

THE COMING OF THE GUERRILLA TEACHER

Fred Staab

Knowledge depends on action for its fruits, but action does not necessarily depend on knowledge to be effective. Action, however, always leads to knowledge, whereas knowledge does not necessarily lead to action.

Wang Yang-ming (1472-1528)

Not too many years ago it would have been unthinkable that an ordinary classroom teacher — starting alone and possessing few resources other than his wit and nerve — would undertake to overthrow the educational system of his school, district, state or nation.

That was before Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. It was before Ho Chi Minh and Caesar Chavez and the Black Panthers. It was before the grass-roots presidential campaign of Gene McCarthy. That is to say, it was before it became clear that modern states and institutions, for all their enormous power and expertise, are not absolute. It was before people realized that, paradoxically, the very power of modern institutions often makes them more vulnerable to challenge by individuals and small groups. Aware of these facts, an ordinary classroom teacher, somewhere in America today, may thus be choosing to go underground.

Though the evidence for the coming of the guerrilla teacher is, at best, sketchy, it is nonetheless real. For the most part, it is to

be found in the growing popularity of books such as Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching As A Subversive Activity**, as well as such new magazines as the Toronto publication, *This Magazine is about Schools* and the Oregon quarterly, *The Teacher Paper*. In these sources, one can find teachers advocating such tactics as

- organizing "counter" in-service days
- cutting the wires to the school's P.A. system
- tape-recording faculty meetings so the proceedings can be published, *verbatim*, in underground leaflets for community distribution
- stuffing phoney memos in the school secretary's in-basket
- alerting students to mouse-trapping their lockers on search days
- renting storefronts where evening discussions are held with parents on how schools fail their kids
- compiling, for the edification of new teachers, confidential files on administrators
- assigning A's to all students in compulsory classes
- printing counter-brochures describing a school district
- removing the plumbing-pipe-and-plastic desks from classrooms and replacing them with old sofa cushions, rugs, and prune boxes
- teaching students how to foul-up standardized tests of ability and achievement
- holding voluntary classes on weekends and in the evenings.

These are only a few of the tactics currently being suggested. *The Teacher Paper* alone printed a supplement to its December, 1969 issue listing 162 tactics calculated to make classrooms more enjoyable, learning more effective, and superintendents more ulcerous. For the most part these are the suggestions of public school teachers who exhibit a deep commitment to teaching and to their students. Though the underground teacher is generally a young one, he sometimes is an older teacher no longer able to endure patiently the bureaucratic routines which characterize so many public schools. Moreover, though this guerrilla teacher often pits himself against

*For a review of this book, see "Trivium at the Bivium" in this issue of the *Journal* — Ed.

his administrators (since they usually exert the most direct control over a teacher's work), occasionally one finds him urging tactics which will gather support for a good administrator. For a guerrilla teacher is someone flexible enough to realize that in seeking to make schools better for students and teachers he needs all the allies he can get, and that not all teachers will be his friends, nor all administrators his enemies. So new that his numbers are few indeed when compared to the two million public school teachers in America, the guerrilla teacher does not pose an immediate threat to the public school system. Furthermore, it is important to remember that he is still at the stage where what he advocates and what he does are not yet the same thing. Nevertheless, since all majorities begin as a minority of one, what this guerrilla teacher advocates, and what he must do in the future if he is to be successful, deserve attention.

To begin with, though guerrilla teachers are suggesting a variety of tactics — some designed to revolutionize only the classroom itself, while others aim at changing the political forces which so often make classroom innovation impossible — all guerrilla teachers share a similar goal and a similar understanding. The goal is to make schools and classrooms more *humane*, to remove from the lives of children and teachers all that is joyless, dishonest, and repressive. The understanding is that to make schools more humane, *action* counts infinitely more than words, theory, and debate. As Saul Alinsky recently pointed out, all revolutionaries understand that "the action is in the reaction," that a well-chosen act demands a response, and the response may make a re-ordering of values, or of behaviour, or of power itself possible. While this response may come from authorities challenged by an act, it also comes from the person who acts. For a teacher, used to letting others make the decisions affecting his classroom, performing an unexpected act can bring psychological strength.

Thus, the guerrilla teacher advocates replacing the classroom furniture first, and inviting the principal down to see the results afterward. Or the guerrilla teacher suggests the mimeographing of exciting educational articles and stuffing them in the school mail-boxes of all teachers. The guerrilla teacher says red-tape should be ignored, that teachers should take their students outside the building where they need to learn something, and leave only a note about where they gave gone. And a guerrilla teacher is one who sug-

gests using the new technology against the schools. For instance, he will say that a teacher, who works in a system where report cards are made up via computers and who is convinced the A to F grading system is unfair or educationally counter-productive for students, should simply assign all the students A's. He will argue that even after his act is discovered it may be too expensive, of time or money or institutional "image," for his supervisors to force him to change the grades and then re-run the computers. The underground teacher will further argue that, faced with such insurrection, school officials may have little option other than waiting until the school year ends before terminating the teacher's contract, and with a *fait accompli* the teacher (a) has dramatically changed the reality of school for his students, and (b) has forced his colleagues and administrators to react in some way, either negatively by denouncing him or ostracizing him, or positively by listening to, or thinking about, the teacher's rationale.

Since he sees schools as essentially political institutions and only secondarily, when at all, as educational ones, the guerrilla teacher often suggests actions which take place outside the classroom or school. He maintains that kids and teachers and learning do not count for much when schools are political on the inside (teachers jockeying for preferential assignments and favours; administrators calculating how to increase their own powers or salaries; athletic coaches competing with history, science, or language teachers over money for football helmets on one hand, and books and lab equipment on the other) and that they do not count for much either when schools are political on the outside (school boards trying to hold down taxes; textbook publishers scheming for million dollar contracts; left, right and centrist groups trying to put prayer in the classrooms, or take controversial books out, or get rid of teachers who grow beards or drink beer or don't drink beer). To change the schools, the guerrilla teacher points out, it is necessary to change the sources of power controlling the schools. To do this, he suggests teachers should short-cut the chain-of-command (the administrators) and the professional establishment (the educational associations and unions) which he has been taught, or forced, to rely on. Guerrilla teachers advocate reaching directly out to parents and community for support, doing so in a variety of ways: evening discussion centers, underground newsletters, radio, and television available now even in small towns with cable hook-ups.

But beyond the recognition that action is crucial, and beyond a few isolated examples of teachers acting on this recognition, there is today little more than rhetorical justification for claiming that guerrilla teachers exist. It is not enough to understand the value of action and to urge others. One must act. And even for true undergrounds (as opposed to mythical ones) action is only one of many principles for success. If guerrilla teachers are to grow in numbers and have an impact on schools, they will need to apply these other revolutionary axioms. They will need to solve the problem of *communications*, making their ideas, visions, and acts widely known through such media as underground newsletters (in the schools and in the community), and forums on television and radio. They will need to talk with all sorts of groups (Rotary, Kiwanis, Chambers of Commerce, unions) that teachers traditionally avoid. Guerrilla teachers will also have to *expose the failures* of the established order, and having done that they will have to go on to demonstrate that *alternatives are possible* and that the underground performs them. This may mean teaching in the evening or on weekends in order to enjoy the freedom of teaching differently. It may mean documenting the failures resulting from compulsory classes and comparing them to successes achieved in voluntary classes, or it may mean revealing how money is wasted in schools (showing how much goes for salaries and how much goes for books or art supplies or field trips). It may mean collecting evidence showing the bankruptcy of repressive discipline, or evidence that kids learn to read if they have real books rather than basal readers or dull literature anthologies. It may mean showing that more math is learned in a ten-minute period followed by games, or music, or art than can be learned in fifty-minutes of lecture and drill.

A particularly difficult task for guerrilla teachers to master is *recruitment*. Unless they can muster among their colleagues the friends and sympathizers who will share the risks and the action, underground teachers will have no lasting effect on the schools. Recruiting often means overcoming apathy, fear, rigidity, and ignorance, traits as prevalent among public school teachers as they are, say, among campesinos in Brazil or migrants in California. To recruit means to behave in the most fundamental human ways, to avoid preaching, to recognize in one's colleagues their unrealized talents, their longings to teach well and to be respected for it. It means helping fellow-teachers realize their classroom dreams and

abandon their nightmares. It means keeping a sense of humor at all times (those who lack it are often viewed as power-mad).

The last principle guerrilla teachers must practise is really the first: *Don't get fired*. Like all revolutionary principles, there are exceptions to this rule, for there may be times when getting fired, or quitting, are necessary for one's sanity or conscience. But in general, underground teachers must develop methods for survival. They need to learn how to make the firing of a teacher more costly than it is worth to school officials. And when a point has to be made, the exact amount of risk must be taken, no more, no less. For example, if the point to be made is the needless interruption of a class by incessant P.A. announcements, the teacher who disconnects the speaker in his own room will survive longer than the one who smashes the main broadcasting console serving the entire school. To survive in America's public schools today is not easy. Two-thirds of all beginning teachers are no longer teaching after five years, and to choose the life of an underground teacher in the public schools may be a frustrating choice. But it may also be the only one. It is not possible to participate in a revolution from a distance, and educational revolutionaries must deal with the fact that the public schools are where sixty-million children and adolescents will be tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. In the urban ghettos, in the suburbs and small towns and rural areas of middle-America, the problems of creating humane, effective schools persist. Until now, individual teachers have done little to confront these problems in a personal way. All too often they have resigned themselves to the way things are, or they have dropped out in despair, or they have left to work in private schools (thus managing to stay in teaching, but consigning the students left behind to those who often care least about kids or teaching).

Many educators, of course, will be horrified at the appearance of the guerrilla teacher and the subversive activities he proposes. It may be true that, like other revolutionaries, his daily frustrations may make him susceptible to romantic fantasies (he dreams of pouring limburger cheese in the confidential files, or of epoxying the principal's door shut). But it is also true that some guerrilla teachers, choosing to stay in the public schools but managing to avoid participation in their failures and deceits, offer the best hope that schools can be revitalized, and will not harden further into irrelevant, repressive, and de-humanizing institutions.