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INTRODUCTION

It is the peculiar fate of Albert Shanker that he is probably best remembered for something he never did. In Woody Allen's 1973 science-fiction comedy *Sleeper*, Allen's character wakes up two hundred years in the future to learn that civilization was destroyed when "a man by the name of Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead."¹ Shanker was considered by many New Yorkers, particularly liberals like Allen, to be a hothead and union thug for shutting down the entire New York City school system with bitter strikes in 1967 and 1968. As head of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the nation's largest union local, Shanker led a fourteen-day strike in 1967 and a thirty-six-day series of strikes in 1968, closing down the nation's largest public-school system and throwing the lives of one million students and their parents into chaos.² His power to disrupt the school system was bad enough for his critics, but both incidents stirred up racial animosity, particularly between black parents and Jewish teachers. Shanker was denounced not only as a power monger for crippling the city's schools, but also as a racist for opposing the black community's quest for greater self-determination and control over the schools. Because it was illegal for New York's public employees to strike, Shanker was jailed after both incidents. When Woody Allen was writing the script for *Sleeper* and wondered whose name to use for a joke

about a madman who had destroyed the world, he tried out a number of possibilities with people at Elaine's Restaurant. The name Albert Shanker got the biggest laugh.³

Almost a quarter century later, however, it was a seemingly very different Albert Shanker who was eulogized at a ceremony featuring leading dignitaries at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. President Bill Clinton, using crutches following a recent accident, hobbled to the stage and spoke of Albert Shanker, the head of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) from 1974 to 1997, as an educational statesman, a personal "mentor," and "one of the most important teachers of the twentieth century." Clinton lauded Shanker as a champion of equity, recognizing that the education-standards movement Shanker led "was essential for democracy to work," because it "was the only way we could give every child, without regard to their background, a chance to live up to his or her God-given capacity."⁴ Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, speaking in his idiosyncratic clipped tones, painted Shanker as an intellectual and a gifted writer whose celebrated "Where We Stand" column appeared in the Sunday *New York Times*. "The impact was extraordinary," Moynihan said. "Union leaders in those days rarely wrote essays, still less felicitous, thoughtful analyses of public policy."⁵

The list of speakers that day—which included Vice President Al Gore and Education Secretary Richard Riley—was evidence that Shanker was a powerful individual, as Woody Allen suggested, but speaker after speaker said Shanker exercised power well and judiciously: to upgrade the teaching profession, to promote democracy abroad, and to improve public education for American schoolchildren.

Some have hypothesized that there were two Albert Shanker's—a "bad Al" and a "good Al." The bad Al was the early, militant teachers' union leader who thirsted for power and poisoned race relations. The good Al came much later and was the statesman who led his union in the direction of education reform, even as parochial elements within the AFT fiercely resisted.

But the presence of Loretta Johnson, one of the speakers at the ceremony that day, suggested the story wasn't so simple. A stout African American woman, Johnson was head of the AFT's division of "paraprofessionals," a group of mostly black and Latino teacher aides, many of them former welfare mothers, who were hired with federal money to help in low-income schools beginning in the 1960s.

Racial tensions ran high following the 1968 teachers' strike, which centered on the question of whether local black leaders had the right to dismiss tenured unionized white teachers and replace them, often with black teachers, as part of an effort to give ghetto communities greater control over their schools. Shanker was a hero of the white middle class, which backed him for standing up to black militants, but Shanker, who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, wanted to make it clear that the issue was not black versus white, but the right of workers to be treated with dignity. Many of the black teacher aides had crossed the picket lines during the teachers' strike to try to keep schools open. But when Shanker saw the opportunity to organize the "paras," who were making as little as two dollars an hour, he jumped at the chance. Shanker met fierce resistance from many teachers, some of whom did not want a union of professionals to include less-educated aides, many of whom were high-school dropouts.

But Shanker was adamant. He saw organizing the paras as a way of proving that the UFT was a racially inclusive organization, and he laid out a vision in which the union would negotiate a career ladder, by which paras could go back to school and become teachers and thereby better integrate the teaching profession. When some teachers continued to balk, Johnson noted, Shanker threatened to resign as president. It was, she said, the only time he did that in his career.⁶

Teachers eventually went along, and the UFT ended up beating out a rival union that unsuccessfully tried to paint Shanker as a racist. The paras did not see Shanker as anti-black; they saw him as someone who went on strike—and went to jail—in order to defend his members, and they wanted to be a part of his organization. Johnson told the audience that when Shanker later retired as president of the UFT, he said of all the things he had done, he was proudest of organizing the paras and providing them with better wages and a program in which they could go back to school and become teachers.⁷ The "bad Al" of the 1960s, to Johnson, did not sound so bad after all.

The ceremony ended with President Clinton, Senator Moynihan, Loretta Johnson, and hundreds of audience members singing "Solidarity Forever."

Al Shanker was a man constantly on the go. As president of the UFT in New York City and the AFT nationally, he was forever giving speeches,

negotiating contracts, testifying before Congress, walking picket lines, and meeting with unionist and human-rights activists abroad. He was constantly churning out new ideas, which he outlined in some 1,300 weekly columns, commenting on education reform, unions, race relations, and politics. He was passionate about his work, traveled 300,000 to 500,000 miles a year, and had little time for his family. (He took his wife, Eadie, to a union conference for their “honeymoon.”)

He thought about running for mayor of New York City in the late 1960s, when polls showed he could beat Republican John Lindsay, and he was mentioned as a possible U.S. secretary of education in the early 1990s under Bill Clinton. In both cases, he concluded he was better positioned to fight for what he cared about as a leader of the UFT and AFT. As head of a union of teachers, he stood at the intersection of the two great engines for equality in the United States—public education and organized labor—and he was not about to give that up. He once told an interviewer, “If I didn’t have to make a living, I would have done this as a volunteer.”⁸

A Father of Modern Teachers’ Unions

Shanker lived the lives of several men in a single lifetime. In 1960, when collective bargaining for teachers was generally thought impossible because it was illegal for public employees to go on strike, Shanker and a handful of other teachers in New York City convinced several thousand colleagues to break the law and risk being fired. Because the school board could not dismiss all the striking teachers, it backed down and eventually recognized the right of the UFT to bargain on behalf of teachers. Other teachers joined on, and from 1960 to 1968, union representation grew from 5 percent of New York City’s teaching staff to 97 percent.⁹ With collective bargaining came a huge change in the culture of teaching. Teachers were accustomed to being pushed around: they were poorly paid, forced to eat their lunches while supervising students, and told to bring a doctor’s note if they were out sick. Collective bargaining brought them higher salaries and also greater dignity.¹⁰

“He was the George Washington of the teaching profession,” said union leader Tom Mooney. “He’s the one who rallied us to liberate ourselves.”¹¹ Like George Washington, Shanker was hardly alone in helping to light the spark of teacher unionism in New York City. He was one of several leaders, including Charles Cogen, president of the UFT at the time, and David

Selden, an AFT organizer. But Shanker soon outpaced his colleagues, leading the union to far greater heights.

The influence of Shanker and his colleagues was felt far beyond New York City, as the UFT's example caught fire and teachers pushed for collective bargaining in Detroit, Philadelphia, and city after city. The nation's largest teachers' organization, the National Education Association (NEA), was adamantly opposed to collective bargaining. But as NEA leaders witnessed the AFT's dramatic gains in membership, the NEA was forced to reverse its position or risk losing its preeminent status.

With collective bargaining, membership in teachers' unions skyrocketed. During a period when the American trade-union movement saw dramatic decline, the AFT grew from sixty thousand members in 1961 to close to one million at the time of Shanker's death in 1997.¹² The NEA saw comparable growth, and schools became, after the postal service, the most heavily unionized sector in the United States.¹³ Today, teachers' unions are broadly believed to be the most influential single force in American education.¹⁴

Influential Education Reformer

Having been one of the founding fathers of teacher unionism would have been an extraordinary legacy by itself. But then, in Act II, Shanker became the most influential education reformer of the second half of the twentieth century. He did so not by changing jobs but by utterly transforming the role of teachers' union leader.

Shanker saw that by the early 1980s the great labor agenda of the previous epoch—Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, the minimum wage, and civil rights—had run into a political cul-de-sac. But education still had political backing, and in 1983, Shanker, virtually alone within the liberal education establishment, embraced the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, which ushered in a quarter century of education reform. While teachers' unions were being reviled as special-interest groups that blocked promising reforms, Shanker let loose with a flurry of his own reform proposals that one newspaper said made the AFT look as much like a think tank as a union.¹⁵

When unions were attacked for protecting incompetent teachers, Shanker backed a controversial "peer-review" plan, in which master teachers would evaluate incoming and veteran teachers, weeding out those not

up to the job. He also astounded critics when he proposed a rigorous national competency exam for new teachers, a concept anathema to the NEA. When unions were attacked for opposing efforts to reward talent through “merit pay” of teachers, Shanker devised a plan to recognize superior performance with greater pay without leaving the decisions open to favoritism by principals. He proposed what would become the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which provides for teachers what board certification does for doctors. Each of these policies was offered not merely as a defensive maneuver against critics of teachers’ unions but as part of an affirmative vision to make teaching not just an occupation but a true profession.

Shanker also proposed innovations to restructure schools and in 1988 popularized the idea of charter schools, public schools that would be set up by groups of teachers and be permitted to experiment with different educational approaches. The idea was widely embraced: in 1990, there were no charter schools; today, there are more than 3,600.¹⁶ Over time, however, the reform went in very different directions than Shanker intended, and he grew increasingly critical of the movement he had helped to father.

Shanker’s greatest impact on education reform came with his decision to embrace a system of education standards, testing, and accountability comparable to what most leading European and Asian nations had. There was enormous resistance to standards from the left (civil-rights groups, education professors, the NEA) and from the right (advocates of local control and states’ rights). But Shanker broke with the education establishment and joined with governors and business leaders to push what today, remarkably, has become the leading education reform in the United States. While the movement has many participants and advocates, Shanker was generally seen as the most fervent, powerful, and consistent leader. He pounded away at the theme that educators had to give students a real incentive to do well. As a former teacher, he often told others that when he gave homework or a quiz, the class invariably shouted out, “Does it count?”¹⁷ Although no one liked to be held accountable, Shanker argued that human nature required that public education use incentives, making it more like the private marketplace, without abandoning the fundamental public nature of schools.

Taken together—his role as a father of modern teachers’ unions and his role as a leading education reformer—Shanker was arguably the single individual most responsible for preserving public education in the United

States during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Whenever private school–voucher proposals surface through ballot initiatives or legislation, the powerful teachers’ unions that Shanker helped create are the most important political opponents. But if the AFT under Shanker had not transformed itself and joined the education-reform debates, the case against vouchers would have been weaker, and more forays from proponents of privatization might well have prevailed. Shanker’s defense against vouchers—fighting “to change public education in order to preserve it”—was “far more effective,” says education writer Thomas Toch, than those in the education establishment, who merely called “for more money to address problems that they frequently argued didn’t exist.”¹⁸ While the United States economy as a whole is far more market oriented than most countries, 90 percent of students remain in government-run public schools. No individual in the past generation is more responsible for this anomaly than Albert Shanker.

Though Shanker held no public office, he became supremely influential, his name constantly invoked in education circles. “In the course of the past two decades,” educator and author E. D. Hirsch Jr. wrote in 1997, “Albert Shanker made himself the most important figure in American education.”¹⁹ While secretaries of education came and went, as did presidents of the much larger NEA, Shanker endured, and he outdid and out-thought all of them. If Horace Mann was the key educational figure in the nineteenth century and John Dewey in the first half of the twentieth century, Albert Shanker has stood as the most influential figure since then. As a central thinker, writer, and player in all the great education debates of the last quarter century—whether school vouchers, charter schools, or education standards—he was, journalist Sara Mosle argues, “our Dewey.”²⁰

Advocate of Tough Liberalism

But that was not all. Shanker had a third life as well, as a combatant in the fight for the future of American liberalism. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, he was in the thick of the great battles waged among liberals over race, unions, American foreign policy, and the direction of the Democratic Party. Shanker clashed with factions within the American left—the “New Left” and the “New Politics” movements—that jettisoned the notion of “colorblindness” in favor of racial preferences and identity politics, saw labor and working-class voters as reactionary rather than central

to the liberal coalition, and rejected muscular cold-war liberalism in favor of a dovish, often isolationist, foreign policy. In this endeavor, unlike his others, he and like-minded advocates were mostly unsuccessful, and the meaning of American liberalism changed dramatically.

Shanker believed in what might be called “tough liberalism,” an ideology that champions an affirmative role for government in promoting social mobility, social cohesion, and greater equality at home and democracy abroad, but which is also tough-minded about human nature, the way the world works, and the reality of evil. He remained, to the end, a liberal, and over a thirty-year period he stood squarely for two central pillars of liberal thought: public education and organized labor. But he also thought liberals were wrong on many of the great issues of the day. Shanker was a Harry Truman/Scoop Jackson Democrat and a Cold Warrior who disagreed with liberals on Vietnam in the 1960s and on detente with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. He believed liberals did not go far enough to support democratic forces in Poland and in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and he opposed liberal efforts to cut defense spending. An early supporter of the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Shanker stood virtually alone among union leaders in consistently raising questions about liberal support for racial preferences, arguing instead for broad-based affirmative-action programs for economically needy people of all races. He similarly opposed certain extreme forms of bilingual education and multiculturalism, which he saw as separatist. And Shanker disagreed with liberals on the role of organized labor in the Democratic coalition. He thought it was a grave mistake to move from a working-class party toward one that centered around women, minorities, and upper-middle-class white reformers.

Shanker's views on defense and quotas put him in conflict with Jimmy Carter. For that reason, some pegged Shanker as a neoconservative, until he decided to endorse not Ronald Reagan but Ted Kennedy for president. As Bill Clinton noted at the memorial service, “Al Shanker would say something on one day that would delight liberals and infuriate conservatives. The next day, he would make conservatives ecstatic and the liberals would be infuriated.”²¹ People could not figure him out. They called him a “right-wing socialist” and a “neanderthal liberal.”²²

He was a complex individual: a pacifist in his youth who became a leading defense and foreign-policy hawk, an intellectual who was also a populist and communicated easily with nonintellectuals, a gifted public

speaker who was unable to make small talk, a liberal whose biggest enemies were often on the left, a gifted writer who had to pay to have his ideas published, a fierce critic of philanthropic foundations who later served on the boards of two of them, a man who devoted his life to improving the education of children but spent little time with his own kids, a man largely ignorant of pop culture who was cited in television shows and movies, and a tough unionist with a gruff manner who enjoyed shopping and baking bread and detested talking about sports.²³

Throughout his life, Shanker continually rowed against the tide. He was one of the only Jewish kids growing up in a tough Catholic neighborhood. He began as a teacher's union activist at a time when no one thought it was possible to organize public employees and then headed a growing union in an era when unions were in decline. He was a leading education reformer at a time when teachers' unions were generally written off as the greatest obstacles to reform. And he was a proponent of colorblindness, first in an era when his stance was considered radical and later in an era when it was considered conservative. Because he did not shrink from fights, his positions often sparked tremendous controversy. Issues of race and issues of war are notoriously volatile. And his main passion—education—aroused strong emotion because it deals with people's children and with society's future.²⁴

Shanker's "tough liberal" philosophy was wrong on some of the major issues of the day. It is hard to defend his relatively hawkish position on the war in Vietnam, to take one important example. But today, when liberals are accused of not standing for anything, it is important to note that Shanker had a coherent ideology. He articulated a cogent rationale for his collection of "liberal" and "conservative" views that bridged traditional categories without merely splitting differences. For Shanker, all roads led back to democracy.

He was for strong and free trade unions primarily because of their democratic virtues. They gave workers a democratic voice at the workplace and in the Congress, checking the unbridled economic power of corporations. They helped strengthen the formation of a middle class necessary to a democracy. And they served as a crucial check against governmental power, which is why authoritarian governments sought to crush them. "There is no freedom or democracy without trade unionism," he said.²⁵ Likewise, Shanker opposed vouchers and supported strong public schools because he believed schools were more than a place to

train future employees; they were institutions that taught democratic citizenship and helped bind diverse peoples together as Americans.

But democracy also underpinned his “conservative” positions. Shanker’s support for trade unionism also translated into an unrelenting anti-Communism. Why was it “liberal” to stand by while Polish authorities crushed Solidarity, or while Nicaraguan Sandinistas beat up union leaders, or while the North Vietnamese arrested the leadership of the independent labor federation in the South, he asked. He also thought that in a democracy it was essential to have a single standard for individuals of all races, and he opposed all privileges associated with race. He recognized a need to take affirmative action to address the legacy of past racial discrimination, but he argued that extra help should be made available for economically disadvantaged people of all races. He quarreled with certain “progressive” educators who pushed fads that were soft on teaching academic content and distorted history in order to boost the self-esteem of minority groups. He believed, with E. D. Hirsch Jr., that if one really wished to be a political progressive concerned about disadvantaged kids, one needed to be an educational “conservative” who stood for teaching students certain core knowledge that was essential to upward mobility in American society.

Shanker argued that tough liberalism was not only consistent and democratic but was also politically attractive, because it addressed the central vulnerabilities of liberalism, which since the 1960s has been seen as soft, elitist, politically correct, and out of touch with the way the world works. Democrats have done fairly well in recent decades with what political scientists call the “moderate middle,” upscale socially liberal and fiscally conservative citizens. But they have been trounced by voters who make up the “radical center,” downscale, patriotic citizens who are concerned about right and wrong, angry about abuses of power by the wealthy, and want more government support for working families. During Shanker’s lifetime, the radical center went from being the backbone of the Democratic Party to its Achilles’ heel. And liberalism went from being a proud moniker to an epithet, “so reviled,” as Peter Beinart notes, “that its adherents dare not speak its name.”²⁶ Shanker believed that issues of national security and race were central to the collapse of American liberalism politically, and he articulated a different path on these questions—a path he believed was not “conservative” but, like the economic populism he also embraced, profoundly democratic. Shanker’s tough liberalism

was highly controversial and largely dismissed during his lifetime as being unorthodox and inconsistent. But as contemporary American liberalism struggles both for intellectual coherence and political viability, Albert Shanker's life reminds us that there is an alternative tough liberal tradition wholly worthy of reviving.