

Open Doors

For 36 years, it has been The Wilson Quarterly's central preoccupation: What's on the horizon for the great American experiment?

BY STEVEN LAGERFELD

SITTING AT THE FAMILY BREAKFAST TABLE LATE ONE recent morning, I looked around bemusedly at the band of sleepy, late rising college friends my daughter Liz had assembled: Sabeen, a Pakistani American; Daniel, a Korean American; Brinay, an African American; and Matt, a white guy who is gay. It is the sort of scene that would have been unimaginable, impossibly exotic, to whoever owned my suburban house just a few decades ago. Now it's the kind of tableau that could probably be seen in any house in the neighborhood. Utterly conventional.

Nineteen seventy-six was the year I returned to as I surveyed my breakfast guests. That was America's bicentennial, and the year the first issue of *The Wilson Quarterly* appeared in print. How much America has changed since then, I thought, and as troubled as our national situation now seems, you couldn't pay me enough to go back to 1976, splendid though it was. America was the great subject in the heart of the *WQ's* founding editor, Peter Braestrup, the ever-grateful son of immigrants who had found refuge from the Nazis in the United States, and he established certain themes that have animated the magazine ever since, themes that were already my own when I joined the staff years ago. So it wasn't mainly the diversity of my little breakfast crowd that struck me most that Saturday morning, but what it represented. Freedom. Change. Opportunity.

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America is hardly perfect, but it is remarkable—let's say exceptional—in the way it constantly opens new doors, whether for individuals and groups or for economic and technological innovations. The belief that one has the freedom to create one's own life, regardless of family background, social status, or any other factor, is uniquely strong in the United States. Earlier this year, the Pew Global Attitudes Project reported responses to a revealing survey question, one that pollsters have posed for many years, always with essentially the same results. Asked if "success in life is determined by forces outside our control," 72 percent of Germans said yes, as did 57 percent of French and 50 percent of Spaniards. Among Americans, only 36 percent agreed.

Yet as the great social scientist Seymour Martin Lipset wrote in these pages a dozen years ago ("Still the Exceptional Nation?" Winter 2000), American exceptionalism is "distinctly double-edged." The individualist, achievement-oriented American Creed yields exceptional wealth and opportunity for upward mobility but at the cost of higher rates of poverty, crime, and economic inequality than other Western nations. America's levels of taxation are much lower than in other advanced societies and the state less interventionist, but its social welfare system is not as generous. Its less fettered capitalism insures that the unemployment rate is much lower—but so are benefits for the unemployed.



There is a painfully simple yet often overlooked principle at work here, one that is increasingly absent from the nation's political discourse: Virtually every good thing involves tradeoffs. That idea has always been central to the ethos of the *WQ*, expressed through our commitment to presenting both sides of the issues. In order to make wise choices, we need to confront what may be lost as well as what might be gained. Pancakes at breakfast are a wonderful thing, but they will make you fat. Opportunity is a blessing, but it comes at the cost of inequality.

Since the 1970s, there has been a steady shift in that tradeoff at the heart of American life. The economic inequality we accept as the price of freedom and opportunity has been steadily increasing. Fabulous opportunities remain wide open at the upper levels of American society, from corporations and hedge funds to the media and the political elite, to an extent no other country can match. Talent is still welcome at the very top, no matter where it comes from. Just ask Barack Obama. For many, though, a ceiling has been lowered.

For a long time, it was reasonable to accept the rise of economic inequality as a necessary but temporary tradeoff. Historically, times of fundamental economic change have yielded lots of outright winners for a number of years before greater balance

was restored, and the developments of the past few decades—the rise of globalization and new information technologies, with all the “creative destruction” they have yielded—are nothing if not fundamental. But the imbalance that began in the 1970s has not stopped growing, and it shows little sign of abating.

My daughter Liz and her college-educated friends will not necessarily have an easy time of it in the future, but for them the sky still really is the limit. And many of those who lack a college degree still have solid prospects. But there is a whole class of people for whom the new terms of our national tradeoff are completely inaccessible. America's education system has many shortcomings and it has let down a lot of people, but none nearly so much as those who do not even make their way through it.

In 1976, it was plausible to think that a person without a high school degree could hope for a decent life. It no longer is. There is little chance for such people to make their way in the modern economy, much less to participate as citizens in our public life and to live fulfilling lives. And there is a national cost. Especially at a time of growing international economic competition, these are lives we cannot afford to waste. Yet 25 to 30 percent of America's young people drop out of school. In hard numbers, that means, for example, that 1.3 million of the 4.3 million Americans who entered high school in 2006 failed to graduate in 2010. This

is a national tragedy. It is also, more than anything I can think of, a national disgrace.

A telling fact about American social and economic mobility is that for all the openness and fluidity at the top, the very bottom is a sticky pit. There are many reasons for this, but none greater than the fact that so many of the nation's poorest people lack high school diplomas. About 40 percent of children born into the lowest fifth of the income distribution will find themselves in the same place as adults. Few of those who rise will go very far. According to researchers Julia Isaac,

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Isabel Sawhill, and Ron Haskins, only one in three will reach the middle class. By contrast, 60 percent of children born into the top two fifths can expect to live in comparable affluence when they grow into adulthood.

Yet there is good news. Dropout rates are notoriously difficult to calculate and numbers are often contradictory, but it is clear that high school graduation rates are on the rise, climbing according to one count from about 70 percent a dozen years ago to 77 percent in 2008.

This is a case of American strength meeting American weakness. Ever since the Reagan administration raised the alarm about the state of education in its *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, a slow revolution has been building in the nation's schools. This being the United States, the challenge could not be addressed by diktat from on high. While the federal government has played an important galvanizing role—the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation, the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative, which has awarded \$4 billion to innovative states since 2009—most of the energy has come from below, in the form of state and local reforms and countless experiments by local school districts, nonprofit organizations, and education entrepreneurs of many stripes,

such as the leaders of Teach For America. There are now, for example, more than 5,000 charter schools in the United States, startups operating largely independently of local school boards and pursuing a huge variety of education strategies. Some are wonderful, others are terrible and are destined to be shut down. All are products of the American capacity for experimentation and innovation.

Much more needs to happen. Graduation rates must be pushed up (Japan graduates 95 percent of its young people) and high school should be made more academically rigorous. Yet we ought to abandon the harmful fantasy that all young people need to go on to college. Dignified work is available to those who don't wear white collars. Pathways must be opened so that students who are not going past

grade 12 can get a real education while also preparing for decent careers. It is a lot to ask, but experiments have begun in some communities and there is no shortage of ideas about what to do next.

Slowly, America's schools are reinventing themselves. It is not only the schools. From its beginning, the *WQ* has had an abiding concern with American institutions and the elites who are responsible for them—the schools and universities, the news media, the military, the organs of government—and the history of the past 36 years has not often seemed uplifting, to say the least. Yet the process of renewal and reinvigoration has continued, often unappreciated and under the surface. Who, after all, would go back to 1976?

Looking around the breakfast table that Saturday morning, I thought that we don't need to be overly concerned about the kinds of futures Liz, Sabeen, Daniel, Brinay, and Matt will have or the kind of country they will inherit. And there is every reason to be very hopeful about what lies in store for their less fortunate peers. They are all endowed with what George Washington called "the sacred fire of Liberty" and they all live in a land ready to give full compass to their talents. Yep, I said to myself, just another morning in America. ■