrats had done, to force local schools into compliance with conservative ideals.

The assault began with the formation of the blue-ribbon committee, the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Secretary of Education T.H. Bell convened the committee under the orders of President Reagan himself. The purpose of the committee was to 'examine the quality of education in the United States' (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.1). One might imagine that the purpose of such a group, called together under the auspices of a Republican administration, would have been to find ways to remove the federal government from the field of education, but that was far from the actual purpose of this committee. William J. Bennett, one of the committee members and one of the leading voices on education from the Right, called the commission's report a 'landmark' and 'the closest thing we have had to a national grievance list' (Bennett, 1992, p.42). Far from calling for the end to federal involvement, the report actually sought *increased* involvement to rectify what its members saw as the excesses and failures of previous liberal government efforts on behalf of the nation's children. Failing to take up the mantra of Eisenhower and Goldwater that local communities knew what was best for their own children, Republicans under the Reagan administration sought to impose the will of the presidency upon communities across the nation.

This ideological inconsistency was apparent in the reforms that were proposed by Reagan and, eventually, by William Bennett, the Secretary of

Education in the second Reagan administration. There were efforts to remove the teeth from certain elements of the ESEA and even Richard Nixon's Title IX (which barred sex discrimination from schools) by severely reducing the funding needed to enforce these provisions. If Reagan could not get the Congress to remove some of these statutes from the books, he could at least hamper their enforcement by slicing their enforcement budgets. This was accomplished under the banner of deregulation.

Bennett admits that the conservative movement used the federal role in education to bring about some of the changes they wanted. Some of the reforms he advocated as Secretary of Education were competency testing for teachers, an end to all tenure for educators, values education and national standardized testing. This is hardly a list of ways to remove the federal government from America's schools.

While liberals had sought to tie federal dollars to civil rights and anti poverty measures, the Republican leadership of the 1980s (and to the present day) used the federal dollar to correct what they felt was wrong with what and how children were taught. Suddenly, rather than putting an end to Washington's influence, there was a movement to place Washington in charge of curriculum, standards, and even hiring practices. The final report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education made for gloomy reading. It was stated that American children were receiving an education that was mediocre at best, and they were falling behind not the children of the Soviet Union, but Japan and Korea and other Asian nations. The question was no longer framed in terms of ideological survival, but of economic superiority. Our teachers, the report stated, 'are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students' and were inept (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.22). It was not time for Washington to loosen its grip — it was time to tighten it.

The Commission recommended that high school graduation standards be strengthened, even going so far as to recommend how many of which courses be taken and when. It laid out specific plans for how English, Mathematics and Social Studies should be taught. The Commission urged that colleges toughen their admission requirements and that standardized

tests be used to determine which schools would continue to receive money from the federal government. The Commission also called for a longer school day or a longer school year. Finally, in a sentence tucked away in the middle of the report, the Commission boldly asserted that the 'Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education' (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1981, p.33). This was an assertion that President Eisenhower and presidential candidate Barry Goldwater would never have believed could come from their party.

Washington's role in education had still not been clearly defined by the time of the Clinton administration. There was a brief resurgence of the belief in no-strings block grants from then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, but a series of political mishaps. and mistakes ended his brief run of power and left men like Richard Armey (Republican, Texas) and Trent Lott (Republican, Miss.) in charge of the Republican legislative program—which quickly returned to the Bennett-period style of educational reforms (Gingrich, 1995, p.82-83). Money continued to be tied to standardized test scores and the willingness of school districts to conform to the will of the congressional majority on issues like sex education and character education. William Bennett wanted federal funds to be tied to the implementation of the 'Three Cs:' content, character and choice (Bennett, 1988, p.15).

In 2001 the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The passage of this act brought together such odd political bed-fellows as Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy and President George W. Bush. Although these two would seem to have little in common, their co-operation in the passage of this sweeping and, in the view of many educators, intrusive act seems to show that the federal government's role in American education is no longer questioned. Now, only the outcomes are to be fought over.

Clearly, the federal government is now an integral partner in shaping American education. In 1957, when *Sputnik* spurred the nation to action, President Eisenhower had hoped that federal involvement would last only as long as the threat from communism. But now, well over a decade after the collapse of the Soviet empire, Washington is still imposing its will on local schools through what many critics would claim to be virtual

blackmail. Bills that demand local schools preach abstinence or patriotism have replaced categorical aid bills that once were tied to the protection of a child's civil rights and this scenario has proved to be utterly irrelevant to which political party holds the reigns of power in Washington.

Johnson's ESEA, Clinton's *Goals 2000*, and George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* Act, have each contributed to the influence of the federal government now being firmly established in America's school systems. In 2000, the Republican Party did not even have a plank in its platform calling for the abolition of the federal Department of Education. This was the first time since the Department's creation that the GOP had not argued in principle, that it was an encroachment on states' rights.

The story of the American federal government's growing involvement in the field of education should give educators across the globe pause for thought. As schools and teachers continue to be a low governmental priority across the world, the money that comes from increased government involvement is often as intoxicating as it is enticing. As the American situation amply illustrates, however, every cent that comes from federal agencies comes with strings attached. Educators—in America and elsewhere — are too often asked to forfeit independence and professional courtesy and respect in exchange for additional funding. Centralized bureaucracies from Washington, D.C. to London, Paris and numerous other nations now blithely bypass teachers and other educational professionals in order to impose their idea of 'standards' and 'accountability'. The term mission creep aptly describes what has happened in American schools and, sadly, it is a pattern being repeated around the world.

Like that day in Somalia recounted at the start of this paper, the ploys surrounding education policy can have serious and possibly disastrous consequences. Idealistic and committed educators—teachers and administrators alike—find themselves drowning in the paperwork and red tape that comes with an exponentially expanding bureaucracy associated with federal 'help.' Frustrated with objectives and mandates over which they have little or no say, many educators are fleeing American schools and abandoning their vocation. Curriculum—that language of education that should always be about best practice and the best interests of our children—is now being repeatedly buffeted on the winds of political

expediency and base politics. Mission creep has come to define the politicians' relationship with schools just as surely as occurred between politicians and the military in Somalia. In the case of education the casualties, sadly, are and will continue to be America's children.

REFERENCES

The National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* Washington, D.C.: US GovernmentPrinting Office, 1983.

US Department of Health, Education and Welfare. *Report on the National Defense Education Act; A Summary of Program Administered by the Office of Education Submitted Under Public Law 85-864.* Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1961.

Bennett, William J. *Our Children and Our Country.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Bennett, William J. *The Devaluing of America.* New York: Summit Books, 1992.

Carroll, Peter N. *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982.

Clowse, Barbara Barksdale. *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958.* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Crocker, Chester A. 'The Lessons of Somalia — Not Everything Went Wrong.' *Foreign Affairs* 74:3 (1995): 2-8.

Dewey, John. *Experience and Education.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938.

Eidenberg, Eugene and Roy D. Morey. *An Act of Congress.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Incorporated, 1969.

Gingrich, Newt. *To Renew America.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

Goldwater, Barry M. *Goldwater.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Hoff, Joan. *Nixon Reconsidered.* New York: Basic Books, 1994.

Noll, William James. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Educational Issues.* Guilford, Connecticut: Dushkin/McGraw Hill, 2001.

Spring, Joel. *American Education.* Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2000.

Volodina, Tatyana. 'Teaching History in Russia After the Collapse of the USSR.' *The History Teacher* 38:2 (2005): 179-188.

'Ambush in Mogadishu.' http//www.pbs.org/wgbn/pages/frontline/shows/ambush 1988.