

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

BDUL -

Charter Schools

Charter Hypocrisy

"When I became president, there was one independent public charter school in all of America. With our support, there are 1,100 today. My budget assures that early in the next century, there will be 3,000."

— PRESIDENT CLINTON,
1999 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS.

Another lie, it turns out. When it comes to actual treatment of the nation's fledgling charter schools, the Clinton Administration follows another policy: It tortures them.

Consider what it is doing to Louisiana's United Charter school. Back in 1995, Louisiana lawmakers surveyed their failing schools. After decades of desegregation orders, mandatory busing and so on, Louisiana school kids, half of whom are black, ranked 49th in the nation in overall achievement. Distressed, legislators passed one of the nation's more far-reaching laws for charter schools—public schools that are given autonomy to try their own educational approach without bureaucratic oversight. Among the new schools planned was United Charter, a K-8 center for 650 at-risk children in an abandoned mall in inner-city Baton Rouge. Again, bear in mind we're talking about a public school. Applications flowed in. "It's something our kids need," parent Estella Percy told the local paper.

This didn't sit well with Mr. Clinton's civil rights czar, Acting Assistant Attorney General Bill Lann Lee. To Mr. Lee and his fellow crusaders at Justice, it seems, the actual welfare of flesh-and-blood students ranks a distant second to abstract notions of "rights." Tucking a 43-year-old court desegregation decree under their collective arm, Mr. Lee's attorneys descended on Louisiana to block United Charter.

In meetings with local officials and school advocates, the Justice Department let it be known that it had concerns about the project, among them that the new school might draw too many white children from neighboring schools, upsetting those schools' racial balance. "What the parents want isn't important to me," a Justice official told Rolfe McCollister, a charter backer. "I'm interested in the law."

This struck locals as ridiculous. First of all, what matters more, skin color or education quality? Second, it wasn't clear that, after years of forced busing, there were enough whites in the community left to recruit even if United Charter sought to do so. As Roger Moser, the local system's school board president, told the Greater Baton Rouge Business Report, United Charter "has a chance of either im-

proving education dramatically for blacks and/or evolving to the point it could be desegregated. But given the location it would have, I don't see any way it would ever become a high proportion of white kids."

Nonetheless, the feds continued to pepper the fragile project with questions. Particularly frustrating to locals was that the government's lawyers never laid out their case against the school on paper. Soon thoroughly intimidated, Baton Rouge authorities halted plans to open United Charter. That's why parents, represented by the Washington-based Institute for Justice, are now turning to the courts to try to resurrect their dream.

Unfortunately, United Charter is far from the only school to find itself harassed by Justice police. When SABIS International, a private school management firm, tried to open another charter school in St. Helena Parish, near the Mississippi River, the civil rights division used yet another desegregation order to block that project. The New Vision Charter School in Monroe was luckier. Though Justice had set its sites on the school, federal Judge F.A. Little Jr. let the project proceed.

This mode of attack on charter schools, moreover, is by no means confined to Louisiana. Nineteen of the 30 states that have charter laws also have areas that are under some sort of desegregation order, all potential battlefields for Justice litigators. In a recent hearing before Congress, Deputy Assistant Attorney General Anita Hodgkiss testified that the Justice Department has opposed charter schools in three other states: Texas, Mississippi and South Carolina.

Some argue that the never-confirmed Bill Lann Lee is the exception in an otherwise centrist Administration. In fact, Mr. Lee represents more the pattern than the exception. His counterpart at the civil rights division of the Education Department, Norma Cantu, spent months harassing another infant school, New York City's Young Womens Leadership School, with the threat that its single-sex program was discriminatory. According to Kimberly Schuld of the Independent Women's Forum, Ms. Cantu backed off only after her boss at education, Richard Riley, began making repeated positive references to charter schools in speeches.

We wish we had confidence that the exposure of the Administration's ongoing hypocrisy toward charter schools would shame it into better behavior. But so long as the Democratic Party's future is tied to the teachers unions, the opposite is more likely.

Look Ma, No Hands!

MIAMI—The Airbus folks are getting ready for a plane crash, and that doesn't mean they're spreading bubble wrap on the ground. Hundreds of the European consortium's state-of-the-art jets are taking to the U.S. skyways. Sooner or later, one is bound to land in a place and at an angle not specified in the flight plan or owner's manual.

What happens next could distort consumer perceptions and public policy for years to come, given the media's history of accident hysteria.

The news cycle being what it is, journalists will be digging through their clip

Business World

By Holman W. Jenkins Jr.

files for the "cause" while investigators are still pulling their boots on. In print, the story line will be "computers were flying the plane." The evening news will simplify this as "computers crashed the plane." After all, computers crash, don't they? Does my hair look OK?

Something about this scenario doesn't appeal to Airbus. Thus we find ourselves among a group of journalists at the company training center here taking turns in an A320 simulator. The engines are idling; we're on a gentle glidepath toward a collision with a major Alp.

Our coach, Larry Rockliff of Airbus, has had the Zurich Airport punched in. As the mountains loom up on the mylar projection screen, a mechanical voice urgently announces, "Pull up, pull up!"

In simulated panic, we pull the stick back to the stops. The nose rises up. The engines surge to life. We clear the mountain with plenty of room to spare.

Had we been flying a conventional air-

craft, the mountain probably would have won. Pulling back hard on the stick would have pushed our angle of attack too high. Our airspeed would have dropped. The plane would have lost lift. We would have faced a long walk back to Zurich in the snow.

We try it again in a snowstorm, at night, with zero visibility. We still can't hit the mountain.

Let us disclose that our last experience in the cockpit was 22 years ago in a Piper Cherokee, and Capt. Rockliff is visibly disdainful of our technique, which involves much stomping on the rudder during final approach. But this actually makes us an ideal test monkey. Airline pilots don't get much practice flying at the edge of their performance envelope either.

What makes Airbus controversial is that it removes the need for competence in desperation maneuvers. All we had to do was yank back hard on the stick. The computer configured the plane for maximum lift and power. If the mountain was clearable, we would have cleared it.

You can't stall an A320. You can't bank it more than 67 degrees, or pull maneuvers that exceed 2.5G (though structurally the plane will withstand 3.8G). The computer decides not just how but whether the pilot's commands will be reflected in movements of the control surfaces of the wings and tail.

Any pilot can think up scenarios where he might want to dodge a missile, say, or another plane. Boeing has opted for "soft limits" in the 777, meaning the pilot can override by pushing against warning resistance in the stick. The difference is largely cosmetic. As a matter of statistics, both companies would privately agree you can save more lives by stopping pilots from doing something stupid than by letting them do something heroic.

Consider the crash that has given Air-

bus such headaches. You've seen the video: An Air France pilot making a low pass at a 1988 air show and then sinking gently into a stand of trees. He was supposed to be demonstrating the A320's low-speed, high-angle capabilities at 100 feet, but for some reason chose to fly at 30 feet.

Under 50 feet, a control law for landing kicks in, so the autothrottle did not engage. The pilot was slow to add power until the engines were already sucking in trees and bird's nests, but at least he wasn't able to



stall the plane. In a stall, one wing typically drops first, and the plane might have cartwheeled instead of landing flat on its belly.

In fact, the debate over hard vs. soft limits may be a bit of a red herring. We didn't try it, but pilots gush about the remarkable similarity of flying the A320 and the A340, which can weigh four times as much on take-off. Only a computer could make two such different planes respond uniformly to pilot control inputs. That saves money on training and crew deployment, but also means long-haul pilots can easily keep current on their takeoffs and landings by doing a stint in the short-haul plane.

Computers have been implicated in air crashes. But these are the flight management computers in much wider use. The problem is "mode confusion," when the pi-

lot is trying to do one thing and the autopilot is trying to do something else.

Experts have cataloged many such accidents and incidents, including fatal wrecks of both Boeing and Airbus planes. Sure, the pilot was at fault because he didn't notice what the computer was doing. Some of these incidents come up because of controllers throwing hairballs at pilots, and a partial solution may come from reform of the traffic control system.

The FAA wants to move us to "free flight"; pilots and airline operations folks would be in charge of choosing flight path and speed, with everyone tied together in a computer network to warn of potential traffic conflicts. In the Airbus, you point the nose and go, while the computer keeps the plane in aerodynamic trim. This reduces workload so pilots can attend to office chores.

The cockpit may not yet come with a Doberman to make sure the crew doesn't touch the controls, but balancing the forces of lift, thrust and gravity is no longer the pilot's primary job description. Northwest, a big A320 customer, has reportedly noticed a difference between old flyboys and younger ones when air traffic control throws a monkey wrench into a flight plan. The old guys take over the plane and fly it manually. The young guys patiently tap the changes into the flight computer.

Sad to say, the latter is probably the right instinct. Even the "pull up, pull up" response may be taken out of the pilot's hands. The U.S. Air Force, in alliance with the Swedish military (whose pilots spend a lot of time maneuvering around mountains), is perfecting a system that would automatically guide a plane away from an encounter with terrain.

When that day comes, it'll be safe to put a journalist-monkey in the seat of the real thing.