
A Dissertation in
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This dissertation investigates the rhetoric of blame in the public discourse of United States education policy. As the frequent object of reform since the mid-nineteenth century, public education in the United States has inspired a great deal of blame. Public education’s blameworthy have included teachers, students, parents, administrators, and entire governments. Not even inanimate concepts like segregation, genetics, race, class, and progressivism have escaped the allegation of culpability. In the permanent reform that is U.S. education policy, blame is an expedient tool for rhetorical actors because it insinuates the need to change both policy and leadership. Blame is not only expedient for rhetorical actors; it is also invigorating for rhetorical exchange. Acts of blame rarely go unanswered and so blaming renews the cycle of policy reform by initiating a process of deliberation. Although blaming itself is often blamed for being simplistic or misguided, this dissertation sets out with the assumption that blame, like any rhetorical act, has use value and thus entails strategy. The profusion of blame in the public discourse of education policy during the 1980s and early 1990s provides both a guiding question (What is all of this blame doing here?) as well as an abundance of opportunities to plumb blame’s rhetorical depths. This dissertation accounts for some of blame’s functions as a deliberative strategy through the close analysis of four prominent acts of public blaming. Moreover, by reconstructing the recent history of blaming in U.S. education policy discourses, this dissertation recovers the rhetorical antecedents of “accountability.”
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Introduction

Blame in the Discourses of U.S. Education Policy

On October 17, 1979, President James Earl Carter Jr. signed legislation organizing a Department of Education.¹ At the signing, Carter renewed his presidential vow to bring the United States’ “formidable educational challenges” to the “forefront of national discussion, where they belong.”² Although education policy had received discussion as a national enterprise since the founding of the National Education Association in 1857, the policymaking power for the administration of public education in the United States was held almost entirely by state and local officials. In his statement, President Carter reassured the nation that the final decisions about what happens in U.S. classrooms would remain local, but he also noted that “placing education in a highly visible department of its own” would give “the American people a much clearer perspective on what the Federal Government is doing in education.”³ Whether or not the American people gained the “clearer perspective” Carter promised, the Democrat and Republican Parties certainly did. Both made education policy a standard component of their presidential campaign platforms “as the federal interest in education policy became wider and deeper after the early 1980s.”⁴ Despite the President’s assurances, the creation of the Department of Education proved a major step in the federalization the politics of education in the United States and its policy as well. Henceforth, policy actors interested in changing U.S. public education would have to reconcile their visions of the educational future with an increasingly powerful federal actor.

Expounding the virtues of the new department, President Carter expressed his hope that “a Cabinet-level leader in education” would “stir national discussion of critical education concerns.”⁵ The President got his wish.⁶ In a discursive environment where the federal capacity to influence public education had outpaced its policies for the application of that influence, there
emerged fierce competition to direct the efforts of the new department. Since the creation of the Department of Education, the national discussion over public education in the United States centered on the nature and scope of the federal role. In addition, that debate over the federal role proceeded on the supposition that, as Carter put it, public education must do a better job of facing up to its “formidable challenges.”

The widespread presumption that public education is failing and thus in need of reform combined with the immeasurable potential of a nascent federal department produced a rhetorical situation ripe for blame. With the problem of failing schools rhetorically established, policy actors could make a coherent policy argument by simply identifying an agent responsible for the schools’ failures and then demanding that the Department of Education take action. Consequently, the visions of the United States’ educational future that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s often began with public acts of blaming.

Blaming is a rhetorical act, a purpose-driven intervention through communication, but also an expression of cause and judgment. As a subject of philosophical inquiry, blame frequently furnishes the hypothetical grounds on which larger, moral questions are contested. The philosophical defensibility of blaming animates P. F. Strawson’s foundational intervention into the dispute between freewill and determinism, “Freedom and Resentment.” For Strawson, to blame is to endow the blamed with freewill, because one must have the capacity and freedom to have acted otherwise in order to be morally responsible for a blameworthy outcome. Disagreeing with Strawson, Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel argue that, moral judgment, in practice, requires that people be held to account for circumstances beyond their control. Indeed, they contend that a standard for moral judgment that excuses individuals on the basis of luck makes blame impossible: everyone is exempt. This rhetorical history does not seek to resolve the philosophical dispute over the prospects of coherent and defensible blame, but it does take from that conversation the insight—shared by Strawson and his discontents—that blame traffics in
agency, most especially, the agency of the blamed. In addition, this project retains the notion that blaming is the communicative act of holding an agent or agents accountable, a central insight for the historicizing of education policy rhetoric over the past thirty years.

Regardless of its philosophical coherence, blame—especially in the context of policy discourse—constitutes a strategic intervention to create, cease, or otherwise influence a discursive exchange. That is, when applied, blame is rhetorical. It has consequences for public talk and those consequences are the primary focus of this dissertation. To investigate the role of blame in the public conversation over U.S. education policy, this project focuses on existing, well-known acts of blame. These instances of blaming provide the empirical grounds on which the evolution of blame-influenced policy discourse is charted. Although each episode of public blame expresses a philosophical disposition, this rhetorical history of blame addresses those dispositions not in the pursuit of an alternative, but to explore how blame reverberates in its targets discourse. Analyzing the role of blame in the evolution of education policy means tracing its appearances and establishing not so much what blame is, but what rhetorical work blame is doing as it sutures cause to agent. Unlike philosophical explorations of blame, this project does not ask whether blame is logically justifiable or morally good. Instead, and in a somewhat analogous way, a rhetorical history asks if particular instances of blame are rhetorically justifiable or good for deliberation. To address questions about blame as rhetorical action, this project draws on a three parallel traditions of rhetorical theory: blame as the counterpart of praise, blame as a scapegoating ritual, and blame as a speech act. Likewise, to address questions about blame as policy advocacy, this project draws on a largely standard account of the political history of U.S. education in the late twentieth century.

From this standard historical account, I examine four prominent visions of the United States’ educational future offered between the organization of the Department of Education in 1979 and the passage of the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994. Each of the four visions
participated in President Carter’s federalization of education policy discourse by calling upon the federal government to enact education reforms, but, more strikingly, each of the four visions hinged on an act of blame. The first vision is “What’s Wrong with Our Schools?” the sixth episode of Milton Friedman’s 1980 television series, “Free to Choose.” I devote the Friedman chapter to exploring the role of blame in creating, destroying, and shifting agency. The second case study reconsiders the vision of U.S. education offered by the *A Nation at Risk* report from 1983. The *A Nation at Risk* chapter explores the anti-deliberative nature the report employs in its act of self-blame. The third vision is John Kozol’s 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities*. The Kozol chapter investigates how context and topography facilitate blame at level of societal inequality. The fourth and last case study considers the vision of U.S. education proposed in *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray in 1994. The *Bell Curve* chapter focuses on how Herrnstein and Murray addressed an existing act of blame in which Herrnstein had been accused of racism and, over the course of their book, shifted that blame onto Americans with low I.Q. scores rhetorically reconstructing causal relationships at the center of a deliberation. Through the close analysis of four high-profile acts of education policy advocacy from 1980 to 1994, I examine how public acts of blame simultaneously call deliberation into being and pose a rhetorical framework for deliberation. In short, this project begins to chart the deliberative dimensions of blame as public policy rhetoric.

Each policy actor in each of the chosen case studies assigns blame differently for the same problem, failing schools. Because of their accusatory nature, these acts of public blaming almost always elicit a deliberative response; either from the blamed or from other interested parties. However, blame is more than just taking a side in an already-existing controversy. Blame calls into being a rhetorical situation in which the agency of the deliberating parties, the sides of the deliberation, the applicable ethics, and the causal landscape of a controversy are predefined. Although blame does not determine the outcome of a deliberation, its capacity to influence both
the content and the structure of deliberation makes blame a powerful site of rhetorical practice. This quartet of public blaming acts, all aiming to assign the fault for failing schools, affords this rhetorical history the opportunity to hold subject matter constant and compare strategies of blame as they unfold over similar discursive landscapes.17

In addition to offering insight into the deliberative functions of blame, these case studies also provide a brief rhetorical history of the public discourse of education policy from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. The development of the excellence movement during this period and its consequences for subsequent education policy are well documented in various histories of the coming of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.18 Instead of attempting to challenge or replace that work, my project seeks to complement it by providing an account of the rhetorics of blaming that helped make those policy changes possible. I investigate how public acts of blaming in the education policy discourse of the 1980s through the mid-1990s changed the way U.S. citizens and their leaders subsequently talk about public education, particularly as a process for which someone must be held to “account.”

A Rhetorical History of Blame

This project addresses the remarkable prevalence of blame in the education policy discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s by examining rhetorics of blame in “What’s Wrong with Our Schools,” A Nation at Risk, Savage Inequalities, and The Bell Curve. Each act of blame is the primary text for a chapter. None of the chapters limit their analysis solely to the primary text, but all of the chapters limit the incorporation other texts to those that aid in understanding the act of blame in the primary text. I employ rhetorical analysis to evaluate each case study. Although it is difficult and often impossible to determine the intent invested in a rhetorical act or, once committed, its effects, the rhetorical analysis of policy discourses presumes the presence of intent.
and effect in every rhetorical act. Rhetorical history assumes that each of its primary texts was produced by rhetors who intended to influence U.S. education policy and that their acts of blame had effects, however big or small, on deliberations over that policy. Rhetorical analysis, for this project, entails an attempt to connect the discursive dots between the rhetorical effects of each primary text and its presumed purpose, education reform. In each case, those dots include an act of blame, and in each case the insight yielded by connecting the dots go beyond the determination of whether purpose and effect agree. Since understanding the historical significance of blame as a discursive practice in the rhetoric of education policy is an overall goal of this project, each chapter also holds its analysis responsible to the relevant historiography of U.S. education policy. The end result is a rhetorical history organized around an episode in the life and times of the rhetorical strategy known as blame.

In addition to the historiography of education policy, investigating rhetorics of blame also requires a careful consideration of the historiography of blame in rhetorical studies. As a rhetorical act, blame is most closely associated with epideictic oratory (ceremonial or demonstrative speech). The classification of blame as epideictic originated in the third chapter of book one of Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*. According to Aristotle, blame (*psogos*) is the opposite of praise (*epainos*) and together they form the rhetorical genre, epideictic. As a genre, epideictic has undergone a great deal of scholarly revision, especially over the past thirty years. Contemporary rhetorical scholars have noted the communal functions of epideictic that often border on deliberation. This rhetorical history builds on the project of rethinking the relationship between epideictic and deliberative speech, but instead of expanding the theoretical boundaries of epideictic so that they overlap ever more with deliberation, I resituate blame as deliberative rhetoric. Aristotle never discussed blame at length, but in the ninth chapter of book one, he elaborated the relationship between praise and deliberation. Giving practical advice on invention in the deliberative context, Aristotle recommended; “when you want to set out proposals in
deliberation, see what you would praise.”20 I take Aristotle’s advice seriously, but in reverse. Instead of asking what would be praised, I ask what would be blamed. Instead of engaging blame as a tool for the invention of future deliberative speech, I investigate blame as a tool for the criticism of past deliberative speech.

To study deliberative blame, this rhetorical history addresses four prominent acts of public blaming: “What’s Wrong with Our Schools,” A Nation at Risk, Savage Inequalities, and The Bell Curve. Each case was an influential act of public blaming committed as part of a larger project of school reform advocacy. Although the cases had different goals, originated in different political ideologies, and blamed different agents, they all agreed that public education was failing and they all professed to know who or what was responsible. The cases fall within the contiguous, fifteen-year time period that followed the increased federalization of education politics through the creation of the Department of Education. Addressing the cases chronologically, they yield a historical narrative of rhetorical practice, however brief and however limited.

Chapter 1: Free to Choose and Agency to Blame: Friedman and the Bureaucrats

A year after winning the 1976 Nobel Prize in Economics, a “retired” Milton Friedman received an offer from Robert Chitester. The president of Erie, Pennsylvania’s public broadcasting station, Chitester proposed a television series designed to explain and publicize Friedman’s economic theories.21 Friedman agreed to star in the series, which was entitled Free to Choose. Completed in 1980, the Free to Choose project included ten episodes and an accompanying book.22 Friedman’s wife and longtime collaborator, Rose Friedman, described Free to Choose as “the most exciting venture of our lives,” and enough Americans shared her enthusiasm to make Free to Choose a bestseller.23 Although nine of the ten episodes of Free to Choose focused on traditional areas of economic policy like taxes and inflation, one episode
addressed a less traditional area of economic policy, education. Entitled “What’s Wrong with Our Schools?” the sixth episode of *Free to Choose* advocated a national system of vouchers to replace primary and secondary public education funding, continuing a discussion Friedman had begun in *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962.24

“What’s Wrong with Our Schools?” was an important moment in the popularization of vouchers as a public education funding mechanism, but it also helped to popularize a view of educators as malevolent bureaucrats. The hour-long episode was split in half between a journalistic report in which Friedman made his case for vouchers and a discussion in which Friedman argued with a panel of education experts. Throughout the first half of the episode, Friedman went to pains to deliver a “vivid description” of the “harmful consequences of permitting public schools to operate as monopolistic providers.”25 Friedman blamed the government bureaucrats who administer public education for working to maintain the public schools’ monopoly to the detriment of its education. During the second half of the episode, Friedman sat down for a discussion with five education administrators. The education administrators disagreed *en masse* with Friedman who, in return, modeled the role of a defiant citizen standing up to a gang of bureaucrats. The discussion period brought Friedman’s act of blaming to life as several of the education bureaucrats, especially Albert Shanker, made comments that substantiated Friedman’s accusations.

I analyze Friedman’s act of blaming specifically for its deft manipulation of agency. In “What’s Wrong with Our Schools?” Friedman uses blame to: allocate educational bureaucrats near total power over public education, depict his audience as stripped of their power as citizens to influence educators, and set the rhetorical scene for the introduction of the marketplace to education as a mechanism for redistributing agency from educators to parents. The relationship between rhetoric and agency has been a central concern for rhetorical critics throughout the past century. Although the Friedman chapter makes no addition to the mounting theories of rhetorical
agency, it provides an account of agency in motion during deliberation. Moreover, the Friedman chapter attempts to account for some the usefulness of blame by tending to its potential to influence the exchange and flow of agency. Convincingly blaming his interlocutors and then drawing them into deliberation, Friedman demonstrates the blame’s capacity to attribute agency generally while, paradoxically, revoking rhetorical agency.

Chapter 2: We Have Met the Blameworthy and He is Us: Self-Blame in *A Nation at Risk*

In 1980, as *Free to Choose* began appearing on televisions across the nation, so did presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. Delivering a message similar to Freidman’s about the dangers of big government, Reagan promised, over and over, to abolish the newly created Department of Education. Governor Reagan’s campaign to replace Carter as President of the United States proved successful. However, President Reagan’s campaign to eliminate the Department of Education failed. Reagan’s inability to abolish the department of education was assured, in large part, by the rhetorically sensational *A Nation at Risk.*

*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was a 1983 report authored by the eighteen-member National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). Convened in 1981 by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, the NCEE was a bipartisan collection of politicians and business leaders tasked with assessing the state of public education in the United States. According to his memoir, Bell commissioned the report in an attempt to “rally the American people around their schools and colleges.” Secretary Bell succeeded in rallying the American people to the cause of education, but not in the positive terms he imagined.

*A Nation at Risk*’s vehement rhetoric helped make it a media sensation. With strongly worded passages like: “our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling” and “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on
America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war,” the quotable report was carried by newspapers and television news programs across the country.\textsuperscript{29} Although it used aggressive, even militaristic, language, \textit{A Nation at Risk}’s act of blaming was inwardly directed. Unlike Friedman’s identification of a blameworthy other in the form of the education bureaucrat, \textit{A Nation at Risk} admonished itself and even its own audience for the deterioration of public education: “we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. . . We have, in fact, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”\textsuperscript{30} Surprisingly, \textit{A Nation at Risk}’s inward turn to hold itself and its audience responsible for the deterioration of public education was accompanied with much of the same agonistic rhetoric one would expect for an outward act of blaming.

Through a close look at both the blame making and blame accepting passages from \textit{A Nation at Risk}, I investigate the psychosomatic quality of the famous report’s act of self-blame. Both assigning and accepting blame for the failures of U.S. public education, \textit{A Nation at Risk} transforms the typically dialogic process of public blame into a monologue. By accepting responsibility for its own accusation, \textit{A Nation at Risk} hastens the blame process successfully advancing the public discussion over education policy by answering the usually contentious question of who is to blame by ensuring the cooperation of the blameworthy.

\textbf{Chapter 3: Place-ing Blame: Jonathan Kozol’s Chthonic Inequalities}

After a quarter century of writing about poverty and illiteracy, Jonathon Kozol returned to the subject of inequity in public education in 1991 with \textit{Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools}.\textsuperscript{31} During the decades between the publications of \textit{Death at an Early Age}—his first book, which recounted a year of teaching in the Boston Public Schools—and \textit{Savage Inequalities}, Kozol built a reputation as an articulate advocate for social justice. Consequently,
Savage Inequalities was well received, becoming a bestseller and popular assignment in teacher education programs. In the book, Kozol used statistical and anecdotal evidence to argue that segregation in U.S. public school had gotten worse, not better, since he wrote Death at an Early Age.

Kozol blamed segregation and the politicians who failed to finish the task of desegregating American education for the failures of public schooling. In the introduction to Savage Inequalities, Kozol lamented that, “in public schooling, social policy has been turned back almost one hundred years.”

The bulk of Savage Inequalities is a first-person narrative of Kozol’s travels to public schools around the United States for three years at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s interspersed with references to education policy research supporting his observations. At each of the schools Kozol visits in the book, he reports descriptions of classroom experiences and the content of conversations with teachers, students, parents, and administrators, but Kozol also takes pains to contextualize those anecdotes within the physical descriptions of the school building, local history, the demographics of the student population, and the cultural geography of the surrounding area. Kozol’s uncommon attention to contextual detail leaves the strong impression that the people he spends time with in both failing and succeeding schools are not Friedman’s strong, entrepreneurial agents, but the victims and benefactors of an unethical system.

Beginning Savage Inequalities with a first-person tour of East St. Louis, Illinois, Kozol’s descriptive and disturbing details captivated his readers. Critics praised Savage Inequalities effusively. Most recommended strongly that the public read his book and some went so far as to advocate for Kozol’s cause. Oddly, though, the public representation of Kozol’s book, by both his critics and supporters, often got his thesis wrong. Instead of asking Americans to support the continued desegregation of the U.S. public schools, Kozol’s public supporters touted the virtues of educational funding reform. Using thick description of place to contextualize his act of public
blame in *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol successfully represented the horrors of East St. Louis. However, choosing to diagnose East St. Louis’s condition as “third world,” Kozol’s captivating act of blame acquired a counter-productive metaphor. In *Savage Inequalities*, the stylistic choice that animates an act of blame of also endangers its effectiveness. The relationship between blame’s form and content proves rhetorically delicate, even for a successful advocate.

**Chapter 4: Blaming The Bell Curve**

Among these four case studies, none has itself been the object of blame more extensively than Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve*. Published in 1994, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* argued for the revival of intelligence as an object of both scholarly study and policy analysis. Pushing into divisive territory, Herrnstein and Murray argued that intelligence differs by race and that intelligence, along with its purported racial variance, should be used to determine social policies like education. Herrnstein and Murray began their book by situating themselves within a history of the study of intelligence and the debate over Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing in the United States, a history that included an episode where Herrnstein himself was accused of bigotry. However, as they advocated the rehabilitation of intelligence studies on the grounds that it would improve social policy, *The Bell Curve* became embroiled in an effort to shift blame.

Unlike the three preceding case studies, all of which began with their own acts of blaming, Herrnstein and Murray began their work of policy advocacy by addressing a preexisting act of blame—the charge that previous studies of intelligence had contributed to institutional forms of racism. *The Bell Curve* responded to that charge by marshaling a mountain of social science research contending that those previous studies, racist or not, were repeatedly reporting what Herrnstein and Murray concluded to be a scientific fact, that race is a statistically valid
predictor of IQ. For Herrnstein and Murray, IQ is a valid measure of intelligence and useful for predicting outcomes, especially in education. Using this conclusion as the basis of their new act of blaming, Herrnstein and Murray alleged that the students themselves were to blame for the failures of the public schools. Certain students, they reasoned, are simply incapable of successfully sustaining complex analytical thought and thus thwart the academic aspirations of a U.S. public school system that naively designed to strive for intellectual success for all students.

By redirecting the checkered history of intelligence studies to a discussion of the failures of public education specifically, but social policy broadly, *The Bell Curve* shifts blame. Herrnstein and Murray ameliorate one act of blaming by resuscitating another. *The Bell Curve* contests blame by disputing it at the level of cause. Indeed, the book is an extensive exercise in the management of the causal relationships that purportedly account for the failures of public education. I investigate the rhetorical benefits of Herrnstein and Murray’s decision to couch their controversial views in cheery academic prose and statistical information, but I also attend to *The Bell Curve* as an act of blame shifting to help account for how acts of blame compete in deliberative settings.

**Approaching Blame**

Blame can be approached as an object of study from a number of productive angles. As an expression of judgment, blame implicates some of philosophy’s most nagging existential and moral questions. As a social phenomenon, blame ritualizes the process by which societies rid themselves of the unpleasantness of their history. As a ceremonial performance, blame sustains communal values. As a legal argument, blame underlies all torts. Approaching it in the context of deliberation, this project examines blame as a rhetorical tactic. From this point of view, blame is an intervention undertaken to influence the outcome of a decision-making process. In the contest
to decide U.S. education policy, blaming is a recurrent strategy. Capitalizing on its frequency, this project compares episodes of public blaming asking how blame is deployed and to what effect.

Exploring episodes of blaming in the public discourse of education policy offers insight for scholars of both rhetoric and education. Consequently, I draw heavily on the scholarly literatures of both. All four of the primary texts for this project are themselves part of the education policy literature, although each is a piece of public advocacy, not scholarship. In order to give every case study its due consideration, I marshal the education policy literature pertinent to the particular act of blame and its context along with the relevant rhetorical scholarship on blame. In the cases of both *A Nation at Risk* and *The Bell Curve* the considerable scholarly work already extant on each are also addressed when that work helps to elucidate or is elucidated by the act of blame at the center of both documents. Several subsets of the scholarly literatures of blame and education policy play a prominent role in this dissertation. In addition, Nan Goodman’s *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law, and the Theory of Accidents in Nineteenth-Century America* serves as a model for my case study approach.

Although this project concentrates on the rhetorical functions of blame, it still draws on four scholarly traditions: rhetoric, philosophy, sociology/psychology, and law. Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* is the first surviving systematic account of a theory of rhetoric in the Western tradition, and blame was there from the start. Perhaps no other document has had such a profound impact on the study of effective communication, and so Aristotle’s treatment of blame as epideictic and his lengthy discussion of deliberative discourse—even when they are not being addressed directly—subtend this entire project. Although I do not present in any revolutionary new readings of Aristotle, but this project does attempt to build on Aristotle’s work by identifying some of blame’s deliberative functions. In addition to Aristotle, I draw on Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical description of scapegoating from *A Grammar of Motives* and Sacvan Bercovich’s literary exploration of the American jeremiad. Both Burke and Bercovich address the social functions of
blame in twentieth century America, providing indispensable theoretical insights for this project. Built on the work of Aristotle, Burke, Bercovich, and others, the ongoing conversation about the nature of epideictic oratory present in scholarly journals of rhetoric is also an important source of insight for this analysis of blame.

Very often, if rhetoricians see fit to study some human phenomena, philosophers do as well. For philosophers, blaming is a moral act that entails judgments about cause and agency. The philosophical perspective on blame entails a focus on the internal components of blame as a human action, as opposed to a rhetorical perspective’s concern with its external context. Moreover, philosophers have often sought to define an ideal form of blame. Although I do not propose an ideal form of blame, I do draw on the various purposes and capacities of blame that philosophers have identified as they have worked to idealize it. These ideal conceptions of blame help to reveal some of the logical underpinnings of blame and they balance the popular preponderance of negative depictions of blaming.

In addition to rhetoric and philosophy, I also draw on the scholarly work of social psychology and legal scholars. Sociologists and psychologists, like rhetoricians, have studied blame in pursuit of its social utility and meaning. Their work rarely addresses the minutiae of the language of blame, but instead helps to situate blame as a social practice. Legal scholars, by contrast, often study the minutiae of the language of blaming, but tend to confine the concept to a legal context. Lawyers share a common history with ancient rhetoricians like Aristotle who first recognized the importance of blame in its legal context. Since all of the texts that I analyzes aspire to law, the legal perspective helps to classify their appeals.

This dissertation is not an abstract meditation on the rhetoric of blame; I implicate its findings in both the historical development and contemporary condition of education policy. To do this effectively, I draw on four strains of education policy scholarship: social scientific studies of national trends, political histories of education, critical pedagogical studies of education, and
the American studies approach to educational history. Both social science and political history help contextualize this project’s national perspective on education policy. A great deal of education research is done through social scientific methods, and that research has a unique ability to quantify national trends. Social scientific research is not necessary for making comments on national discourses over education policy, but it is necessary for making claims about nationwide averages or trends in areas like funding or classroom practices.\textsuperscript{39} Political histories provide similar contextual information across time. Political histories also cover the minutia and processes of policy change bringing to light important archival information and clarify the processes by which rhetoric becomes realized in governmental action.\textsuperscript{40} Social scientific research and political history provide the grounds for a serious study of education policy rhetoric, and they also constitute the common knowledge about education policy to which I speak.

Of course, this scholarly project is far from the first to look at education critically as a social enterprise. Critical studies of education and pedagogy have a long history. Raymond Callahan’s classic study of the history of the term “efficiency” as education policy’s nineteenth century watchword provides a strong example of a critical historical study.\textsuperscript{41} More recently, and perhaps more famously, Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz have helped to carve out a space for cultural studies of education. Through politically grounded criticism, Giroux and Aronowitz proffer a vision of education as critically conscious and democratic as they bemoan conservative efforts to privatize it.\textsuperscript{42} These critical studies, along with others, afford my project a scholarly grounding in important criticisms of the politics of public education as well as model a productive skepticism of the national character of education policy. In this dissertation, I do not purport to know what is best for education policy, but I do seek to identity and describe some of the rhetorical processes that have helped create the conditions for the developments that scholars like Aronowitz and Giroux condemn.
This dissertation is a critical project, but in the broadest sense. I embrace the rhetorics of blame in U.S. education policy to garner insight into the role U.S. citizens and their leaders envision for education in the continuous re-production of America. Although the scholars I identify would not use the term themselves, I brand the critical historical scholarship that addresses education’s role in making America the “American studies” method. For historians like Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin studying the history of education in America explains both education policy’s own historical development, and also the development of the United States. For public policy scholars like Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick or Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, the study of national trends in education policy, be they historic or contemporary, afford insights into the role of education policy in the production of U.S. culture and society. By investigating blame in the context of education policy, I address the role of blame in the production of not just education policy, but also what it means to be American.

Putting discourses of education policy under a rhetorical microscope, results in a finished product similar in form to Nan Goodman’s *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law, and the Theory of Accidents in Nineteenth-Century America*. Published by Princeton’s university press in 1998, Goodman’s book provides a useful model. In *Shifting the Blame*, Goodman examines the cultural influence of the new legal standard of blameworthiness for determining liability. Reexamining six literary narratives about accidents, Goodman finds the writers of the period struggling with questions of cause, fault, and what constitutes ordinary care. The four case studies in this dissertation work to a similar end, analyzing their various deployments of blaming as advocacy strategies. Like Goodman’s, each of the four case studies struggles with the same purported phenomenon, failing schools, and each works to make sense out of that phenomenon so that it fits a larger narrative. In the end, Goodman argues, the nineteenth-century saw the introduction of agency into the American notion of an accident making the twentieth century notion of collective liability possible. This dissertation seeks to provide a similar insight by demonstrating that the
pervasive rhetorics of blame in the education policy discourse of the 1980s and 1990s cleared the rhetorical path for the blame-infused ascent of the rhetoric of “accountability” that came to dominate education policy after 2000.

**Departing Blame**

Altogether, these four case studies trace the act of public blaming across just a decade and half of U.S. education policy. By revisiting some of the best-known and most thoroughly historicized events in education policy from the 1980s and early 1990s, this project records a history parallel to the existing accounts of the social and political development of education policy from that time. As the federal policies that govern education marched slowly toward greater and greater accountability, that evolution of federal policy was underwritten by the consistent and public application of blame. No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—the most recent reauthorization of the law that governs the federal budget for U.S. public schools—has largely withered away. In September of 2011, the Obama administration began accepting applications from states seeking to waive NLCB’s consequences taking much of the punitive bite out of the law. However, as the Obama administration has drawn down the law, the White House has reiterated that the reign of accountability would not end with NCLB. Although “accountability,” the notion that schools and teachers are to blame for public education’s failures, might be a transformation of the substance of education policy, as rhetoric, it is simply blame enthroned. And, indeed, blame continues to reign. This rather compact rhetorical history traces the rise of accountability and points toward an explanation for its staying power. Moreover, this dissertation inaugurates a larger project investigating the roots of a deteriorating faith in the quality and value of the public education system, a program of research I plan to develop through the revision of this dissertation for publication among other projects.
Giving close attention to a brief series of episodes in the deliberative life of blame affords some insights for scholars of rhetoric as well as education. As a rhetorical act, blame has most often been studied as epideictic oratory despite its prevalence in deliberative exchanges. A rhetorical history and criticism of blame as an empirical phenomenon is not sufficient for the development of a theoretical account of the rhetorical functions of blame, but it does identify aspects of blame’s potential. This project accounts for some of the deliberative work blame can do, through four close encounters with what it has done. At points, blame boosts and detracts from the rhetorical agency of those it accuses often providing a deliberative advantage for the accuser. Blame establishes a causal landscape that must be navigated or reformed by the rhetors that follow it making the rhetorical work of opposition treacherous. Blame is a powerful tool for placing agents in their ethical context, but when it is taken up by others blame risks fidelity to the purpose with which it was inaugurated. Finally, blame can be shifted, but it often requires the application of additional blame further risking the ethos of those who hope to jettison an unwanted blame narrative. For better and worse, blame is a reliable way to influence deliberation. Blame is a rhetorical act with deliberative consequence and its persistent use warrants scholarly attention. As I develop portions of this project for a broader audience, I hope it will inspire more thoughtful use, and in some cases avoidance, of blame as a means of achieving deliberative ends.

1 The first department of education was organized in 1865 under President Andrew Johnson. The department was demoted to an office in 1867. Lee W. Anderson, *Congress in the Classroom: From the Cold War to “No Child Left Behind”* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 102, 129.


7 McGuinn, No Child Left Behind, 39-40.


11 The Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 was a reauthorization, as well as a renaming, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. It brought a greater emphasis on accountability, albeit without enforcement, into the ESEA. Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994, Public Law 103-382, 103rd Cong., 2nd Sess. (October 20, 1994) § 1001.

12 Milton Friedman, “What’s Wrong with Our Schools?,” Free to Choose, episode 6 (Erie, PA: Penn Communications Inc., 1979), DVD.


For a few example, see: Anderson, *Congress and the Classroom*; Kevin R. Kosar, *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2005); Vinovskis, *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind*.


Aristotle was not entirely ignorant of the connections between epideictic and deliberative discourse. In chapter 3 of Book 1, Aristotle classified praise (*epianos*) and blame (*psogos*) as epideictic. In chapter 9, paragraph 35, of book 1, Aristotle clarifies that “praise and deliberation are part of the same species.” Aristotle explains that “when you want to set out proposals in deliberation, see what you would praise.” Although Aristotle does not make the same assertion for blame, throughout his discussion of praise he clarifies that the same insights apply to blame. He then eschews any in-depth discussion of blame. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed., trans. George A Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 48, 80-81.


Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Joanovich, 1980). Both the television series and the book were updated by the Friedmans in 1990.


26 Kosar, *Failing Grades*, 85-86.

27 McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 16.


29 Bell, *Thirteenth Man*, 131.


40 Anderson, Congress in the Classroom; Kevin R. Kosar, Failing Grades; McGuinn, No Child Left Behind; Vinovskis, From a Nation at Risk.

41 Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).


45 Nan Goodman, *Shifting the Blame*.

Chapter 1

*Free to Choose* Blame: Milton Friedman and the Bureaucrats

In 1980, with Jimmy Carter’s Department of Education just a few months old, the Public Broadcasting Service began airing *Free to Choose*, a television series written and narrated by University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman.¹ *Free to Choose* was ten episodes long and released with an eponymous book. Proselytizing free market capitalism throughout, Friedman used the series to deliver his neoliberal economic vision in the forms of investigative journalism and public debate.² Nine of the series’ ten episodes focused on traditional economic policy controversies such as the role of welfare and taxation, but the sixth installment differed. Entitled “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” episode six made the case for public school vouchers. Advocating the creation of an educational marketplace through the reallocation of public funds from a direct-to-schools model to parentally-controlled vouchers, Friedman argued that competition among schools for voucher funds would give parents more choice in where they could send their children to school and improve the overall quality of elementary and secondary education in the United States. Although Freidman’s vision of an educational marketplace was developed before the advent of the Department of Education, the federalization of education policy brought on by the founding of the new department made it possible, for the first time, to imagine vouchers as a national policy.

Unlike the Department of Education, the debate over school vouchers was not new in 1980, not for the U.S. public and certainly not for Milton Friedman. Indeed, Friedman is typically credited—perhaps more often blamed—for beginning the public deliberation over school vouchers.³ The seventh chapter of his *Capitalism and Freedom*, entitled “The Role of
Government in Education,” helped put vouchers on the national stage in 1962. That chapter was developed from an earlier essay Friedman contributed to an obscure collection made in tribute to the late Columbia economics professor Eugene Agger. Both of Friedman’s early essays argued for school vouchers on the grounds that they would break up an inefficient state monopoly while preserving society’s interest in a well-educated citizenry. Although written in a lively academic style, the essays stuck to the economic case for vouchers. Neither engaged in any overt blaming.

In “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman departed dramatically from his previous voucher advocacy. Whether Friedman’s departure was the result of the newly federalized context of education policy or the translation of his work from the printed page to the television screen, the changes in his rhetorical strategy were profound. Unlike his academic writing on the subject, Friedman’s televisual case for vouchers made extensive use of blame. Posing “bureaucrats” as the answer to the episode’s titular question, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman held education professionals responsible for the purported failures of public schooling in the United States. The hour-long episode sought to demonstrate bureaucratic malfeasance through two complementary segments. The first, a newsmagazine style report on the condition of the U.S. public schools, was an indictment portraying educational professionals as an oppressive cabal bent on protecting their own interests at the expense of parents and students. In the second segment, Friedman debated four prominent education experts, three of whom were hostile toward vouchers. Put together, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” mobilized blame first to accord bureaucrats the requisite agency to ruin an entire school system, and then to take away their rhetorical agency to speak credibly about that same school system. As Friedman sparred with his three recalcitrant bureaucrats, their unified resistance, directed in turn at the singular Friedman, appeared to enact exactly the oppressive agency he accused them of in the first half of the episode. Wielding an excess of rhetorical agency, Friedman modeled individual agency as a mode of resistance to repressive bureaucracy.
This chapter charts rhetorical agency as Friedman uses blame to expand, confine, redirect, and enact it across both segments of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” The rhetoric of education policy is an extended conversation about the relationship between the school and the state. “In an ideal world,” according to Friedman, “the state would play no role in education.” In “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman assigns blame to bureaucrats to make education policy a contest over agency. For Friedman, the question is: who should have the freedom to choose a student’s educational future, the parents or the bureaucrats? Persuading under the pall of a zero-sum struggle for agency, Friedman offers the privatization of public schooling as the best avenue for parents to actualize their agency. Friedman urges Americans to trust the individual agency enacted by parents to direct the U.S. public schools and to restore that agency by reallocating the collective agency of bureaucrats to parents. Instead of perfecting the relationship between the school and the state, Friedman’s rhetoric of education policy invites parents to join him in demanding they divorce.

**Blaming Bureaucrats**

Milton Friedman’s report during the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is a fast-paced study in contrasts. Over thirty minutes, Friedman introduces his audience to nine schools: rich and poor; urban, rural, and suburban; public and private; parochial and charter; primary, secondary, and collegiate. The schools represent a broad range of socioeconomic contexts and administrative structures. Friedman speaks either on location or over images of each institution enlisting the selected schools as evidence for his arguments. According to Friedman, good schools are clean, parent-run, and independent from centralization—preferably private. Bad schools, by comparison, are neglectful of their facilities, scornful of parental concerns, and beholden to a centralized state bureaucracy. Although Friedman unabashedly commends and
condemns his example schools throughout the segment, he conscientiously reserves for “bureaucrats” the responsibility for scholastic failure.

In the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Freidman narrates a transcontinental tour of U.S. education. Talking to his audience from in front of a soiled school bus in Boston and over extensive footage of a public pool at the University of California Los Angeles, Friedman blames educational bureaucrats for the struggles of the U.S. public school system. Although the second half of the episode would feature a debate over the viability of vouchers as a funding mechanism for improving U.S. schools, the first segment did little to establish the suitability of Friedman’s voucher solution. Indeed, Friedman’s only extended discussion of vouchers emphasized the intense opposition they encountered from a headmaster in the sleepy English town of Ashford. Instead of making his case for vouchers to serve as the grounds for a vigorous deliberation over their effectiveness, Friedman makes his case against bureaucracy, impugning not just the policy, but also the credibility of the experts he was about to be shown debating. Friedman uses blame to cleave individual from collective agency and place the pair in opposition. Advocating what he describes as a return to the United States’ educational past, Friedman promotes individual agency as a necessary ingredient for educational success.

**Stuffed Shirts as Scapegoats**

From the beginning of the episode, Friedman presents scenes of bureaucracy for dystopian effect. “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” opens with students arriving at Boston’s Hyde Park High School. As the students pass through metal detectors observed by armed police officers, Friedman, the visually-absent narrator, reproves Hyde Park’s correctional atmosphere and the financial waste involved in creating it. “Isn’t that awful? What can be learned under these circumstances?” Friedman ponders aloud. Hyde Park, according to Friedman, delivers an
expensive and unhappy education. Worse still, Hyde Park is “a vivid illustration of the problems facing America’s schools.” Friedman not only sets the scene in inner city Boston, but he generalizes the oppressive atmosphere he finds there throughout the episode. For Friedman, U.S. public education is plagued by bureaucratic excess. Even as the visual presentation of the episode transitions to additional locales like the “last one-room schoolhouse in Vermont,” Friedman encourages his audience to continue watching for the malignant bureaucracy exemplified by Hyde Park’s security guards. According to Friedman, bureaucracy is both unnecessary and injurious. Characterizing bureaucracy as harmful in the status quo, but harmless to remove, Friedman repeatedly invites his audience to stand against it as he continues to narrate.

“Bureaucrats” are the chief antagonists in Friedman’s narrative of U.S. public schooling. They evidence their blameworthiness by centralizing power, impeding innovation, and overlooking the wellbeing of the students with whom they have been entrusted. According to Friedman, “parents feel trapped” by the “bad education” bureaucrats provide. Throughout the episode, Friedman employs “bureaucrat” as devil term applying it disapprovingly to various educational professionals. For Friedman, bureaucraticality is not determined by rank or position. Friedman characterizes some teachers as repressed by bureaucracy whereas he labels other teachers bureaucrats themselves. In the same segment, a British headmaster from Ashford speaks out against a movement among Ashford parents to bring vouchers to his school district and a charter school principle in Harlem speaks out against the bureaucrats on New York’s board of education for reforming his school. Despite holding the same rank in their respective institutions, Friedman depicts the headmaster as an arch-bureaucrat and the principle as a mistreated visionary. Although he never pauses to directly define his use of “bureaucrat,” Friedman gives substance to his use of the term first through an origin story and later by providing a representative anecdote. Together, Friedman’s origin story and anecdote imbue bureaucrats with a teleology that guarantees their interests will conflict with those of parents.
From the bustle of urban Boston, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” cuts to the tranquility of rural Vermont. Sitting on a desk outside “the last one-room schoolhouse” in Vermont, Friedman gives his antagonists a backstory. Over a hyperactive soundtrack of chirping birds, Friedman laments “the way it used to be,” when parents controlled their children’s schools. According to Friedman, parents used to be the ones, “choosing the teacher, monitoring the schooling . . . even getting together and chipping in to paint the schoolhouse.” Contrasting parents and bureaucrats much like urban Boston and rural Vermont, Friedman asserts that the advent of “increasingly . . . centralized administrations” coincided with the declining role of parents in education. Friedman explains that bureaucrats replaced the oversight and contributions of parents. In centralized school districts like Boston, “professional educators,” decide “what shall be taught, who shall do the teaching, and even what children shall go to what school.” Friedman indicts bureaucrats for exercising their professional agency. Both the defining and damning characteristic of a “bureaucrat” is that he or she is a person who makes the educational decisions that parents used to make back when U.S. children took their lessons in little red schoolhouses. In other words, bureaucrats are professionals who compete with parents for the agency to make educational decisions concerning their children.

For Friedman, bureaucrats are the natural enemies of parents. Educational bureaucracy itself is a perversion of parental agency. Bureaucrats take agency in the form of decision-making power away from parents and professionalize—as well as centralize—decisions that used to be private, or at least local. Rearticulating the rise of educational bureaucracy—a complicated social and institutional history—as a power grab by bureaucrats, Friedman forecloses the potential for parents to work with educational professionals. Friedman invites his audience to view bureaucrats suspiciously as aggressors. He simultaneously produces the sense that bureaucrats have behaved aggressively toward parents and that they have done so with malicious intentions. According to Friedman, bureaucrats cannot be trusted to make good educational decisions for
children or to deal with their parents fairly because their first priority is maintaining the power they have wrongfully taken.

To bolster his version of the origins of educational bureaucracy, Friedman offers a representative anecdote of a malicious bureaucrat. Dennis Gee, the balding headmaster of the Newtown Primary School, plays the part superbly. At about thirteen minutes, Friedman cuts from a school district in California that had experimented with school choice, to Ashford, England. In Ashford, Headmaster Gee and parent Maurice Walton trade camera time presenting opposing views on a proposed school voucher program. As the episode tacks between the stern interlocutors, Friedman’s disembodied voice periodically interjects, helping the audience interpret the scene. Gee, who could star in a Monty Python skit about the eccentricities of British bureaucracy, makes no secret of his disdain for vouchers and the parents who would like to use them. He refers derogatorily to the vouchers as a “sticky little piece of paper,” and then bemoans the agency they give parents. “We see this [vouchers] as a barrier between us and the parents,” he explains. Gee worries aloud about voucher-wielding parents “coming in” to the school “and under duress” commanding teachers, “‘you will do this or else.’” For Gee, parental agency trades off with professional expertise. Above all else, Gee fears that vouchers will give parents the power to force educators to make decisions against their professional judgment. The headstrong headmaster makes Friedman’s argument for him, both claiming and demonstrating that agency over a child’s education is a zero-sum game played between parents and educators.

Gee’s statements are helpful for Friedman’s case not just because of their contentious content, but also because of their acrimonious style. As the episode begins to cut back and forth between the headmaster and the parent, Gee’s imperiousness justifies an outraged response from Mr. Walton. With palpable discontent, Mr. Walton expresses his desire to use vouchers to force teachers to “pull their socks up and give us [parents] a better deal.” Although Mr. Walton’s campaign for vouchers is the argument against the status quo to which Gee is responding,
“What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” arranges their interaction in the reverse: Gee speaks first and Mr. Walton responds. So, when Mr. Walton talks about teachers having “a gun at the parent’s head” and then declares that he would like to reverse the situation, his argument is contextualized as responsive instead of aggressive. Arranging Mr. Walton’s comments as a reaction to Gee’s reasserts the notion that bureaucrats have wronged parents and deserve retaliation. They are, after all, the ones holding the metaphorical gun. Lest the guilt of treating educational professionals unfairly get the better of any audience members, Mr. Walton offers absolution. Considering aloud the power a voucher system would give parents over teachers, Mr. Walton confesses that he “can only say tough on the teachers.”

Thus, by minute eighteen of Friedman’s report, parents and educators are unapologetically in conflict. Friedman capitalizes on this local dispute between a bureaucrat and a parent using the headmaster’s vague language to expand the conflict well beyond its Kentish context. Gee expresses his concerns about vouchers as a collective opposition. “It’s this sort of philosophy of the Marketplace that,” Gee explains, “we object to.” Speaking in response to some off-camera prompting, the headmaster never contextualizes his “we.” Gee might be invoking the membership of the local teachers union where, Friedman points out, he serves as secretary. Gee might have the administration and/or teachers of Newtown Primary School in mind when he says, “we.” Whatever group Gee meant to enlist by using “we,” Friedman, as narrator, ensures that “we” reinforces a universal opposition between bureaucrats and parents. Rephrasing Gee’s words, Friedman treats the headmaster as a spokesperson for educational bureaucrats everywhere: “in other words, Mr. Gee objects to giving the customer, in this case the parent, anything to say about the kind of schooling his child gets. Instead, the bureaucrats should decide.” When Friedman rearticulates Gee, any markers of local context, save the headmaster’s name, are eliminated. Parents in Freidman’s audience are invited to read themselves into this conflict. Moreover,
Friedman leaves “parent” singular and makes “bureaucrat” plural. Not only are parents invited to read themselves into a conflict; they are invited to read themselves into an asymmetrical conflict.

Altogether, Friedman’s rhetorical treatment of educational professionals fits Kenneth Burke’s description of scapegoating. Friedman “merges” bureaucrats with parents by retelling the historic rise of the education bureaucracy and giving bureaucrats a share of the agency to manage education with parents. From that merged position Friedman “loads” bureaucrats with the “iniquities” of public schooling through his transcontinental tour of bureaucratic malfeasance. In other words, Friedman blames bureaucrats for educational failure by arguing that they are its cause. To complete the scapegoating ritual, parents are then urged to dissociate themselves from the iniquity-bearing bureaucrats. Friedman encourages parents to purify themselves by condemning the bureaucrats’ on the grounds that they are responsible for the failures of the public schools, the precise culpability Friedman just established.16

Burke, owing perhaps to the Second World War context of A Grammar of Motives, focused his analysis on the constitutive element of scapegoating. Burke described scapegoating as a process of “vicarious atonement” in which the parties doing the scapegoating (Friedman with the aid of his intended audience) are “purified” and then “unified” through the “suffering” of an other (the bureaucrats).17 Friedman’s act of blaming does have an important constitutive function, but—as the mediocre policy success of vouchers attests—the brunt of Friedman’s rhetorical success lies elsewhere. Instead, Friedman’s blameworthy bureaucrats become a great reservoir of educational agency. For the parents in Friedman’s audience, exercising their own agency means taking it from bureaucrats. Accepting Friedman’s act of blaming gives parents a license to regard bureaucrats suspiciously and to seek to subvert their professional activities. Friedman’s audience thus gains agency, but only insofar as they can wrest it from bureaucrats. Their newfound agency is the agency to struggle as one against many.
Friedman aroused conflict between parents and his scapegoated educational professionals by blaming bureaucrats for educational failure. Yet, to present a coherent policy argument, Friedman needed more than a contest over agency for agency’s sake. Friedman needed to substantiate his act of blaming with a causal relationship between bureaucracy and educational failure. He had to establish culpability. Moreover, this causal relationship had to implicate the management of public education by bureaucrats without simultaneously incriminating parents. Once again, blame’s capacity to influence agency proves critical for Friedman’s rhetoric.

Throughout the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman lauded the virtues of individual agency and decried the evils of collective agency. Each stop on his tour of U.S. public schools was an opportunity to reinforce this position. Whenever a school fostered individual agency among its students and for their parents, Friedman celebrated the success that followed. Likewise, whenever a school reserved agency for the collective decision making of educational professionals, Friedman lamented an avoidable failure. In other words, Friedman’s distinction between individual and collective agency was the grounds on which he blamed. Not only did Friedman’s philosophical stand in favor of individual agency allow him to give a warranted account of educational failure and success, it was an account that praised parents, panned bureaucrats, and prescribed an asymmetrical form of resistance that Friedman would then model as he debated his collection of educational professionals over the merits of school vouchers.

In the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman highlights the dramatic inconsistencies in U.S. public education. Some of the schools he visits present models of excellence whereas others supply cautionary tales. As Friedman works to delineate between successful and failing schools he reduces the differences between the two categories to agency. Failing schools, he insists, rely on the collective agency of bureaucrats to make important
educational decisions whereas successful schools foster the exercise of individual agency by both students and their parents. Over and over, Friedman stresses that students and parents at successful schools have “chosen” those schools and take education seriously. For example, Friedman describes Saint John Chrysostom School in the South Bronx as “a joy to visit” noting that the parents have “picked this school” for their children and that they “are paying some of the costs from their own pockets.” Even though the school serves poor parents in a poor neighborhood, Friedman argues that their wealth of individual agency ensures a quality educational experience. Friedman’s use of agency to account for educational success and failure in the context of Saint John Chrysostom rationalizes the school’s unlikely success as it rebuts the competing explanation that socioeconomic status determines educational outcomes.

Turning his attention to higher education later in the report, Friedman contrasts Dartmouth College and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Yet again, Friedman employs individual agency to call attention to the differences between the two schools and to demonstrate the superiority of Dartmouth, an elite private institution. At Dartmouth, Friedman finds students hard at work serving patrons in the school’s hotel and managing a call center that solicits alumni donations. As Friedman speaks from a chair in the well attended and well-appointed Sanborn Library, he observes that, “the real value of education is brought home” at Dartmouth. The high cost of a Dartmouth education, Friedman reasons, requires an equally high level of buy-in from the Ivy League institution’s students and parents. Comparing Dartmouth to UCLA, the Bruins fair quite poorly for Friedman. Unlike Dartmouth’s industrious student body, UCLA students are depicted as lazy and directionless. Whereas each of the Dartmouth students’ productive activities is given camera time with an accompanying interview, none of the UCLA students are given the opportunity to address Friedman’s audience. Additionally, Friedman narrates his analysis over a prolonged shot of young people recreating at UCLA’s outdoor pool, a dramatic contrast with the studiousness of Sanborn. “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” even
includes an interview with an exasperated UCLA lecturer who bemoans low attendance in his class—a problem Friedman attributes to UCLA’s demotivating subsidized tuition.

From Friedman’s point of view, UCLA’s state subsidized schooling creates a “distortion” in the “education marketplace.”

UCLA shelters its students from the true value—especially in monetary terms—of their education, robbing them of the motivation they need to invest properly in its pursuit. Attributing Dartmouth’s relative success versus UCLA to the influence of state support ignores some compelling alternative explanations for Dartmouth’s educational achievements like its two centuries of institutional momentum and the selectivity of its admissions process. Dartmouth is a member of the Ivy League with a charter antedating the Declaration of Independence. Friedman’s choice to attribute Dartmouth’s impressive educational record to the economic incentives of private education and to explain UCLA’s purportedly inferior educational environment to the economic disincentives of state support relies on neoliberal standards for educational success. For Friedman, individual agency is valuable, particularly because of its economic potential. Although the disinterested Bruins may not be amassing as many accomplishments as the intrepid Kegs, their indolence does not necessarily correspond to a failure to exercise individual agency. One does, after all, choose to go to the pool. Friedman’s comparison between Dartmouth and UCLA reveals that what Friedman values in individual agency is its facility for economic activity.

Friedman’s neoliberal analysis of university education provides a theory of motive that values individual agency over collective agency. Economic incentives, felt directly by an individual who then acts on his her own behalf, are the only trustworthy basis good educational policymaking in Friedman’s view. Bureaucrats, due their collectivizing nature, cannot foster, and in fact disrupt, meaningful individual agency. For example, when Friedman tells the story of Harlem Preparatory Academy, a “storefront school” set up to help struggling New York students, he stresses the purported ill effects of bureaucratic oversight. Harlem Prep’s virtues all spring
from the school’s cultivation of individual agency. According to Friedman, the students make “a deliberate choice to come to Harlem Prep” and thereby find “the teaching they want.” Although the teachers do not have the certification “papers” required by the state, “that has not stopped them from doing a good job,” lectures Friedman. As a consequence of its students’ and teachers’ exercise of individual agency presumably channeling their economic motivations into their pursuit of quality education, Harlem Prep “was a very successful school.” Friedman notes that “many students went on to college; some to leading colleges.” However, all of this changed when “the school was taken over by bureaucrats.” Although the board of education—Friedman’s bureaucrats—was stepping in to keep the school from closing, they planned to move Harlem Prep to a traditional school building and bring Harlem Prep under the oversight of the New York City Public Schools. The school board’s takeover also coincided with the resignation of some thirty teachers and the school’s principal. Framing the Harlem Prep example, Friedman observes that, “the strangling of successful experiments by bureaucrats is not unusual.” The influence of bureaucrats, even when they are trying to help, must be negative because bureaucratic action always collectivizes agency that would otherwise belong to individuals.

The first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” ends with a benediction back in front of the first one-room schoolhouse in Vermont. “The system is not working!” Friedman declares. “It lacks a vital ingredient.” According to Friedman, “a centralized system cannot possibly have that degree of personal concern for each individual child that we have as parents.” In other words, the bureaucrats, by definition, collectivize what should be a decision making driven by individual agents. For Friedman, the solution is obvious: “market competition is the surest way to improve the quality and promote innovation in education as in every other field.”

In Friedman’s neoliberal view, the flourishing of individual agency necessarily attends market competition, but that agency can only be gained by taking it from bureaucrats. Altogether, Friedman’s report creates a context for the following debate over school vouchers that heavily
favors his position, both his policy advocacy and his role in the debate. Valuing individual agency and devaluing the role of bureaucrats are both arguments for a voucher system for public education, but they also create a context in which Friedman’s defiant resistance to his bureaucratic interlocutors becomes a performance of that policy position. During the debate, Friedman becomes the individual parent standing up for his or her individual agency in the face of bureaucratic recalcitrance. That Friedman is set against three bureaucrats appears to be a disadvantage; Friedman braving taking on all comers. Far from presenting a disadvantage, Friedman’s unified bureaucratic resistance serves as additional evidence of his position. As Friedman’s opposing educational professionals stick together in response to his advocacy of vouchers, their collective resistance in the debate proves them guilty of bureaucracy and all its sins.

Debating Bureaucrats

In contrast with the geographic expansiveness of the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” the second half never leaves one room in the Harper Memorial Library at the University of Chicago. In the North Reading Room, Friedman spars with four education experts: Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers; Thomas Shannon, the Executive Director of the National School Boards Association; Gregory Anrig, the Commissioner of Massachusetts’s Department of Education; and Thomas Coons, a Law Professor at the University of California Berkeley and the director of the Initiative for Family Choice in Education. All four experts express reservations with Friedman’s voucher advocacy, but Coons, unlike the other three, advocates a modified version of Friedman’s voucher system. Robert McKenzie moderates the debate, using his position primarily to encourage the experts to clarify their opposition and keep all of the discussants from interrupting each other.
The second half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” has the argumentative dynamic of a policy debate carried out as a roundtable discussion. Just as in a policy debate, the moderator, McKenzie, poses a controversial statement, or resolution, on which the participants take a position: “market innovation is the surest way to improve the quality and promote innovation in education.” Instead of a series of timed speeches alternating between the sides of the controversy as would be expected in a formal debate, the seated debaters discuss the topic under McKenzie’s moderation. As a result, I will refer to the participants—Friedman et al.—as “debaters” and their activity as “debating” because they argue competitively with each other throughout. However, I will call the event a “discussion” to reflect the debaters’, often contentiously, improvised turn taking. This debaters-in-discussion format is not much different from the kind of policy discourse featured on political talk shows like The MacNeil/Lehrer Report or Meet the Press. Unlike The MacNeil/Lehrer Report or Meet the Press, though, the Free to Choose series has no commitment to bipartisanship guiding its format. As Friedman brings the blame narrative he developed in the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” to bear on the other debaters in the discussion, he damages not just their credibility, but also the credibility of the entire deliberation and his own.

“What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” appears to give the question of school vouchers a fair hearing through an open discussion. Indeed, the hearing appears more than fair because Friedman and his conditionally supportive ally, Coons, are outnumbered three to two. However, the structure of the episode favors Friedman’s position. The first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” serves as Friedman’s opening speech in the debate. His newsmagazine-style report on the state of the public schools not only gives him thirty minutes up front to make his case, but also the opportunity to present a framework for evaluating the subsequent debate that is favorable for his position. Friedman argues that bureaucrats are in direct competition with parents for control of each student’s education and therefore should not be trusted. He also works to establish
that educational success—just like economic success in a capitalist system—is impossible
without the unfettered exercise individual agency. In addition to favorable framing, Friedman has
the benefit of a supportive moderator whose questions invite the education experts to align
themselves together in opposition to Friedman’s pre-established standards of evaluation. Insofar
as McKenzie’s moderation helps lure Friedman’s opposition together, the true ratio among
participants rises from two on three to three on three.

The overall effect of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is the appearance of exactly the
sort of market competition of ideas that Friedman’s capitalist framework prescribes for education,
but carried out in a context biased by blame. Friedman leverages his blame narrative from the
first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” to limit his opponents’ rhetorical agency.
Friedman uses blame to paint the education experts as blindly ideological and cabalistic. By
wielding blame within a standard-looking policy discussion, Friedman’s voucher proposal
appears validated by the meritocracy he prescribes for the public schools, but without actually
risking deliberation on equal grounds.

On its own, the biased condition of Free to Choose is no rhetorical sin. However, the
appearance of a fair deliberation weighing the public schools system of the 1980 status quo
against Friedman’s proposed voucher system is an essential feature of the persuasive appeal in
Free to Choose. Friedman’s deliberative success can only serve as a meaningful validation of his
position if that success is won fairly. Moreover, Friedman underscores his commitment to free
market competition, the process through which vouchers are to improve schooling, by putting his
trust in open and fair deliberation. Friedman’s public blaming of bureaucrats, a consistent feature
of the Free to Choose series, damages the purported fairness of the discussion portion of the
episode. Although blame provides Friedman with a powerful rhetorical tool throughout “What’s
Wrong With Our Schools?” it also undermines the integrity of his advocacy.
The debate portion of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” begins with about four and a half minutes of discussion between Friedman’s interlocutors. After a narrative voice invites the audience to “find out how” the education experts “react to Friedman’s analysis,” the debate opens with a few terse words from the notoriously unpleasant Shanker. According to Shanker, U.S. public education is “pretty good” and it would be “foolish” to “throw out something you’ve got,” referring to the public schools, on Friedman’s “pet ideas.” McKenzie then invites Coons to respond. Coons stakes out his space between the two sides in the debate sharing his support for a voucher program so long as it is carefully calibrated to prevent a situation “with the poor in one kind of school and the rich all in another.” In response to Coons, Shanker argues that market competition cannot work in a situation where the public schools have to admit all children and private schools can turn undesirable students away. According to Shanker, difficult students are a significant handicap for the public schools in the education marketplace. Shannon then reads a prepared statement making an argument similar to Shanker’s and the debate turns to Anrig. Anrig begins by expressing his agreement with Friedman that increased parental involvement would be an improvement. He then asserts a democratic purpose for education and argues that the market will subvert the public schools’ core mission. Following up, McKenzie redirects Anrig, asking whether he accepts Friedman’s diagnosis of the public schools. Anrig says, “no,” and steers the debate toward some important sites of disagreement.

Providing a perceptive argument analysis, Anrig explains his rejection of Friedman’s description of the public schools by accusing Friedman of presenting “three straw men.” Anrig argues that Friedman mischaracterizes the U.S. public schools as more centralized than they actually are, overestimates the one-room-schoolhouse-style of education that never served a large and diverse population of students, and exaggerates Hyde Park’s appropriateness as a synecdoche
for public schooling because of the particularly difficult circumstances at Hyde Park at the time of the episode’s production. After Anrig’s straw person charge, Friedman gets his first opportunity to enter the debate. Friedman’s response is a critical moment. Unlike Shanker’s insulting description of Friedman’s position as a collection of “pet ideas,” Anrig’s charges engage seriously with the details of Friedman’s advocacy. Moreover, at least by comparison to Shanker, Anrig seems to state his objections earnestly. Instead of addressing any of Anrig’s concerns, Friedman begins his response with the blanket charge that “the one unsurprising thing about these comments is that all of the opposition to allowing the market to work comes from people who have a very strong vested interest in the present public school system.”

From the first sentence of his first contribution, Friedman brings the blame narrative he constructed in the report to bear on the debate. Friedman charges Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig with bureaucracy. In the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman loaded bureaucrats with collective agency over education policy and accused them of working to keep that agency from parents in a zero-sum struggle for control over schooling. Friedman’s charge, an *ad bacuocratem,* leveled at Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig implies that their arguments should be disregarded because of their professional affiliations. Although the three education experts had been invited to represent the opposition to Friedman’s voucher plan in this discussion, Friedman’s blaming rhetoric could not tolerate the equal consideration of their contributions; Friedman did not respect their rhetorical agency.

Additionally, Friedman’s blaming rhetoric could not tolerate a middle ground in the struggle for educational agency. Thus, Friedman separates the three education experts from the moderate Coons despite the concerns he had just voiced about the inequity that could result by “allowing the market to work” without restriction. By charging just Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig with bureaucracy Friedman claimed Coons as an ally, but he also grouped the rhetorically sensitive Anrig with the caustic Shanker.
Throughout the debate, Friedman, when given the option, chose to debate with Shanker instead of Anrig. As Friedman’s first intervention into the debate continued past his *ad
bureaucratem*, he responded to Shanker’s opening statement, clarifying that his voucher proposal did not call for the dismantlement of public schooling. Only after charging his interlocutors with bureaucracy and correcting the excess of Shanker’s opening statement, did Friedman address Anrig’s straw person arguments. Ignoring Anrig’s charge that he harbored an idealized understanding of the one room schoolhouse, Friedman reasserted his claim that centralization is the core problem for U.S. public schooling and then defended his use of Hyde Park as representative of the problems of public schooling by introducing sagging SAT scores and “widespread dissatisfaction” among parents as evidence for his bleak diagnosis. Although Friedman presented relevant information in defense of his characterization of the problems facing the public schools, he offered no direct response to Anrig’s straw person charge that Hyde Park was an extreme example. Wisely, Friedman buried his weak defense behind an offensive argument, his *ad bureaucratem*, and a strong defensive argument against Shanker’s hyperbole.

Friedman extends his *ad bureaucratem* later in the debate by classifying—as a means of response—his opponents’ arguments. The best example of Friedman’s classification strategy occurs midway through the debate when Shanker speaks up in defense of the quality of education offered by public schools. Shanker argues that unsupportive fiscal policy makes the work of the public schools harder, distorting Friedman’s understanding of the accomplishments of the public school system. Insisting that not enough resources are allocated to supporting at risk students during elementary school, Shanker laments that those neglected students become more difficult and expensive to educate in later grades. Friedman responds to Shanker’s argument, by placing it into a pre-existing category: “I have never yet known anybody defending a government program who didn’t say, ‘all of its evils come from the fact that it wasn’t big enough.”**30** Instead of explaining how an educational marketplace might address the needs of at risk students, Friedman
attacks Shanker’s argument as typical of “someone defending a government program.” Once again, Friedman draws attention to his opponents’ bureaucraticness. Friedman’s retort saves him the trouble of discussing education for at risk students—something Shanker probably knows more about than a University of Chicago economics professor—while simultaneously suggesting that Shanker’s argument should be dismissed as yet another hopeless defense of bureaucracy. More importantly, though, Friedman’s dismissal estranges Shanker from his words. According to Friedman, Shanker is not speaking for himself, he is speaking in the idiom of big government bureaucracy. Shanker is, by implication, blind to the origins of his own words. Friedman undercuts Shanker’s rhetorical agency characterizing Shanker as predictably parroting one of the tenets of his bureaucratic ideology. According to Friedman, Shanker has lost control of his speech. Shanker is ventriloquized, his rhetorical agency dissipated.

As the debate carries on, Shanker does Friedman an argumentative favor by demeaning at risk students. According to Shanker, at risk students as a liability for public schools. The students with “hardcore problems” take “ninety-five percent” of the teacher’s time, disadvantaging the public schools as competitive institutions in any educational marketplace. Shanker’s derisive remark undercuts the ethos of the education professionals as more compassionate or directly concerned with the wellbeing of the students. Shanker’s callousness, the rhetorical style he was known for, made Friedman’s decision to group the Anrig and Shannon with him as fellow bureaucrats all the wiser.

Tracing Friedman’s invocations of the blame narrative from the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” during the following debate, elucidates blame’s capacity to simultaneously give and take agency. Through blame, Friedman attributes to bureaucrats the agency to ruin the public schools, but simultaneously denigrates their rhetorical agency to speak cogently about those same schools. McKenzie’s moderation helps to fold Shannon, Shanker, and Anrig together into one “bureaucratic” position. Once grouped, Friedman argues with all of them
at once pushing Shannon—and more significantly—Anrig together with Shanker. Not only does Friedman’s strategic grouping of Anrig and Shannon with Shanker force their position to bear Shanker’s often caustic rhetoric, but the grouping proves Friedman’s accusation: like bureaucrats, Anrig, Shannon, and Shanker work together as a group. The education experts become the argumentative embodiment of collective agency. As Friedman’s defiantly enacts his individual agency in response to the bureaucrats, their struggles in the debate confirm the philosophical position underlying Friedman’s theory of education: individual agency is a prerequisite for success.

**Milton and Goliath**

In addition to defying his invited opposition, Friedman’s debating presents individual agency as a mode of resistance. Although Friedman draws Coons onto his side of the debate over vouchers with his first intervention into the discussion, the two voucher supporters do not coordinate their resistance to Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig during the discussion. Indeed, Coons makes several comments to prevent his support for vouchers from getting misconstrued as a wholesale endorsement of Friedman’s position. As the debate carries on, Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig frequently enter the discussion in each others’ defense, but Friedman and Coons generally let each other debate by themselves. Friedman’s debating, as isolated opposition, exudes defiance. Over and over again, Friedman plays the role of Socrates at a sophistic dinner party. Friedman models, for his audience of parents, the individual agency of the gadfly. As the education experts struggle and ultimately fail to secure any concessions from Friedman, the power of individual resistance is confirmed and the debate over vouchers stagnates. Although Friedman’s position is consistent with his public act of blaming, which holds bureaucrats—including those in the room—responsible for the purported failures of the public schools, Friedman’s refusal to
acknowledge the common ground between himself and his opposition precludes a productive argumentative exchange. No agreement is found. No progress is made. In its culmination, the discussion presents no apparent result aside from the affirmation of Friedman’s individual capacity to disrupt the position held collectively by education experts.

Friedman’s performance during the discussion session of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is impressive; so impressive that his deliberative proficiency itself is amounts to a strong persuasive appeal. Friedman is a skilled debater. He appears to possess a ready response for each of his opponents’ contentions, and when he does not, Friedman conceals his argumentative anemia behind other, stronger claims. When Friedman invokes his own blame narrative from the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” he even appears prescient anticipating his opponents’ bureaucratic pathologies. “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is, consequently, a remarkable piece of persuasive theatre. Although the episode makes a strong persuasive appeal for Friedman’s policy position, that appeal is grounded in the virtuosity of Friedman’s subversion—not elevation—of the policy discussion.

Friedman’s style of debate is distinguished by its defiance. Friedman’s intransigence and tone convey the certainty of his convictions, but his defiance registers most meaningfully in the techniques he uses to respond to his opponents’ arguments. Friedman not only labels Shanker and Anrig’s arguments bureaucratic, but, throughout the discussion, Friedman delivers strategic concessions in the form of blame. Both of Friedman’s techniques of response—labeling and concession—estrange the education experts from their rhetorical agency. Friedman’s labels undermine the experts’ ownership of their arguments, locating the genesis of those arguments in ideology. By concealing his strategic concessions, Friedman also avoids having to directly admit that his opposition has anything correct. On points that he agrees with or decides not to debate, Friedman is most often silent. Each of his contributions to the discussion stresses the division between his views and those of his opponents’. Maintaining the demonization of education
bureaucrats begun in his public act of blaming from the first half of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman avoids validating Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig’s words. Ironically, Friedman’s model of resistance is itself a monopolization. Friedman will not tolerate his opposition’s rhetorical agency.

Strategic concessions are a common debate technique. When a debater chooses to make a strategic concession he or she will acknowledge that his or her position shares a common presupposition or conclusion with other side of the debate. Strategic concessions help clear uncontroversial material out of the debate. After all, if an argument is agreeable to all, it needs no debating. Anrig demonstrates strategic concession the first time he participates in the discussion. Before cautioning that Friedman’s vision of schooling subverts the democratic purpose of the public schools, Anrig concedes that he “very enthusiastically agrees” with “the part of the film [Friedman’s report] that speaks to the great parental involvement.” Anrig’s accession succeeded in that the discussion rarely addressed parental involvement. In addition to directing a debate away from a subject, strategic concessions can also deflect arguments by reassessing them as consistent, instead of at odds, with the conceding debater’s position. Sometimes, strategic concessions can even be used to build goodwill between debaters or with an audience.

Unlike the education experts, when Friedman takes the opportunity to identify common ground, he couches his observation in blame. Friedman comes closest to making a standard strategic concession when at two times in the debate he reminds his opponents—and his audience—that he is not proposing to destroy the public schools, only to make them compete in an educational marketplace. Friedman delivers the first of his two strategic concessions in his initial contribution to the discussion. “We are not proposing to destroy the public school system,” Friedman insists, “we are only asking that the public school system should be . . . open to competition.” Friedman then adds, if the public school system “is really as good as you people
make it out to be, it has nothing to worry about.” Despite Friedman’s combative tone, his statement actually concedes that both he and his opponents, “you people,” agree that the public school system should continue to play an important role in U.S. education. Although decades later, Friedman would oppose the public schools as a whole, within this discussion Friedman consistently advocates reform. Friedman defends non-centralized, parent-run public schools as worthy educational institutions and implies that vouchers would reward them. Friedman’s concession could acknowledge the broad agreement he and his opponents’ share about what makes a good school and that both sides of the debate see a need for reforming underperforming public schools. Instead, Friedman wields his concession as the basis for blaming. Friedman refers to the education experts in the debate as “you people” and implies that their protectiveness reveals the fragility of the public school system they defend.

Friedman’s defiant style of strategic concession grows even more aggressive the second time he employs it. Again responding to Anrig, Friedman chides, “We’re not proposing . . . to dismantle anything. We’re only saying, ’put up or shut up.’” Clarifying “put up or shut up,” Friedman demands that the education experts “either show that you can produce the kind of education people are willing to go and get, or reduce your size, go out of business.” Friedman delivers his repeated concession as blame; the education experts are guilty because they resist putting public education up against private education in open competition. They are defending the perverse privilege of monopoly. By repeating his concession masked in blame, Friedman suggests that the education experts are hyperbolizing his argument because they are so concerned with the dire consequences of losing their monopoly on schooling in the United States. That the education experts treat Friedman’s position as one that will destroy the U.S. public schools is, from Friedman’s perspective, a confession that they are not confident that public schools provide an education good enough to compete. Revealing the silencing consequences of his debate strategy, Friedman demands that, as long as the education experts are unwilling to open public education to
market competition, they should “shut up.” Friedman’s position disallows the education experts from speaking credibly about education until they are willing to endorse the market as the arbiter of educational success and failure.

Using concession in the form of blame, Friedman works to constrain the education experts’ rhetorical agency and reinforce the incompatibility between his position and theirs. Friedman’s use of concession as an aggressive argumentative maneuver maintains a contentious division between Friedman and the education experts at precisely the moment when Friedman could permit that division to collapse into agreement. By keeping his position entirely separate from his opponents’, Friedman’s antagonistic concessions sustain the consistent appearance that he is an isolated individual arguing with a recalcitrant group. Friedman plays the defiant gadfly to the education experts’ suffocating bureaucracy. Not only is Friedman’s defiant style of resistance an appropriate strategy for resisting bureaucracy, his defiance reinforces the bureaucraticality of his interlocutors. The more defiant Friedman is, the more he refuses to concede even basic common ground, the more the education experts work together to try and sway him, and the more they appear to be an oppressive collectivity. Friedman’s argumentative defiance, as a debate strategy, is self-reinforcing. His defiance elicits a bureaucratic response, the justification for his defiant posture.

Through a defiant style of debate, Friedman distinguishes his policies from those of the education experts, but he also distinguishes his rhetorical agency. Friedman participates in the discussion as an individual agent, his recipe for success, against a collection agents doomed, in his estimation, to failure. Most strikingly, though, Friedman’s rhetorical agency draws its potency from the suppression of his opponents’. As he estranges Shanker from his own words by accusing the caustic union boss of typifying the bureaucratic attitude towards government programs, Friedman appears prescient. Friedman’s ad bureaucratem demotes Shanker’s voice to that of a rank and file bureaucrat as it confers Friedman with prescience, suggesting that he had expected
just such a response from Shanker. Similarly, when Friedman concedes that vouchers would not mean the destruction of the public schools, he is sure to highlight Anrig’s distrust of the market. Friedman, by virtue of his participation in the discussion, is willing to tolerate competition whereas the monopolistic education experts are not. Friedman’s defiant style of strategic concession confers him with credibility as he accuses the education experts of being untrustworthy. By labeling the education experts “bureaucrats,” a group he blames for the purported failures of the public schools, Friedman contests not just Shanker, Shannon, and Anrig’s arguments, but their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

**Blame and Rhetorical Agency**

Friedman wields blame to great rhetorical effect during both segments of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” During his opening report, Friedman blames bureaucrats for the failures of public schooling and parses success and failure with the exercise of individual and collective agency. At the conclusion of his report, Friedman has established that bureaucratic and parental agency trade off with each other in a zero-sum game and that, by their very nature, the individual agency of parents is bound for educational success and the collective agency of bureaucrats is doomed to failure. During the discussion that follows the report, Friedman dismisses his opponents’ argument as typical bureaucratic speech and uses every speaking opportunity, even points of agreement, to highlight his absolute opposition to the education experts’ position. Through *ad bureaucratem* and strategic concessions stated as blame, Friedman calls into question the education experts’ rhetorical agency. Friedman’s use of blame challenges his audience to fight, not for better schools *per se*, but for control of schooling. “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” makes education policy a contest over agency instead of a collective enterprise to
improve society. Moreover, everyone with an interest in schooling is locked in this contest as either an individual or collective agent in the midst of a zero-sum struggle for control.

“What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is a seminar on the rhetorical power of blaming and that power’s incompatibility with open deliberation. Friedman uses blame in the report to prejudice his audience against his opponents in the following discussion. During the discussion, Friedman reminds his audience that his opponents are to blame for the failures of public education and even suggests dismissing their arguments as a consequence. Friedman uses blame to suppress the education experts’ rhetorical agency. The education experts, whom Friedman labels bureaucrats in his first foray into the discussion, find themselves impugned by their expert status. That there are three education experts debating with the one Friedman makes his job easier because the experts, in their numeracy, appear to be the menacing collective Friedman warns his audience about throughout the report. Although the discussion has the legitimating appearance of open deliberation over vouchers, blame poisons the well. Friedman’s efforts, upon close inspection, do more to confirm his virtuosity as a public debater than to demonstrate the worthiness of school vouchers as public policy. Taking pains to ensure that his arguments succeed, Friedman guarantees that his deliberation will fail.

1 Milton Friedman, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?,” Free to Choose, episode 6 (Erie, PA: Free to Choose Enterprise, 1980), DVD.

2 Friedman’s neoliberalism, in the case of “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is his insistence that education would be managed better by a market than the state. Suzy Harris, The Governance of Education: How Neo-Liberalism is Transforming Policy and Practice (London: Continuum, 2007), 20-21.


4 Friedman first made his case in print in 1955. He later made his case in a more popular forum, his own book Capitalism and Freedom. The essays from both publications are almost identical save some


6 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

7 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.


9 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.


12 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

13 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

14 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

15 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

16 Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 406-408. All of the quotes from this paragraph are Burke’s words from these few pages.


18 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

19 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

20 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

21 In this case, my neoliberal diagnosis is meant both as a matter of Friedman’s expressed political and philosophical disposition and also as a historical observation. Friedman was one of the chief proponents of what has retrospectively been label “neoliberalism” and *Free to Choose* was one his most

22 Valuing the economic capacity of individual action above other individual expressions is consistent with Friedman’s neoliberal approach to education. Harris, *The Governance of Education*, 136.

23 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

24 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

25 Each of the discussants is listed with the designation he was given on screen during the televised debate/discussion except Coons. I have added the fact that he is a law professor. I would also like to thank the University of Chicago’s online help chat service where an anonymous University of Chicago librarian helped me identify the specific room in which this debate/discussion was taped.

26 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

27 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD. Shanker’s reputation for rash decision making even appeared in a Woody Allen film. When the protagonist travels into the future he finds out that the “old world” had been destroyed when “a man named Albert Shanker got a hold of a nuclear warhead.” Woody Allen, *Sleeper* (Santa Monica: MGM, 2000 (1973)), DVD.

28 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

29 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

30 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

31 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.


33 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.

34 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.


36 Friedman, “What’s Wrong,” DVD.
Chapter 2

We Have Met the Blameworthy and He is Us\(^1\): Self-Blame in *A Nation at Risk*

In 1980, as Milton Friedman articulated his public attack on the education bureaucracy in “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Governor Ronald Reagan promised—if elected president—he would demote the Department of Education to an office. Although he planned to eliminate the department, Reagan first had to appoint a Secretary of Education willing to go down with the ship. The Reagan administration chose former U.S. Commissioner of Education Terrel Bell for the unenviable job and he accepted. In his memoir, Bell described the appointment as the political equivalent of “sitting on death row.”\(^2\) Fortunately for Bell, Reagan failed to keep his campaign promise and the department escaped its sentence. Nevertheless, Reagan’s first term as president proved extremely influential for the future of federal education policy.

For their first two years in the White House, most of Reagan’s cabinet searched in vain for the political capital to relegate the Department of Education while Secretary Bell organized a blue-ribbon commission and tasked its members with developing a report on the state of public education in the United States. In 1983, Bell’s bipartisan committee, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), shocked the Reagan White House, and the secretary himself, when it returned a sensational report entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*. The report took an alarmist tone accusing the public education system of imperiling the United States’ economic security. If a “foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today,” the report exclaimed, “we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”\(^3\) In response to this national educational emergency, *A Nation at Risk* recommended stronger curricular standards, increased teacher pay, renewed focus on core academic subjects, and the resuscitation of a lost commitment to “excellence” in U.S. public
education. For the Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk* proved a *deus ex machina*. Sparking a national outcry for strong federal leadership on education, *A Nation at Risk* put Reagan’s plan to demote the department out of political reach.

Unlike Friedman’s *Free to Choose* episode on public schooling, *A Nation at Risk* was a defense of bureaucracy, not an attack. Whereas Friedman assigned bureaucrats the responsibility for declining test scores and turmoil in urban schools, the NCEE blamed the “American people” for failing to demand more from their public schools. Extending its military metaphor, the NCEE castigated Americans for “committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.” The trouble with U.S. public schools, according to *A Nation at Risk*, was not an excess of oversight, but a dearth. Speaking for the American people, the report’s authors accepted the blame for this educational failure, confessing: “We have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”

Like Friedman, the NCEE placed blame, but, going one step further than Friedman, the NCEE also accepted it. Instead of forming the basis of a contentious policy discussion, blame, in *A Nation at Risk*, is a monologue that both initiates and completes a rhetorical ritual.

In addition to Secretary Bell and the Reagan White House, *A Nation at Risk* also shocked the American people to whom it was addressed. Public responses to *A Nation at Risk* ran—and continue to run—the gamut from applauding endorsements to vehement denunciations. Although the report still generates a great deal of disagreement over the quality of its content, there is almost no disagreement about the scope of its influence. Assessing the discourse of education policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Holly McIntush credited *A Nation at Risk* with having “generated a new discourse on education reform” that “structured the debates for years to come.”

Both conservative and liberal policy advocates adopted the language and arguments of the report as their education policy shibboleth. Insistently plying *A Nation at Risk*’s blame narrative, conservative education scholar Chester Finn expressed exasperation at polls reporting Americans’ approval of their local public schools. Bemoaning the rise of a “no-fault culture,” Finn imitated
the militaristic language of the report analogizing education policy with the Cold War throughout *We Must Take Charge!* From a more liberal perspective, E.D. Hirsch proposed standardizing the cultural education in the U.S. public schools insisting that it would help Americans communicate more effectively with each other. Hirsch made his case in *Cultural Literacy*, but instead of resting that case on the civic benefits of a shared culture, Hirsch—channeling *A Nation at Risk*—argued that the widespread practice of “Standard English” would be a critical advantage in the United States’ economic competition with Japan.⁸

Scholars of both communication and education have offered explanations for the report’s remarkable success in creating a broad and lasting consensus in education policy. Observing that *A Nation at Risk* “shifted the focus of education discourse from education as a means of social and political equalization to education as a means to economic prosperity,” McIntush attributes the report’s extraordinary success to agenda setting infused with war metaphors, free market ideology, and individualism.⁹ Taking a literary approach, Kirsten Lanier credits *A Nation at Risk*’s “long run of influence” to its convincing performance of the America jeremiad.¹⁰ Both McIntush and Lanier account for *A Nation at Risk*’s lasting impact by fitting the report into an existing discursive genre. For McIntush, Frank Baumgartner’s agenda setting accounts for the report’s legislative influence and for Lanier, Sacvan Bercovitch’s American jeremiad accounts for the *A Nation at Risk*’s social influence.¹¹ Both explain A Nation at Risk’s effectiveness by classifying the report into a genre of rhetorical action, agenda setting and the American jeremiad. Although they might at first seem to be in contradiction with each other, the two are thoroughly compatible explanations; jeremiads set agendas.

This chapter shares the goal of investigating *A Nation at Risk*’s remarkable rhetorical success with McIntush and Lanier. Beginning with the assumption that McIntush and Lanier are correct—*A Nation at Risk* is an agenda-setting jeremiad—this chapter seeks an explanation goes one step deeper than the diagnosis of genre. Instead of granting the persuasive force of agenda
setting and the American jeremiad, this chapter seeks an explanation for their efficacy in *A Nation at Risk’s* central rhetorical act that underlies both, self-blame. Self-blame in *A Nation at Risk* contains both the accusation and acceptance of culpability and thus presents itself as post-deliberative reluctant testimony. Self-blame sidesteps deliberation presenting a monologic form of a typically dialogic rhetorical process. Instead of directing blame at an other who then has the opportunity to accept or reject the accusation, the NCEE both blames the American people for the failures of public education and then accepts that blame on their behalf. In this way, a policy the NCEE represented its position as the outcome of an open deliberation—over who is in fact to blame—that never actually took place. In addition, self-blame is reluctant testimony, an admission of fault that draws enhanced trustworthiness from its authors’ sacrifice of face.

Importantly for education policy in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, self-blame avoids the discussion of the full range of causes for failed education. *A Nation at Risk’s* deliberative elision helped shift the focus of education policymaking from the pursuit of equality to the pursuit of outcomes.12 Advocating a focus on outcomes, *A Nation at Risk’s* great contribution to the rhetoric of education policy was not just the popularization of a neoliberal view of education nor was it just the re-articulation of neoliberal education as a patriotic enterprise. *A Nation at Risk* recast the neoliberal focus on outcomes in education from a contentious proposal pushed by the eccentric likes of Milton Friedman to a measured recommendation certified by the expert deliberations of a blue-ribbon panel. Through the pious performance of self-blame, the NCEE legitimized the prioritization of “excellence,” realizing the neo-liberalization of the rhetoric and the practice of education policy.
The Blame of the Nation

*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform* is an exemplary government report that inspired a number of imitators. Composed by a commission including influential educators and intellectuals, *A Nation at Risk*’s “powerful language. . . . focused national attention on public education like no other single event since the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik in 1957.” Officially, *A Nation at Risk* is the report of a blue-ribbon report commissioned by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell. However, the report defies its directive, declaring itself an, “open letter to the American people.” Like private correspondence, *A Nation at Risk* delivers its “forthright” message with “candor,” but unlike private correspondence, it includes expense reports and longish lists of statistics. Preserving the narrative integrity of their stern warning, the NCEE spared the report of most references to the statistical information that led them to their startling conclusions. There are few numbers, few studies, and few other government documents mentioned in *A Nation at Risk*’s prose. Instead, *A Nation at Risk* confines its technical details in blocked sections that become increasingly numerous and increasingly lengthy as the report carries on. The reader is left to piece together which studies and which statistics belong to which claims. More than anything, *A Nation at Risk* is an impressive collection of sensational quotes. The report’s hardest-hitting axioms are memorable, numerous, and concentrated in the first few pages. Defying the stereotype of the government report, *A Nation at Risk* is no plain report of the facts. It is an unabashedly persuasive document.

The report is also unabashedly exhortative. *A Nation at Risk* urges reform, and not just from the government officials and education experts who make the big decisions about public education. Parents, students, teachers, school board members, union members, the media, “all who care about America,” are called upon to “reverse the current declining trend.” The NCEE is stern and ambitious: “If the tasks we set forth are initiated now and our recommendations are
fully realized over the next several years, we can expect reform of our Nation's schools, colleges, and universities.”  

“A Nation at Risk envisions a thoroughly nationalist reform effort supplying both exceptionalist and alarmist rhetoric to fuel it. “History is not kind to idlers” the NCEE warns, “the time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm.” Heightening the sense of danger, the NCEE insists that “America's position in the world” is no longer “secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women.”  

“A Nation at Risk matches its urgent vision of a new educational future with an equally urgent sense of alarm about the status quo to produce a fervent call to action.

Although its message is clear, A Nation at Risk’s central rhetorical tactic is easy to lose in the suasory fray. The NCEE’s remarkably tough talk is self-directed. American “society and its educational institutions” have “lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling” and “the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them,” laments the report. According to the NCEE, the American people are the source of their educational crisis. All Americans—and, by implication, the NCEE themselves—are blameworthy for permitting a “rising tide of mediocrity” to take hold in their public schools. The NCEE blames themselves—along with the American people—for the purported failures of the public schools often using the first-person “we” to speak as the American people. In the first-person, they accept the responsibility assigned by their own act of blaming. Urging the nation to join them in “renew[ing]” their “commitment to schools and colleges of high quality,” the NCEE preaches atonement through education reform.

Admonishing the American people to take responsibility for the failures of public education, the NCEE models a public act of self-blame that they then invite their audience to replicate.

Self-blame is the central contention of A Nation at Risk. Through ineffective education policy, the report asserts, the nation has imperiled itself. This act of self-blame distorts public deliberation. Self-blame circumvents public deliberation by rhetorically displacing open
discussion over the causal origins of a social problem with a preemptive, private deliberation. Rhetors who enact self-blame not only identify the source of a social problem, they—as an embodiment of the declared source—accept the accusation. Often invoking the authority of a private deliberation that has already taken place, self-blame renders public deliberation over the cause of a social problem redundant by both opening and closing the question of who is to blame. Self-blame truncates the process of public deliberation, leapfrogging from the stasis of fact and proceeding directly to policy. Self-blame limits the scope of solutions considered in public discussion by asserting, without contest, the nature of the problem. In addition to squeezing the public out of deliberations over cause, self-blame masks the self-interest of the rhetor. A rhetor who blames him or herself—even as a member of a group—admits some degree of fault, garnering verisimilitude from his or her sacrifice of face. Although self-blame in a deliberative context advocates policy in the interests of the rhetors who deploy it, as a rhetorical performance, self-blame has the outward appearance of a selfless deliberative act. In *A Nation at Risk*, both of these deliberative distortions rhetorically animate an agenda setting jeremiad.

**Blame Accepted**

Starting with the assertion that public education is failing its charge, the NCEE locates the responsibility for that failure with the American people, characterizing educational decline as self-inflicted. In the idiom of a militaristic metaphor that carries throughout *A Nation at Risk*, the NCEE inveighs: “We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”21 The NCEE makes this case over and over again throughout *A Nation at Risk*, firmly establishing the public’s culpability for educational failure and depicting each negative educational trend it identifies as the consequence of negligent policy decisions. *A Nation at Risk* indicts the America people for their failure to provide an adequate education for its children, but,
more importantly, the report models the acceptance of that indictment. Using “we” to mean the American people including themselves, the NCEE characterizes “our” education policy as “unthinking,” lacking in both vision and commitment. Eventually acknowledging the great advancement of including more Americans in public education over the course of the twentieth century, *A Nation at Risk* maintains that the coinciding decline in test scores is reason to reject the era of federal education policy initiated by President Lyndon Johnson with the signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 on that grounds that it was too administratively permissive. Through the acceptance of self-blame, desegregation, a byproduct of the successful democratization of U.S. public schooling, becomes the grounds on which that policy is deemed a failure. Taking the problem of educational failure from the stasis of fact straight through to policy, the NCEE defines the education policy of the Johnson and subsequent presidential administrations as a communal failure and qualifies that failure as negligence.

The NCEE began their report with the now famous declaration: “Our Nation is at risk.” Painting public education with an alarmist brush, the commission proceeded to describe a myriad of problems facing the United States as a result of its poor education policy. The NCEE’s dramatic rendition of the facts, the “unimaginable” consequences of U.S. public education between 1965 and 1983, is well remembered in public and academic discussions about *A Nation at Risk*. Yet, by its second paragraph, *A Nation at Risk* initiated another line of reasoning just as alarming and just as pervasive throughout the report. “We have allowed this to happen to ourselves,” the NCEE declared. Citing the American people—and, by implication, the members of the commission themselves—as the source of the educational horrors enumerated in the report, the NCEE defined the problems facing U.S. public schools as self-inflicted. Corroborating their accusation, the NCEE marshaled supporting facts from the findings sections of the report. According to the NCEE, “we” have: “squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge,” and, “dismantled essential support systems which helped make
those gains possible.\textsuperscript{22} Using “we” throughout the report, the NCEE simultaneously blames the American people for allowing public education to deteriorate and accepts responsibility as blameworthy members of the American public.

The NCEE’s accusation is also an admission. Someone is to blame, but that someone is us. Blame, usually a dialogic process where an accusation is made with the expectation—or at least the possibility—of rejoinder from the blamed, is instead accompanied by acceptance. The NCEE models this admission of culpability through its use of “we.” Creating a rhetorical atmosphere of acceptance—instead of deliberation—around their act of self-blame, the NCEE contextualizes their willingness to speak for the blameworthy American people with quotes from experts using the same rhetorical maneuver. \textit{A Nation at Risk} reports that education researcher Paul Hurd “concluded at the end of a thorough national survey of student achievement that within the context of the modern scientific revolution, “We are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate.”” Similarly, the report notes that former Director of the National Science Foundation John Slaughter “warned of "a growing chasm between a small scientific and technological elite and a citizenry ill-informed, indeed uninformed, on issues with a science component.”\textsuperscript{23} Quoting the two experts, the NCEE positions itself as one voice in a growing choir of officials acknowledging an unhappy reality. Hurd and Slaughter’s words provide precedent for the NCEE’s claim that educational failure is self-inflicted, and legitimate the NCEE’s rhetorical decision to package that claim as self-blame. Like the NCEE, Hurd and Slaughter model both the accusation that the American people are to blame for the problems faced by their public schools and the acceptance of that blame. In the same way an in-film audience’s reaction to the fictional action they are presumed to be witnessing, Hurd and Slaughter’s participation in the report’s self-blaming provides a proto-audience inviting the report’s readers to participate as well. As quoted commentators, Hurd and Slaughter are a small but prestigious bandwagon of experts.
Extending their use of “we” and their expectation that *A Nation at Risk*’s act of self-blame must be accepted, the NCEE reveals the causal reasoning that substantiates their act of self-blame. “That we have compromised this commitment is,” according to the NCEE, “hardly surprising, given the multitude of often conflicting demands we have placed on our Nation's schools and colleges.” Those schools are “routinely called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve,” the NCEE concludes. Poor educational performance is the “unsurprising” result of a lack of focus in education policy. The NCEE’s causal connection between education policy and the national peril posed by declining achievement relies on the assertion that education policy is subject to a limited amount of institutional focus, a focus that has been divided too broadly. The extracurricular aspirations of the American people, which include helping young people deal with “personal, social, and political problems,” have out-competed traditional academics for the focus of education policy and institutional effort argues the NCEE. If accepted, the commission’s act of self-blame requires that any solution to the problem of educational failure come in the form of a narrowing of the goals of education policymaking.

Using “we” to make their accusation against the American people and also to accept it, the NCEE unifies the typically dialogic process of blaming. Both opening and closing the process of blaming without having a deliberative exchange, the NCEE garners a sense of finality for their position without risking objection. Through self-blame, the NCEE proclaims the American people responsible for educational failure. The NCEE then defines education policy as a pursuit limited by a finite amount of institutional focus. For the NCEE, a strictly academic focus is critical for successful education policy because focus is a resource subject to the economic law of scarcity; it runs out. Self-blame in *A Nation at Risk* narrows the possibilities for policy action by defining education as responsive to a limited range of policies.
In addition to its capacity to restrict the range of potential policy solutions, self-blame also imposes limits on deliberation. Pinning the success and failure of educational policy to the American people’s focus, the NCEE makes education policy personal. Like the members of the commission, each American must accept his or her culpability for the educational failures of the 1960s and 1970s. Individual acceptance of the NCEE’s act of self-blame becomes a prerequisite for making good judgments about education policy. Contesting *A Nation at Risk* thus requires revisiting the stasis of definition and redefining education policy from a matter of acceptance to a matter for deliberation. Contesting *A Nation at Risk* also means suffering the accusation that one is in denial, the charge that the contesting party has not come to terms with his or her own role in the purported failure of education policy that transpired over the twenty years prior to the report. By defining education policy as a self-inflicted problem, the NCEE not only discourages deliberation over the stasis of definition as they establish it in the report, but they also make the future contestation of their definition more difficult by preemptively framing their opposition as unrepentant.

Through self-blame, the NCEE defines the failure of education policy as a matter of acceptance, but the commission also qualifies the failure U.S. public schools as the result of negligence. According to *A Nation at Risk*, the American people have not acted to damage their education system; they have failed to act in its defense. In passive voice, the NCEE laments: “We have allowed this to happen to ourselves.” Admonishing the American people for having “compromised” their “commitment” to educational achievement, the NCEE answers the stasis question of quality.25 The American people are guilty of a crime of omission, not commission. The American people must accept their responsibility for the state of public education, but they do not have to admit to knowingly damaging their schools. Bridging *A Nation at Risk* from the stasis of definition to policy, negligence grounds a call to action by establishing a deficit of action as the source of educational failure.
To charge the American people with negligently handling their education policy, the NCEE argues counterfactually. The problem is not what the American people have done, but what they have not. *A Nation at Risk* describes American education policy from the 1960s and 1970s as “unthinking.” “Our society and its educational institutions,” reports the NCEE, “have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling.” Gone too, they note, are the “high expectations and disciplined effort” that had typified American schooling before the ESEA.26 Establishing a violated expectation, the NCEE recollects: “Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.”27 The NCEE’s counterfactual claim that the U.S. education policy has failed to insure an expected degree of intergenerational progress appeals to the nationalist expectation that the United States not only be first in the world at everything it does, but that the country earn its preeminence through constant, accelerating growth.28 Failures are easy to identify when applying constantly accelerating growth as a standard for education policy. With accelerating improvement is an obligation, anything less is blameworthy. Arguing counterfactually eases the burden of proving negligence for the NCEE. Instead of identifying a blameworthy action taken by the American people and proving the connection between that action and some damage done to public schooling, *A Nation at Risk* reasons backwards arguing that since the current state of public education is not ideal, education policy and the American public that made that policy are *de facto* negligent.

For *A Nation at Risk*, negligence is more than a technical designation. Negligence warrants blame because it is an unsatisfactory approach towards the world at large, a way of doing things antithetical to the NCEE’s nationalist narrative of achievement won through strenuous exertion. For the NCEE, negligence is not just a policy posture; it is a cultural practice that must be opposed in all of its manifestations. “In contrast to the ideal of the Learning
Society,” the NCEE’s vision of successful American education, “we find that for too many people education means doing the minimum work necessary for the moment, then coasting through life on what may have been learned in its first quarter.” Making their own rhetorical evaluation, the NCEE remarks: “this should not surprise us because we tend to express our educational standards and expectations largely in terms of ‘minimum requirements.’”

According to the NCEE, policies and individual actions can be negligent, but so can language choices. Since negligence must be avoided in all of its manifestations, *A Nation at Risk* strongly encourages action and discourages even the discussion of inaction. In addition to tempering the failure of the American people to provide a better education policy, negligence also bridges the stages of definition and policy. The quality of educational failure in the U.S. public schools is that of negligence a condition both blameworthy and only remediable through action.

The massive effort to enfranchise African American children into the U.S. public school system, an effort that occupied national education policy for much of the mid-twentieth century, is conspicuously absent from *A Nation at Risk*’s discussion of the failure of education policy from that period. Indeed, the word “desegregation” appears nowhere in the report. The NCEE comes closest to acknowledging the costs and benefits of desegregation when they discuss generational differences in the levels of education. “It is important,” the report insists, “to recognize that the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago” and the “positive impact of this fact on the well-being of our country and the lives of our people cannot be overstated.” “Nevertheless,” cautions the NCEE, “the average graduate of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college. The negative impact of this fact likewise cannot be overstated.” Speaking of the dismantlement of apartheid schooling in the United States in plausibly deniable terms, the NCEE stresses that failing to increase overall quality while simultaneously increasing the overall
diversity of U.S. public schools constitutes negligence. Although they acknowledge the significance of educating more Americans, the NCEE references the process of desegregation only to stress that despite it, the American people are still negligent. According to *A Nation at Risk*, the U.S. public schools did not undergo a requisite, but difficult process of democratization; they lost focus on the primary function of public education, the production of scholastic excellence.

In the legitimating form of a bipartisan government report, *A Nation at Risk* redefined the primary purpose of public education from the general betterment of American citizens to the dogged pursuit of measureable outcomes. The NCEE not only promoted outcome variables like test scores as the arbiters of educational success, they did so in the context of education’s relationship to the state. Instead of serving the state by working to “apply the promise of American life,” public education, as the NCEE would have it, earned its keep by enhancing the United States’s economic competitiveness. Defining educational failure as a matter of acceptance and then performing that acceptance, *A Nation at Risk* reassigns the governmental role of public education while simultaneously shielding their reassignment from balanced public deliberation. Combining acceptance of the American people’s responsibility for the failures of public education with the qualification of that failure as negligence, the NCEE produced a powerful nationalist narrative. *A Nation at Risk* called for a change in education policy by blaming the past inaction of the state. Without admitting the commission of bad policy, only the omission of good policy, the NCEE preserved and strengthened the role of the state in education as they repurposed public education for economic ends. *A Nation at Risk* applied a neoliberal frame to education policy by insisting upon the economization of schooling, but then envisioning that economization through an escalation of federal power. From a progressive stasis of fact, *A Nation at Risk* achieves a neoliberal stasis of policy.
Reluctant Blame

A Nation at Risk was an important moment in the neo-liberalizing of education policy, not because it popularized new policies like Milton Friedman did, but because it lent an air of impartiality and officialdom to the economization of public education. The NCEE’s prioritization of outcomes as the arbiter of successful education policy was realized only in part by truncating the stases. Public education’s tragic fall from mid-century grace as told by a histrionic government report would be easy to dismiss as mere sensationalism were it not delivered reluctantly. Trumpeting their patriotism throughout A Nation at Risk, the NCEE are loath to make their dire assessment of a once cherished American enterprise. Trading on the strident nationalism they display throughout their report, the NCEE’s act of self-blame garners believability from the discontinuity between their unabashedly pro-American worldview and their condemnation of America, its people, and themselves, as failed education policymakers. Admitting years of American failure, the NCEE sacrifices face in exchange for argumentative verisimilitude.

Reluctant testimony is both concurrent and corroborative with self-blame in A Nation at Risk. Reluctant testimony unfolds in stages culminating in the NCEE’s act of self-blame. For testimony to appear reluctant, the rhetor delivering the testimony must express a bias. That is, the reluctant testifier will not appear reluctant to his or her audience without first establishing a public sense of his or her interests. In deliberation over policy, those interests are grounded in attitudes that bias the testifier toward the policy or policies in question. Second, the testifying party must construct an extraordinary narrative that justifies the decision to make an exception from that publicly-constructed biased. The narrative must rationalize deviance without impugning the integrity underlying the reluctant testifier’s typical stance. At the same time, this narrative must relate a sense of loss in the testifier’s decision to testify against his or her established bias. With a bias established and an extraordinary narrative conveyed, a speaker may then testify
reluctantly. In the context of a deliberation over policy, such testimony typically comes in the form of an argument that runs counter to the testifier’s usual policy stance. Reluctant testimony thus forfeits the consistency of a speaker’s position as an indemnity for the persuasive appeal of his or her argument.33 *A Nation at Risk* establishes the NCEE’s patriotic bias, constructs an exceptional narrative of threatened security justifying deviance from that bias, and then reluctantly testifies that American education is broken breaching the NCEE’s pro-American mantra. This last step, the testimony itself, is the NCEE’s act of self-blame. Accomplishing their gambit tactically, reluctant testifiers confide a shortcoming with an audience to intensify the trust that audience invests in the testifier.

Although the rhetoric of self-blame in *A Nation at Risk* is easy to miss, the rhetoric of nationalism is not. In her analysis of the report, McIntush contends that the NCEE’s use of war metaphors treats public education as a matter of national security. Noting passages where the NCEE likens federal education policy to “disarmament” and “an act of war,” McIntush detects a rhetorical bid for “urgency.”34 Recognizing *A Nation at Risk* as a broadly nationalist document performing in the tradition of the American jeremiad, Lanier interprets the report’s jingoism as part of broad appeal for the nation’s soul, positioning a renewed education policy as the path to salvation.35 For both McIntush and Lanier, *A Nation at Risk*’s haughty Americanism was a rhetorical means for emphasizing the importance of education policy in determining the fortune of the American people. McIntush and Lanier are correct to note the broad appeal of patriotism and the strategic role that appeal played in stressing the importance of education policy. However, the NCEE’s emphatic nationalism also served an important function in the production of reluctant testimony.

As the NCEE appealed to the presumed patriotism of their audience, the commission also established its own authorial identity.36 Preceding the body of the report itself, *A Nation at Risk* included a letter from Commission Chairman David Pierpont Gardner addressed to Secretary
Bell. This letter formally presents *A Nation at Risk* to the Secretary of Education along with some framing of its contents and commentary on its production. In his letter to Secretary Bell, Gardner emphasizes the patriotic spirit that guided the production of *A Nation at Risk*. Thanking Secretary Bell on behalf of the commission for the “opportunity” to “have served our country as members” of the NCEE, Gardner contextualizes the concerns voiced in the commission’s strongly worded report as emanating from a patriotic sense of duty. Whether this self-professed sense of duty is a generic component of the letter or a spontaneous expression of heartfelt national pride, *A Nation at Risk*’s content evidences a thoroughgoing commitment to patriotism. From the subject of its title to its self-assigned audience, “the American people,” *A Nation at Risk* implicates its findings in the consequences of education for the future of the country far beyond the traditional bounds of domestic social policy. Instead of conceptualizing education policy as an exercise in wise stewardship constituting an end in itself, *A Nation at Risk* regards it as a means for realizing American hegemony.

As strongly as *A Nation at Risk* condemns the condition of public education in the United States, it equally strongly endorses the exceptional character of America’s role in world affairs. Indeed, education’s failures matter so much to the NCEE because they threaten the “unchallenged” status of the United States’ “preeminence” in the world. Although the NCEE warns that the “time is long past when America’s destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations,” *A Nation at Risk* narrates this preeminence lost as tragic, thus sanctioning its preservation. As the NCEE mourns the passing of a progress narrative that required “each generation of Americans” to “outstrip its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment,” their lamentations uphold American exceptionalism as the central value that girds their policy advocacy. In the first pages of *A Nation at Risk*, the NCEE
establishes their investment in a narrative of America’s place in the world that emphasizes positive aspects United States hegemony, and, at the very least, elides its negative aspects.

After establishing and reiterating their endorsement of American exceptionalism, the NCEE’s criticism of U.S. education policy needed to emerge in opposition to their authorial patriotism, but without undermining it. To accomplish this delicate rhetorical exchange, the NCEE reclassifies education from a matter of domestic policy to a matter of security policy. According to the NCEE, education policy is critical to the United States’ economic and military security. Furthermore, in both cases, the NCEE is driven by exceptional circumstances to make their dire assessment of public education. Whereas the NCEE’s patriotic approach to their work as a commission is portrayed as a thoughtful expression of their agency, their negative evaluation of the state of education policy is portrayed as an objective evaluation driven by an exceptionally unfortunate set of circumstances.

Addressing education as a matter of economic security, A Nation at Risk relates their own interpretation of globalization during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Describing an economic circumstance that marks the end of an era in American history, the NCEE suggests that they have been driven to raise the alarm by an unprecedented decline in American competitiveness. According to A Nation at Risk, popular Japanese automobiles, efficient South Korean steel mills, and excellent German machine tools are the horsemen of an impending economic apocalypse. The dawn of the “information age,” cautions the NCEE, makes learning an “indispensable investment required for success.” As they stress the importance of a strong education system for the future of the nation, the NCEE translates education itself into an economic good. The NCEE frets that successful manufacturing in Germany, Japan, and South Korea “signify a redistribution of trained capability.” Rendering their metaphor material, A Nation at Risk declares “knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence” the “new raw materials of international
Analyzing education as a matter of security, the NCEE is compelled to flunk U.S. public education as failing to meet the requirements of successful economic policy.

Similarly, the NCEE’s discussion of public education in terms of military security, although metaphorical, also relieves them of responsibility for condemning the public schools. Describing U.S. education policy as “unilateral disarmament” and its resulting failures as tantamount to “an act of war,” *A Nation at Risk*’s military metaphor positions the United States as a defending nation in a conflict. As the victims of educational belligerence, the NCEE possesses only limited agency in their response. As in war, they are compelled. The NCEE, as the spokespeople of an aggrieved nation, are not responsible for their conclusion that education policy has failed in the same way that an attacked nation is not responsible for the violence that ensues after being attacked. Once again, the NCEE characterizes itself as facing circumstances that are exceptional and therefore require a strong, if reluctant, condemnation of the current state of the nation’s education policy.

Having advertised their patriotism and then found—to their great surprise—a nation at exceptional risk, the NCEE was prepared to sacrifice some of their patriotic bravado at the altar of *eunoia*. Although most of *A Nation at Risk* is written in the hyperbolic language of alarmism, the report reaches its evaluative apex with a rare episode of judiciousness:

> It is important, of course, to recognize that the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago—more literate, and exposed to more mathematics, literature, and science. The positive impact of this fact on the well-being of our country and the lives of our people cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, the average graduate of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college. The negative impact of this fact likewise cannot be overstated.

Here, the NCEE confesses their doubts about the state of U.S. education, but not without stressing the displeasure they experience in doing so. Written in an uncharacteristically somber tone, this passage is conspicuous. Here, the NCEE reluctantly admits their loss of faith in the excellence of
American schooling, doing so despite the public school’s successful past. The United State is not, in education, a leading hegemon worthy of universal praise. Committing the patriotic equivalent of apostasy, the NCEE not only finds fault with American education policy, they clarify that a decline in academic success, even when it coincides with a rise in inclusiveness of public schooling, still constitutes a failure.

Comparing more academically successful, but exclusive, education with less academically successful, but inclusive education, the NCEE achieves the delicate balance of reluctant testimony. They garner believability by violating their audience’s expectation for unshakably enthusiastic flag-waving, at the same time retaining the nationalistic worldview that underlies their patriotism. That is, the NCEE’s preference for educational success over inclusion is consistent with their view of world affairs and the United States’ place in them. In the same way the NCEE upholds American economic and military hegemony, they also uphold American educational hegemony. Across the board, the NCEE prefers the pursuit of excellence certified through competition. America’s economic and military success is established by its world dominance vis-a-vis other nations. Similarly, the NCEE favors the education policy that produces the cohort with better test scores. Although they acknowledge the uncomfortable reality of a lapse in the United States’ educational dominance, the NCEE expresses their reluctant realization as an obligation—not violation—of their exceptionalist worldview.

The NCEE’s artful, argumentative misdirection rhetorically inoculates _A Nation at Risk_ from some of the standard skepticisms that accompany deliberations over policy. Appearing to speak against their interests, the effusively patriotic NCEE comes across as uncommonly trustworthy when admitting a failure of U.S. education policy. At the same time the NCEE builds trust with their audience, they also duck a broader conversation of the social consequences of endorsing excellence over inclusion. Remarkably, for a report that characterizes some three decades of federal education as a failure, _A Nation at Risk_’s brief comparison of the average
citizens of the 1980s to the average graduates of the 1950s is the closest the report comes to discussing the consequences of desegregation. Admitting that, “the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago,” the NCEE seems to refer to the massive mid-century effort to remake American public education from an oppressive tool of apartheid to something resembling a nationwide engine of upward mobility.

On its face, the NCEE’s oblique recognition of the advances of desegregation appears fair-minded. However, as all serious consideration of the consequences of race and class on education policy vanish into two reassuring sentences, the NCEE’s insistence that education policy must be overhauled despite its success producing a better-educated citizenry falls short of fair. Exclaiming that the “negative impact” of a decline in the quality of education achieved by the average graduate of America’s schools “cannot be overstated,” the NCEE delivers its enthymematic evaluation. The NCEE never explains why this decline in excellence is more important than the coinciding gains in inclusion. Their insistence on the ineffability of the “negative impact” of a lapse in educational excellence, as enthymeme, invites their readers to provide their own hyperbole while it excuses the NCEE from making the causal connections between educational excellence and change in society. Moreover, the NCEE’s strong judgment intimates that the issue has already been considered, even deliberated, by the NCEE in advance of any public discourse. Thus, the deliberations of the government panel stand in for a broader public discussion over not the just the means, but the ends of education policy. The NCEE proclaims to have resolved the great contest between the competing demand for high achievement and equality in achievement’s favor. And, using A Nation at Risk as a powerful forum to address the American public, the NCEE suggests that the American people move forward without deliberating the purpose of education themselves.\(^4\) All of this, the NCEE achieves through reluctant testimony, rendering their aggressive—and ultimately quite successful—bid to reframe American education policy a passive reaction undertaken out of necessity.
**Resolving to Blame Oneself**

In his letter submitting *A Nation at Risk* to Secretary Bell, Chairman Gardner stated the intentions of the NCEE: “Our purpose has been to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions, not to search for scapegoats.”46 Upon careful consideration, Chairman Gardner’s prohibition was tremendously precise. When the blameworthy are already in the room, there is no need to search for them. Of course, Chairman Gardner did not proscribe blaming, just the wasteful pursuit of where to place it.

Electing to blame themselves along with the American people, the NCEE made a successful public case for education policy that pursues academic achievement as its top priority. Directing blame—a process that typically externalizes cause—back at themselves, the NCEE took an argumentative shortcut from the stasis of fact to the stasis of policy. According to *A Nation at Risk*, the failures of education policy required citizens to accept their own role in the decline of American educational achievement, not to deliberate them. Blame, an invitation to dialogue—however contentious—becomes a monologue in the hands of the NCEE. Delivered as reluctant testimony, the NCEE’s act of self-blame not only sought to foreclose a site of public deliberation, it also made an instant bid for the public’s trust. The NCEE established and then disrupted a patriotic ethos that provided them a reluctant posture from which they could privilege education policy’s role in the economic and military security of the United States over the examination of equality’s role in the making of education policy. Although Chairman Gardner lauded the NCEE’s members for “reflecting” the “diversity” of views of the American public, their report did not reflect much on diversity as a consideration when making policy.47

In her work comparing the presidential rhetoric of “accountability” from the Reagan administration with the George W. Bush administration, Rebecca Kuehl concluded that, for both, White Houses “accountability”—an outgrowth of *A Nation at Risk*—framed education policy as
an issue of political liberalism. I agree with Kuehl’s conclusion that *A Nation at Risk* helped neoliberalize United States education policy by reframing it as a private matter. But, more than just declaring education a private enterprise, the NCEE—by blaming themselves as American citizens—rhetorically modeled the privatization of education policy. Once again, in his letter to Secretary Bell, Chairman Gardner promised success “if the people of our country . . . care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required.” That is, if the American people find it within themselves to blame themselves for the failures of public education and to set aside their concerns about equality and inclusion, they can build a system of education befitting an exceptionalist nation.

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1 This phrase is taken from: Walt Kelly, *Pogo: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).


4 All of the quoted material in this paragraph was taken from: NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.


NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, quoted description of report from the letter to Secretary Bell from the commission included at the beginning of the report.

Scholars often remark at the rhetorical nature of the report, usually crediting the report’s success to its rhetoric despite policy content. For example, see Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation’s Changing Needs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 155, 157-58.

NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 11.


All of the quoted material in this paragraph was taken from: NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.

NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.

NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.

24 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.


26 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.


29 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 11.


37 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, from Letter to Secretary Bell.

38 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5-6.


42 All quotations for this paragraph taken from: NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 6.

43 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.

44 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 8-9. The italics are the NCEE’s.

46 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, from Letter to Secretary Bell.

47 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, from Letter to Secretary Bell.


49 NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, from Letter to Secretary Bell.
Chapter 3

Placing Blame: Jonathan Kozol’s Chthonic Inequalities

In October of 1906, *Cosmopolitan*—then a literary magazine—ran an essay by Upton Sinclair entitled, “What Life Means to Me.” Writing just a year after the original publication of *The Jungle*, Sinclair reflected on his already successful book and its attendant socialist politics. Instead of reveling in his considerable literary success, Sinclair—described by *Time* as “a man with every gift except humor and silence”—waxed regretful.¹ Characterizing “proletarian” life as a “nightmare inferno,” Sinclair took the opportunity to correct a popular misreading of *The Jungle*’s third chapter. An especially grotesque episode in an especially grotesque novel, Chapter 3 narrated Jurgis’s tour of a Chicago meatpacking plant. Sinclair had hoped his readers would recognize capitalism in the baleful machinery of slaughter, but much to his expressed disappointment, Sinclair’s mercilessly detailed portrayal of a hog disassembly line was taken literally. So literally, it proved an impetus for the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, not a socialist uprising. Lamenting his rhetorical misfire, Sinclair resolved: “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach.”² Despite simultaneously producing a classic of American fiction and a masterpiece of muckraking, Sinclair failed his self-imposed rhetorical purpose with *The Jungle*.

In September of 2005, one hundred years after the original printing of *The Jungle*, Jonathan Kozol published *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*.³ A follow-up in both form and content to his acclaimed 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools, The Shame of the Nation* is a collection of detailed and often disturbing observations from Kozol’s travels to some of America’s poorest public schools. Extending his argument from *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol condemned the return of segregated
education in *The Shame of the Nation*. Late in the book, reflecting on his own role in the previous forty years of education politics, Kozol lamented that he had hoped *Savage Inequalities* would inspire a “response” to “racial isolation” in American schools. Instead, *Savage Inequalities* helped lawmakers justify the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Like *The Jungle*, *Savage Inequalities* misfired rhetorically. Kozol aimed for desegregation, and hit national standardized testing. Also like *The Jungle*, *Savage Inequalities* contained a standout chapter that captured the public’s attention with a detailed account of the inhumanity of urban poverty.

“Life on the Mississippi: East St. Louis, Illinois,” *Savage Inequalities*’s first chapter, is a thirty-three page expose of the horrendous conditions in one the United States’ most impoverished cities and the similarly horrendous consequences those conditions had for schoolchildren in the late 1980s. Narrating his visit to East St. Louis, Kozol described the “savage” landscape of “another world” blighted by a “lagoon of sewage,” a “mountain of tin cans,” and “acres of smoldering garbage.”

Likening East St. Louis to a “Third World” country, “Life on the Mississippi” received a great deal of attention from a concerned public. Heaping praise on *Savage Inequalities*, many of Kozol’s literary critics highlighted the East St. Louis chapter in their reviews often quoting from it. Like Sinclair’s descriptive tour of the slaughterhouse, Kozol’s similarly descriptive tour of East St. Louis—at least for his reviewers—became a synecdoche, standing in for the entire book.

The public response to Kozol’s new book was dramatic. *Publishers Weekly*, the publishing industry’s trade magazine of record, broke its 119-year of political agnosticism and freely endorsed *Savage Inequalities* on its cover. Forgoing some thirty thousand dollars in advertising revenue for its September 27, 1991 issue, the magazine elected instead to print an open letter to President George H. W. Bush “urging” him “to read” the “startling and disturbing new book.” Describing *Savage Inequalities* in alarming terms, *Publishers Weekly* seemed to have “Life on the Mississippi” in mind when they also insisted that “there is no doubt that we will have
to spend money, and a lot of it, to bring genuine equality to our schools.” Unfortunately for Kozol, the lesson most often drawn from his time in East St. Louis was the need to equalize funding between public schools, not the “subcontext” calling for an end to “racially segregated education.”

Although Sinclair wrote to stoke the embers of socialist revolution and Kozol wrote to extinguish an inferno of racial injustice, both authors confronted a similar rhetorical challenge: how to persuade the public to see substantial structural inequality in urgent need of remedy. Both Sinclair and Kozol found their available means of persuasion in an intricate narrative form designed to immerse the reader in a flood of environmental details. Sinclair’s slaughterhouse and Kozol’s East St. Louis place blame by blaming place. Sinclair and Kozol grounded their acts of blaming in a location. The children of East St. Louis suffer, according to Kozol, because their city causes suffering. However, to make a convincing case for policy change, Kozol’s description of East St. Louis had to exceed the American context. Transcending poverty is an integral part of the American Dream. In the American context, failing to overcome poverty is not a structural oversight; it is a character flaw. Great Americans are often great because they manage to escape poverty. Unlike character-building domestic poverty, “Third World” poverty—structural inequality resulting from the abuses of colonialism or the neglect of “underdevelopment”—qualifies as a legitimate social problem. Like Sinclair’s metaphorical effort to prove capitalism a slaughterhouse, Kozol’s argument in “Life on the Mississippi” insists that East St. Louis is in fact a third world city.

This chapter is a rhetorical analysis primarily of Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, but also, at points, its reviews. Hailed at its release as a book that “everyone should read,” *Savage Inequalities* has enjoyed a splendid reputation as a “clear and compelling” call for education reform. Yet, its core argument—that reform must begin with desegregation—was, by Kozol’s own account, all but ignored in the subsequent cycle of education reform that culminated in the
No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Citing “Life on the Mississippi’s” third world depiction of East St. Louis, many of Kozol’s reviewers issued glowing endorsements of his book along with their own calls for a more equal system of public school funding. Exposing the colonial condition of East St. Louis, Savage Inequalities successfully established the need to on the structural problem of educational inequality, but simultaneously suggested a philanthropic remedy—giving money through funding reform—not desegregation.

Kozol’s place-based blame is not confined to his first chapter. Geographic features become physical barriers to social justice throughout Savage Inequalities. The bluffs above East St. Louis confine its students to the shadows of the surrounding middleclass suburbs. The Cooper River forms a moat between the poor kids of Camden, New Jersey and the affluent children of Cherry Hill. The water ditches running through San Antonio’s Edgewood School District mark both the land and its young people as undesirable. Blaming along topographic lines, Kozol bifurcates America into territory occupied by oppressors and territory occupied by the oppressed. Although Kozol’s chthonic blaming establishes the corporeality and consequence of division in American society, it also elides middle ground. Sadly, Savage Inequalities offered no starting point for the sort of social union that might have supported meaningful desegregation.

This Blame is Your Blame

In an interview with the New York Times, Vice President of Cahners Publishing Fred Ciporen explained that the decision to run a letter to the president on the cover of Publishers Weekly was made “unanimously” by the magazine’s editorial staff. Accounting for their sudden outburst of editorial activism, Ciporen confessed: “We were very moved by this book.” The editorial staff at Publishers Weekly was not alone. Spending a month—November of 1991—on the New York Times’ non-fiction bestsellers list, Savage Inequalities amassed a parade of
accolades. The New York Times ran two reviews of Savage Inequalities by two moved reviewers. Andrew Hacker expressed outrage over “decaying schools” and “third world conditions,” and Herbert Mitgang sarcastically speculated that poor schools “might find a more sympathetic reception in Washington if they applied for help under some foreign aid program as an underdeveloped third world country.” Mitgang’s sardonic recommendation envisioned the unlikely scenario in which a bid for federal education funds succeeded. Although Mitgang was moved to sarcasm, he was not similarly moved to recommend desegregation.

Kozol’s reviewers almost universally cosigned his urgent call for reform, but their endorsements were usually inspired by the strong pathos appeals from “Life on the Mississippi,” not Kozol’s call to finish the job of desegregating American education. In addition to agreeing with Kozol’s assessment that East St. Louis is a “third world” city, Hacker described Savage Inequalities as “an impassioned book.” Reviewing for USA Today, Robert Wilson went so far as to insist that, “everyone should read this book.” Explaining why Kozol’s book deserved the attention of every American, Wilson paraphrased many of Kozol’s descriptions of East St. Louis. “Holes in the roof,” “over- or under-heated buildings,” and “trash-strewn lots” all make it into Wilson’s review giving his readers a feel for the aesthetic content of book, even as its core argumentative content is lost. Robert Kuttner, editorializing for the Washington Post, recognized Kozol’s book as response to a “fashionable” discourse of “blame” in education policy. Despite his rhetorical sensitivity in contextualizing Savage Inequalities, Kuttner argued that, “Kozol's story cannot be dismissed -- because his subjects are children.” Calling Kozol’s expose a “story” and lauding its attention to “children,” Kuttner’s review defends Savage Inequalities by highlighting its theatrical virtues. With its argument for desegregation thoroughly ignored, Savage Inequalities was reduced to proof of failed state of public education in the United States. Rhetorically, Savage Inequalities became a powerful pathos appeal that could be manipulated to move concerned Americans toward any number of policy goals.
Even the usually phlegmatic President Bush was rhetorically moved by Kozol’s book. Although he declined to respond directly to the *Publishers Weekly* cover, he repeatedly addressed the poor state of many American schools immediately following the publication of *Savage Inequalities*. At a public event honoring the nation’s Blue Ribbon schools, Bush described “American education” as “anything but good,” and grudgingly acknowledged the “necessary business” of “shining light into the dark corners of the system.” Taking advantage of the media’s interest in federal education policy, Bush delivered an address on his Goals 2000 initiative to a group of Ohio educators in late November. Calling Goals 2000 “a revolution against business as usual,” Bush stressed that Goals 2000 would help give “poor working people” the “power to choose” what public school their children attend. Arguing in favor of school choice as opposed to increased funding, the president joined the chorus of concern for the plight of poor children in America’s schools. However, Bush advocated school choice as an efficient and effective means to improve the quality of schooling through market competition, not as a means to achieve thorough and lasting desegregation.

Although Kozol’s dismal descriptions of public education in poor communities echoed endlessly in the mouths of politicians and lawmakers, his proposed policy solution—a thorough program of desegregation—vanished in deeds and words. For President Bush, the educational plight of poor children evidenced the need for greater choice; for President Bill Clinton, higher standards; and for President George W. Bush, a federally enforced program for flipping problem schools. Even *Publishers Weekly* ignored Kozol’s insistence for radical desegregation. Their cover letter admonished the Bush administration for advocating “market terms that have no place in a debate on the needs of our poor children.” However, instead of calling for the reunion of poor and wealthy children under one schoolhouse roof, *Publishers Weekly* concluded that “we will have to spend money” to bring “genuine equality to our schools.” Despite making a dramatic impression on many of his readers, Kozol’s masterful book failed to secure the change he sought
in either policy or rhetoric. Almost everyone who wrote about *Savage Inequalities* seemed to agree that it was a moving book deserving of praise and attention, but almost no one wrote in favor of its core argument. It seems Kozol took a wrong turn in East St. Louis.

**The Blame-Man’s Burden**

By far, *Savage Inequalities*’ most moving chapter is Kozol’s visit to East St. Louis. Dense with descriptive detail, “Life on the Mississippi” is a *tour de force* of “words facilitating vision.” Narrating his literal tour of the destitute city, Kozol encourages his audience to envision a postcolonial hell-scape with scene after awful scene of urban decay. Although the episodes Kozol relates are horrific enough without embellishment, Kozol’s descriptions systematically exceed blank reportage. Providing the “materials on which judgment is built,” Kozol translates his experiences into third world terms, facilitating his audience’s vision of colonial abuse and, consequently, their outrage.

Through Kozol’s words, the landscape of East St. Louis is terra-deformed. Scarred by its industrial past, East St. Louis afflicts its children with violence and disease and its government with corruption and deterioration. Not just the object of domestic charitable effort, Kozol’s East St. Louis is a workplace for Nongovernmental Organizations. Although Kozol did not lie to his readers about the state of East St. Louis, he did make a rhetorical decision to stress its extremes and to explicitly argue that Americans should think of the city as a part of the “Third World.” This chapter takes no issue with the accuracy of Kozol’s observations or the validity of his advocacy. Nonetheless, Kozol’s choice to write a lengthy colonial conceit was a rhetorical decision with consequences for his political project.

Throughout “Life on the Mississippi,” Kozol stresses the otherworldliness of East St. Louis. Quoting from an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Kozol informs his audience on the first page of the chapter that East St. Louis is “another world.” As Kozol begins to describe
what he witnessed in his time off world, scenes of urban decline become the geographic features of a malevolent, foreign landscape. Riding down Missouri Avenue, a large hole in vacant lot becomes a “crater.” Emissions from the Pfizer and Monsanto plants “cloud” the city’s skies.24 Again and again, Kozol describes artificial phenomena in natural terms as the features of a hostile land, much like the inhospitable equatorial locales that typified European colonialism. Each time Kozol confronts East St. Louis’s confounding sewage problem, he reports his encounter with an alluvial designation. On his first trip to Villa Griffin, a government housing project in East St. Louis, Kozol surveys an “oozing lake of tainted water.” Returning to the project, Kozol’s sarcasm rises with the level of the lake he rechristens a “lagoon of sewage,” giving it a tropical character. Casing the grounds at Villa Griffin with some of its youngest residents, Kozol finds himself traversing a “sewage marsh” in the shadow of a “mountain of tin cans.”25 Reporting Villa Griffin’s disfigured terrain, Kozol affixes East St. Louis’ problems to the land, but a far away land. Using exotic geographic terms like “crater” and “lagoon” Kozol stresses the distance and otherness of East St. Louis. Waste like sewage and tin cans become the landmarks of a faraway place, achieving through their naturalization not just permanence, but agency.

For non-residents, East St. Louis’ exotic features distort perception. Much like a visiting colonial administrator, Kozol rides through East St. Louis with a guide. Safir Ahmed, a reporter for the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, gives Kozol the lay of the land and shares the local significance of its prominent places. Kozol relates Safir’s descriptions. The “brownish yellow haze” emanating from the Monsanto plant’s smokestacks gives the night sky a “nightmarish look.”26 More than just poor, more than just distant, East St. Louis is a fearful place. East St. Louis is so frightening to those who live around it that passing through on the interstate can bring on vertigo. Extending Missouri Avenue across the Mississippi River, the Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge is a “three minute” drive connecting East St. Louis with downtown St. Louis. “For White people,” says Ahmed, “it could be a thousand miles long.”27 Although Ahmed’s observation is
emic—it comes from a local, not Kozol—by incorporating it into the chapter, Kozol certifies his colonial conceit. Despite East St. Louis’ location near the center of the continental United States, those closest to it most comfortably regard East St. Louis as distant. Moreover, despite Kozol’s condemnation of the segregation of black St. Louis suburbanites into East St. Louis and white St. Louis suburbanites into surrounding suburbs like Bellville and Fairview Heights, Kozol’s central argument in “Life on the Mississippi” relies on his readers agreeing that East St. Louis is a world apart from St. Louis’s whiter, more affluent suburbs. Arguing that its conditions relegate East St. Louis to the distant and frightening “Third World,” Kozol commits his own geographic distortion. From the heart of the Midwest, *Savage Inequalities* transports East St. Louis to a faraway, colonial locale rebranding it “America’s Soweto.”

Kozol needs little imagination to set the third world scene in East St. Louis. Many of the facts on the ground support his interpretation. The Daughters of Charity, who typically provide international aid, have a mission in East St. Louis. The city supports the rust-belt equivalent of an extraction economy. The leading sources of economic activity in and around East St. Louis are factories owned by large corporations headquartered in distant financial centers with little or no investment in the ailing Midwestern town or its people. Moreover, the factories almost exclusively employ workers from St. Louis or its Missouri and Illinois suburbs, not East St. Louis residents. Like many former colonies, East St. Louis has a violent history of social unrest motivated by economic and racial animosity including a 1917 race riot that ranks among the worst in United States history. In addition to its colonial economy, East St. Louis has many of the aesthetic features of the third world. Kozol warns his readers about the summer when mosquitos “carrying polio and hepatitis” swarm East St. Louis. He even reports on the state of the adult entertainment industry, labeling East St. Louis as “a place where young white men go . . . for sexual adventures.” Reporting East St. Louis’ third world conditions, Kozol presents an atrophic environment: a location harmful just to occupy.
Savage Inequalities records how those who live near East St. Louis are deceived by a colonial landscape that distorts perceptions, but those who live in East St. Louis suffer a worse fate; they are themselves distorted. Throughout “Life on the Mississippi,” Kozol returns to the disturbing reality that the loam in East St. Louis, the land itself, is poisoned. Everyday, the city makes its residents sick. From years of unchecked industrial pollution, East St. Louis’s soil contains heavy metals and other poisons that “chip away” at the “potential” of its children. Arsenic, mercury, lead, and even bovine steroids putrefy the ground. Outdoor play at a city park or family home, normally healthy activities, entail dangerous consequences in East St. Louis. In one of the Savage Inequalities’ most disturbing passages, Kozol reports on the unusually high rate of lead poisoning among children relating a case affecting five children in just one home. As Kozol lists the “insidious” symptoms of lead poisoning, including “child sleep disorders, stomach pains, and hyperactive behavior,” he simultaneously affixes those afflictions to their place along the Mississippi’s floodplain. Inequity grows up from the earth in East St. Louis. Exhuming its origins, Kozol renders inequality chthonic.

Expanding his third world metaphor, Kozol pairs the terrible pathos of ailing children with the terrible logos of ailing institutions. Just like in a third world country, enterprises designed to improve the public welfare of East St. Louis, through corruption and mismanagement, end up doing harm. Kozol narrates his assessment of life on the Mississippi by recounting his tour of East St. Louis’s public schools. Throughout this tour, Kozol emphasizes institutional dysfunction. Kozol begins his inspection by establishing a relationship between East St. Louis’s warped geography and its struggling schools. Introducing his discussion of the public education in East St. Louis, Kozol quips: “The problems of the streets” often “spill over into the public schools.” Then rendering his metaphor literal, Kozol recounts two episodes of sewage backups flooding East St. Louis schools from the inside out. Foregrounding the exceptional horror of sewage in “food preparation areas,” Kozol turns his discussion to the refusal of public
officials to aid East St. Louis.35 “Life on the Mississippi” singles-out then governor Jim Thompson for special condemnation. Kozol stresses the structural barriers preventing the public schools from improving concurrently noting the “dismissive” tone the governor takes toward the situation in East St. Louis. Contrasting the shocking reality of a fecal deluge—a situation demanding immediate remedy—with the refusal of the Illinois’s highest office to entertain intervention in East St. Louis, Kozol brings to mind the callousness and desperation of colonial rule.

As Kozol relates his conversations with teachers and students in East St. Louis, he enumerates the ways state level mismanagement gives rise to local level mismanagement. Kozol reports everything from missing paychecks to deteriorating facilities. The auto shop teacher shares a story of debilitating institutional inefficiency, explaining that, in order to bring a car into shop class, he must move it through two other classrooms. A science teacher named McMillan, tells Kozol that he cannot wear a tie to school because the climate control system is broken in his classroom. Like a colonial officer struggling with the heat of the tropics, McMillan works through one hundred degree days, even in the middle of winter. Mr. Solomon, a history teacher, describes East St. Louis High as temporally “cut off.” Because their school has hopelessly out of date audiovisual equipment and textbooks, advances in pedagogy pass East St. Louis students by. Their schools lack the basic infrastructure to implement new curricula. Once again, Kozol stresses the distance—both spatial and temporal—between the colonial East St. Louis and even its neighboring suburbs.36

In a longer passage about institutional dysfunction, Kozol details the state of the East St. Louis High football program. According to Kozol, their field is “missing almost everything.” Instead of proper goalposts, the field has “a couple of metal pipes” protruding vertically from the ground at each end.37 The high school’s post apocalyptic impression of a football field, along with its admirably loyal coach/caretaker, brings to mind the desolate majesty of a grassless colonial
soccer pitch. Sharing a conversation with coach Shannon, Kozol discusses the football program as a way to compare public education in East St. Louis with its wealthier neighbors. Kozol quotes Coach Shannon: “When we go to wealthier schools I look at the faces of my boys. They don’t say a lot. . . . I hope they are saying, ‘This is something I will give my kids someday.’”

Like the colonial soccer pitch, football is a common pursuit between the wealthy and the poor. Its persistence in the face of degradation in East St. Louis simultaneously endears the community to Kozol’s readers as it accentuates the community’s subaltern position.

In addition to teachers and administrators, Kozol also talks with students in “Life on the Mississippi,” sharing his conversations in print. In Mr. Solomon’s advanced class, Kozol asks a small group of high school students for their thoughts on growing up and going to school in East St. Louis. In turn, Mr. Solomon’s students relate some of the unfortunate and all-too-predictable experiences of growing up poor and black in the United States. One young lady recounts her experience with a prejudiced shop owner when she visited a bookstore in a neighboring suburb. Another laments the absence of Latin from East St. Louis High’s curriculum. Driving at the thesis of the book he was—at the time—planning, Kozol asks the students to state their preference between funding reform and desegregation: “If the government would put a huge amount of money into East St. Louis, so that this could be a modern, well-equipped and top-rate school . . . would you say that racial segregation was no longer of importance?” In a response Kozol characterizes as representative of the class, a student named Luther came down definitively on the side of desegregation: “Going to a school with all the races is more important than a modern school.”

Although the reviews of *Savage Inequalities* issued dramatic calls for funding reform, Kozol’s exchange with Mr. Solomon’s advanced class explicitly argued both that desegregation should be the top priority of education policy reform and that prioritizing funding reform above desegregation would be mistaken. How could Kozol’s reviewers have so plainly misrepresented Kozol’s position and why did they do so with such remarkable consistency?
By the point at which Kozol begins reporting his conversation with Mr. Solomon’s students, “Life on the Mississippi” had thoroughly established the grim case for the third world condition of East St. Louis. In conversation with Kozol, even the students themselves expressed doubt about the status of their citizenship. Referring to the chasm between the quality of education in East St. Louis and other towns in Illinois, one girl asks the rhetorical question: “Are we citizens of East St. Louis or America?” When Luther finally expresses his preference to go to “a school with all the races,” his comment is contextualized as a brave stand against prevailing wisdom. Kozol quotes Mr. Solomon marveling that Luther and his classmates “still believe in that [Martin Luther King’s] dream.” Although the passage seems to invite readers to share Mr. Solomon’s reverence for his students’ perseverance and vision, it also suggests that their belief in the power of desegregation is—at least popularly perceived as—naïve. Instead of encouraging his readers to support desegregation, Kozol encourages them to support the students themselves on the grounds that their faith in desegregation is an admirable stance in the face of a popular belief. Having positioned his readers as privileged citizens attending—through their reading of Savage Inequalities—to the problems of a neglected colony, Kozol inadvertently effaces the students’ agency. When one student worries aloud about her citizenship, her concerns are not labeled naïve, but when Luther shares his prioritization of desegregation over funding reform, his rational choice to put one course of action ahead of the other is interpreted as a miraculous act of faith. Luther’s policy preference, instead of constituting its own decision calculus, is incorporated—as a data point—into the policymaking calculus being carried out by Kozol’s readers. Luther is not a citizen participating in a democratic process of reform; he is the colonized object of reform. Luther and his classmates are subjects ripe for philanthropy.

Kozol finishes “Life on the Mississippi” with several paragraphs despairing the future of East St. Louis. Although his conclusion unambiguously conveys Kozol’s displeasure with the status quo, it leaves his preferred course of action somewhat vague. Bewailing the city’s abysmal
trajectory, Kozol opines: “Now and then the possibility is raised by somebody in East St. Louis that the state may someday try to end the isolation of the city as an all-black entity. This is something, however, that no one with power in the state has ever contemplated.”42 If one takes Luther’s stated preference for desegregation seriously, Kozol’s pessimism at the end of “Life on the Mississippi” appears to be the author’s way of expressing a longing for a better future that he believes will be very difficult to achieve. However, if one interprets Luther’s response as the naïve belief of an idealistic youth, then Kozol’s conclusion seems to warn against the political impracticality of desegregation as a policy option. Among those familiar with the nuances of Kozol’s previous writing and activism, his preference for desegregation would presumably have shone through his gloom. However, for his reviewers, Kozol’s advocacy was either opaque or disregarded. In their ringing endorsements of *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol’s reviewers-turned-public-advocates confused the symptom for the disease promoting a more equal system of funding and all but forgetting Kozol’s insistence that desegregation is the source of inequitable public school funding.

Kozol’s cynical reservations at the close of “Life on the Mississippi” obscure his policy advocacy, but so does his decision to characterize East St. Louis as a third world city throughout the chapter. Writing a geographic metaphor that depicted the maximum physical and metaphorical distance between East St. Louis and the rest of the United States, Kozol undercut his advocacy with a descriptive motif that worked against his self-professed goal of bringing Americans back together in their public schools. Although Kozol’s account of the frightening reality on the ground is corroborated by nearly everyone who wrote or spoke about East St. Louis at the time—even those he criticizes in *Savage Inequalities*—he presents no compelling vision of how the devastated city could be reincorporated into the American landscape. Having encouraged his audience to think of East St. Louis as hopelessly remote, desegregation made little practical sense. Taking the metaphor seriously, one wonders if a place so distant can be integrated?
Ironically, this practical objection provided one of the core reasons for the Supreme Court’s landmark holding to allow *de facto* segregation in *Milliken v. Bradley*. The decision—which Kozol denounces in *Savage Inequalities*—overturned the Michigan Supreme Court’s order to desegregate Detroit’s public schools by integrating the city’s school district with its suburbs. According to the Supreme Court, cross-district desegregation would have turned Michigan “into one vast new super school district” creating “logistical problems” like “the large-scale transportation of students.” Setting aside Kozol’s metaphorical topography, the East St. Louis he describes—however sympathetically—is both an educational and literal deathtrap. Talking to a girl named Serena at the Villa Griffin, Kozol relates the disconcerting story of her sister’s rape and murder. Patiently explaining to Kozol that her older sister’s “face was busted” and that the “police arrested one man but they didn’t find the other,” Serena’s story is shocking evidence of the desperation of life in East St. Louis, but also a stark warning about dangers integrating children would face there. Without helping his audience imagine a realistic path to an integrated future, persuaded reviewers echoed Kozol’s appalling observations, but replaced his advocacy of desegregation with a public policy solution more befitting the third world, philanthropy. The transfer of money, instead of bodies, promised all absolution of overcoming a pernicious political injustice without physical risk required to redress the underlying source of its profound perniciousness.

**Blamer in a Blame Land**

Reevaluating *Savage Inequalities* in the context of Kozol’s previous activism, his concern for the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* is clear throughout. Using the third world as a metaphor to account for East St. Louis, Kozol takes the core argument of *Brown*—that separate is inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional—to a new extreme. According to Kozol,
separate is not just unequal, it is colonial. East St. Louis, “America’s Soweto,” earns its place as the first case study in *Savage Inequalities* because it is such an extreme example of the injustices generated by *de facto* segregation. However, with the Supreme Court upholding *de facto* segregation in *Milliken v. Bradley*, Kozol sought not only to prove segregation harmful, he sought to prove it intentional and immoral. To motivate change, Kozol rhetoricized geography to convince his readers that segregation in post-*Brown* America was still being systematically and intentionally enforced. Once again, topographical metaphors shape *Savage Inequalities*’ act of blame. As his tour of dysfunctional public schools takes Kozol to communities all around the United States, he constructs a cartographic account of inequity. Surveying patterns of injustice encoded in the American landscape, Kozol attributes blame for educational failure to the exploitation of geography.

*Savage Inequalities* is an extensive exercise in spatial reasoning. The book’s chapters are organized geographically. After East St. Louis, *Savage Inequalities* records Kozol’s observations from his subsequent time in Chicago, New York, Camden, Washington D.C., San Antonio, and, briefly, Cincinnati. Like its chapters, the book’s argument is also organized by reference to regional borders. Kozol’s central contention, the premise that underlies his advocacy in *Savage Inequalities*, is that the spatial separation of Americans gives rise to injustice. Each chapter of *Savage Inequalities* includes detailed geographic descriptions of its location usually located near the beginning. In lengthy digressions, Kozol gives the reader a sense of how each place is laid out with a strong focus on the socioeconomic consequences of land use and administrative policies. Usually sharing his topographic observations before describing his experiences in the schools he visits, Kozol’s geography lessons frame his accounts as injustice. When *Savage Inequalities* reports the testimony of disaffected youth or burnt out educators, its readers have been prepared to contextualize that testimony as the symptoms of a larger set of structural inequalities.
In each location he visits, Kozol maps inequality onto the land or cityscape. In East St. Louis, bluffs “surround” the downtrodden suburb “in a semicircle” enforcing both its social and economic isolation from neighboring towns. Quoting a professor from the nearby Knox College, Kozol asserts that the “bluffs” versus “bottoms” distinction constitutes two “tiers” to which the region’s inhabitants belong by virtue of their residences’ elevation. Towns on the bluffs are much wealthier and whiter than East St. Louis, which is situated below in the Mississippi’s floodplain. Importantly for Kozol’s argument, the bluff-dwellers are not just physically removed from the bottom-dwellers, they are administratively detached as well. In Kozol’s narrative, the physical distance between the bluffs and the bottoms becomes a metaphor that helps convey the tangibility and permanence East St. Louis’s hierarchical relationship with its neighbors. Kozol’s topographic description of Greater St. Louis also provides a causal explanation for East St. Louis’s place as the region’s socioeconomic nadir. When East St. Louis needs to raise funds for public projects or seek solutions for difficult civic problems, its municipal isolation—justified publicly by its lower elevation—excludes the city from the sizeable tax base required for civic uplift. "Although dirt and water flow downhill,” Kozol quips, “money and services do not.” With no escape, inequality pools in the low spot that is East St. Louis—a process made visible by Kozol’s terrestrial metaphor.

In San Antonio, Kozol repeats this high ground versus low ground geography lesson. According to O. Z. White, a professor at Trinity College and Kozol’s tour guide in Texas, the “poor live by the water ditches” and “the rich live on the high ground.” As in East St. Louis, the poor and the wealthy of San Antonio are estranged by their differing altitudes. Also as in East St. Louis, San Antonio’s administrative borders meticulously divide the city’s classes, excusing each from the responsibility of sharing governance and resources with the other. Supporting his contention that inequality corresponds with contour lines, Kozol follows his description of San Antonio’s socioeconomic geography with an exposition of the statistical differences between
public schools in the heights and their peers in the ditches. In addition to higher elevations, the schools of the wealthy also enjoy higher per pupil spending and graduation rates.\textsuperscript{47}

Kozol’s topographic survey of San Antonio invites comparisons with East St. Louis. Kozol applies many of the same criticisms to San Antonio’s cityscape that he applies to the East St. Louis’s floodplain, and he narrates his criticism following a similar rhetorical form. Touring the city with a local, just as he had in East St. Louis, Kozol acts as an authorial conduit relating an insider’s account of the power relationships embedded in San Antonio’s geography. Kozol geographic appraisal primes his audience not just to see bad schools in bad neighborhoods, but to also see their badness as a result of structural inequality. Courting his readers’ \textit{déjà vu}, Kozol sustains the strong appeal to pathos he crafted in the painstakingly detailed “Life on the Mississippi” through to the last chapter of \textit{Savage Inequalities}. With relatively brief references to neighborhood crack houses and Hispanic children addicted to inhalants, Kozol’s San Antonio chapter invokes a broader image of urban poverty developed throughout his book.\textsuperscript{48} As he encourages his audience to see the geographic indicators of structural inequality repeated in San Antonio, Kozol simultaneously invites his readers to see the anecdotal indicators of debilitating urban poverty recurrent with that troubled geography.

Not every place Kozol visits organizes its socioeconomic inequality around naturally occurring physical geography. In New York and Chicago, inequalities conform to geographic barriers, but those barriers arise from the more explicitly artificial boundaries that divide residents, block-by-block, into neighborhoods and boroughs. Instead of using elevation to map inequality for his audience, Kozol emphasizes the aesthetic differences that distinguish places of privilege from places of poverty. In New York, Kozol juxtaposes the educational environment of Riverdale in the northwest corner of the Bronx with Jerome Park about a mile southeast. Visiting what was Public School 261 on Jerome Avenue, Kozol notes its regrettable location sandwiched between an elevated train line and a mortician’s office. A former skating rink, PS 261 has low
ceilings and no windows. Inside, PS 261 is overenrolled. Outside, it is “concealed” on a “crowded city block.”

Visiting PS 24 in Riverdale, Kozol finds a school utterly besieged by parks. Riverdale grass is “neatly trimmed”—there is grass—and “Tudor” rooftops punctuate “tree-shaded streets.” The magnolias and dogwoods are “in full blossom” on the day Kozol comes to call. In addition to “decorated” windows—there are windows—Kozol marvels at PS 24’s adjoining planetarium. The differences Kozol notes between the two neighborhoods are parallel and acute.

In Chicago, Kozol finds similar disparities comparing North Lawndale with Winnetka. Contrasting the affluence of Winnetka with the poverty of North Lawndale, Kozol casts educational inequality in moral terms. For Kozol, education funding is a zero-sum game and so is educational quality. The conditions that make North Lawndale an “industrial slum,” are the same conditions that provide New Trier’s “seven gyms” and “Olympic pool.” The remarkable resources and beauty in places like Riverdale and Winnetka come at the cost of deprivation in places like Jerome Park and North Lawndale. Featuring PS 24’s planetarium and New Trier High School’s FCC licensed television station, Kozol not only underscores the severity of the educational inequality he condemns, he invites his audience to see that inequality as a moral problem. Planetariums and televisions stations are ostentatious status symbols. Juxtaposing these luxuries with poor schools in various states of disrepair, Kozol encourages his audience to see the exceptional resources in wealthy school districts as decadent affronts to social justice.

Finding grounds for moral judgment in the geographies of North Lawndale and Winnetka, Kozol inverts his previous hierarchy by territorializing Chicago’s history along with its aesthetics. While Winnetka’s bests North Lawndale’s in wealth, it simultaneously is bested by North Lawndale morally. Whereas Winnetka’s streets record a century of prosperity in undulating semicircular driveways, North Lawndale’s “weed-choked” lots attest to considerable and ongoing strife. Despite the absence of any historical marker, Kozol manages to find the empty lot where
Martin Luther King Jr. lived during his failed campaign for racial justice in Chicago. Reporting that the civil rights leader’s former house has been razed and replaced with a “broken truck” out of which pizza is sold, Kozol identifies North Lawndale as an important location in the history of the Civil Rights Movement as he positions Winnetka’s within a protracted history of wealth acquisition. Much like New Trier High School’s student-run television station, Kozol finds frivolity in Winnetka’s idyllic suburban setting by juxtaposing it with the ruins of Civil Rights Movement in North Lawndale. Aesthetic and historical differences between wealthy and poor neighborhoods become geographic markers of separation and the bases for judgment in both Chicago and New York.

Sticking with his geographic aesthetic to the very end of Savage Inequalities, Kozol delivers his appeal for a better future with the narrative equivalent of a Thomas Kinkade painting.

As he describes his panoramic view of Cincinnati standing outside Walnut Hills High School, Kozol’s word-portrait drifts into the sublime:

Standing here by the Ohio River, watching it drift west into the edge of the horizon, picturing it as it flows onward to the place three hundred miles from here where it will pour into the Mississippi, one is struck by the sheer beauty of this country, of its goodness and unrealized goodness, of the limitless potential that it holds to render life rewarding and the spirit clean. Surely there is enough for everyone within this country. It is a tragedy that these good things are not more widely shared. All our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of America. Whether they were born to poor white Appalachians or to wealthy Texans, to poor black people in the Bronx or to rich people in Manhasset or Winnetka, they are all quite wonderful and innocent when they are small. We soil them needlessly.

Delivering the penultimate sentence of his tour of America’s schools with transcontinental anaphora echoing Martin Luther King Jr.’s appeal to “let freedom ring,” Kozol merges the attributes of school children with their geography. For Kozol, America’s children and its land are full of “potential” and “innocence” when they are unbounded. Allowed to “drift west into the edge of the horizon,” the Ohio River is an authorial inspiration signifying “bounty” and “goodness.” For Kozol the creation of territory, dividing the land and its children, destroys their
potential and innocence. In this final paragraph, *Savage Inequalities* envisions a return to a natural, unified, desegregated circumstance that never existed. Although Kozol’s vision of a United States without socioeconomically restrictive geography is internally consistent and ethically admirable, it bears little correspondence to the political realities that make American inequalities so savage. The thorough desegregation of American education and society that Kozol envisions would not be a return to the past and it could not be achieved through a process of letting go. The problems Kozol identifies in the wealthiest and poorest public schools require protracted and politically costly reform. Reform that the four preceding decades of civil rights demonstrations, Supreme Court rulings, Congressional legislation, and Presidential rhetoric failed to achieve.

Lamenting those decades of failed reform, Kozol concludes *Savage Inequalities* with perhaps his clearest declaration of blame: “we soil them needlessly.” Although “we” and “them” are vague when removed from their place at the end of his final paragraph, Kozol’s verb choice “soil” expresses culpability in chthonic terms as the culmination of his book’s central metaphor. According to Kozol, the American public—or at least the part of it he imagines reading his book—has tarnished the “wonderful” innocence of children by inflicting a malicious demography on them. Scarred with concentrations of pollution and poverty, Kozol’s American landscape replicates its deformation in its people. By accident of birth, American children are either strengthened or hobbled. Of course, soil’s additional meaning—to befoul, most often through defecation—also attends Kozol’s accusation bringing to mind shit-stained school cafeterias in East St. Louis. In the end, although Kozol never offers a metaphorical or even a literal description of a desegregated America, his geographic act of blame is vivid and—for his reviewers—convincing.
Like *Savage Inequalities*, *The Jungle* concludes with a four-word sentence calibrated for dramatic effect. Amidst the rising action of a fictional socialist revolution Sinclair hoped to make nonfictional, Jurgis exclaims: “Chicago will be ours!” Of course, it would not. Accounting for Sinclair’s persuasive failure, Thomas Benson noted that, “when Sinclair asked the American people to adopt Socialism, he asked for a truly revolutionary change. . . . Compared to such a revolutionary plea the request for a law regulating food and drugs was relatively minor.” In Benson’s view, Sinclair was defeated, in part, by the ambitious scope of his advocacy and ready availability of a more modest course of political action. Given the option between an interpretation of Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* that prescribed the equalizing of public school funding and one that prescribed thorough desegregation, Kozol’s reviewers and their public also chose the “relatively minor” option. However, both Sinclair and Kozol unwittingly contributed to the public’s misreading of their works by detailing systematic violations of basic hygiene.

Like Sinclair, Kozol used expose journalism to make his case for structural inequality, but also like Sinclair, his message is only half-heard. Instead of remembering Jurgis as the witness to an inspirational revolution, the American public remembered him as the witness to a monumentally disturbing factory tour. Just as Sinclair’s readers, captivated by his thick descriptions of meatpacking malfeasance in Chicago, never ultimately resolved with Jurgis and his socialist comrades that “Chicago will be ours,” Kozol’s readers, captivated by ubiquity of sewage in East St. Louis, never ultimately resolved with Kozol that redistribution refers to both resources and students. Unfortunately, the American public took stronger ownership of the alarmingly detailed appeals to pathos both Sinclair and Kozol put at the center of their advocacy, than the policy prescriptions those details were intended to support.
In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol demonstrates that the horrors of places like East St. Louis are so egregious, in part, because they are localized. Using geographic boundaries to help his audience see structural inequality as a causal force, Kozol confers a degree of corporeality to an otherwise abstract argument. Kozol’s topographic blame gives inequality a solidity that makes it easier to identify, but harder to act upon. For Kozol, fixing public education is a project that entails the reconceptualization of American geography. In *The Shame of the Nation*, Kozol dismisses “national standardized examinations” because they are not a “response” to “racial isolation.” Then, relating a conversation with *Washington Post* editorialist Roger Wilkins, Kozol rationalizes the nation’s failure to address educational inequality by attributing it to political intransigence. However, Kozol’s focus on the poorest and wealthiest extremes of American education in *Savage Inequalities* permits no real vision of the political union for which he longs. Kozol’s account of the American landscape is rigidly divided between the oppressors and the oppressed. A middle-class American reading his book would be hard-pressed to place him or herself in Kozol’s America and could easily do so in what Kozol might deem an inaccurate or unproductive way. Indeed, Kozol seems to speak to an elite audience when he repeatedly insists that “we”—himself a product of an elite Massachusetts boarding school and Harvard’s English Department—have done this to “our” nation. For the elite, *Savage Inequalities* is a brutal act of blame that cries out for recompense, which came in the form of a public movement for funding reform. However, for most Americans, *Savage Inequalities* is a book about places they have never been, either because they cannot afford it or because they would not want to go. Despite Kozol’s admirable commitment to desegregation, he wrote a book divisive to its core.

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1 This quote is from a review of Mary Craig Sinclair’s memoir, *Southern Belle: A Personal Story of Crusader’s Wife*. “Uppie’s Goddess,” *Time* 70, no. 21 (1957): 120-121.

The Jungle was originally published in the magazine, Appeal to Reason, between February and November of 1905.


I have declined to call this the sentimental style. Both Kozol and Sinclair carefully control environmental details in somewhat the same way as what Edwin Black described as the sentimental style, but unlike the sentimental style’s ends of hiding some great wrong, Kozol and Sinclair sought to expose a great wrong. Edwin Black, "The Sentimental Style as Escapism, or the Devil with Dan'l Webster,” in Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action, ed. by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1993), 75-86.


16 Robert Wilson, “‘Savage’ Indictment of Inequality in America’s Schools,” *USA Today*, October 18, 1991, 4D.


20 *Publishers Weekly*, cover.


28 Kozol take the phrase “America’s Soweto” from the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*. Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 15.


34 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 23.


46 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 224.


49 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 85-86.

50 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 92-94.


54 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 233.

55 In addition, Benson suggested that, “a study might survey the entire field of rhetorical novels, to determine how, with common rhetorical purposes, they work in different or similar ways to achieve their ends.” I consider this essay a small contribution to that cause. Thomas W. Benson, “Rhetorical Invention and Disposition in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*” (master’s thesis, Cornell University, 1961), 86-87.


57 Kozol, *Shame of the Nation*, 238.
Chapter 4

Blaming *The Bell Curve*

In 1969, Arthur Jensen scandalized the academic world with his lengthy *Harvard Educational Review* article advocating the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence. Preferring nature over nurture as the origin of cognitive ability, Jensen provoked condemnation by rejecting federal efforts to improve public education for historically oppressed Americans. Answering the essay’s titular question, “How Much Can We Boost I.Q. and Scholastic Achievement,” Jensen began his essay by declaring: “Compensatory education has been tried and it apparently has failed.”¹ According to the hereditarian perspective, intelligence—translated into a quotient or I.Q.—is determined primarily by genetics and therefore confined within fixed parameters from birth. This fixity, according to Jensen, dooms any effort to improve I.Q. Because the supplemental programs that typified compensatory education in the 1960s were a sizeable investment in nurture, the hereditarian perspective rejected them on principle. Jensen’s polemic on public education dismissed the prospect of social uplift through schooling, but his views on education policy were among the least controversial in the essay. Largely ignoring Jensen’s necrology of the public education reforms of the 1960s, his critics were outraged that the respected psychologist endorsed social policies that circumscribed the aspirations of so many poor and non-white Americans. Jensen’s lengthy piece met with charges of racism and reopened the public debate over the provenance of intelligence and its consequences for public policy.

Although Jensen’s views met with abundant censure, he was not alone in the hereditarian camp, nor was he alone in his call to reform social policy. In September of 1971, *The Atlantic Monthly* published an essay by Harvard psychology professor Richard J. Herrnstein entitled “I.Q.”² Herrnstein also described intelligence as a biological trait necessary for scholastic
achievement, but went further, declaring I.Q. critical to success in contemporary American society generally. As the United States became more thoroughly and efficiently meritocratic, Herrnstein reasoned, Americans would simultaneously divide themselves into classes based on their cognitive abilities. Because this burgeoning meritocracy would increasingly incentivize the smart to marry and reproduce amongst themselves, Herrnstein foresaw the stratification of these emerging cognitive classes: Americans hierarchized not just by test scores, but by all of the spoils that come with a high I.Q. For Herrnstein, this brave new world required a reconsideration of American social policies such as education and welfare. Once again, public advocacy of the hereditarian perspective earned widespread condemnation. In the inaugural article of the journal Cognition, Noam Chomsky berated Herrnstein’s essay as an ideologically driven abuse of Skinnerian psychology. In the Boston Globe, fellow Harvard psychology professor Alvin Poussaint called Herrnstein, “the enemy of black people.” Even the Harvard Crimson, which published some supportive statements from fellow academics including Skinner himself, concluded that Herrnstein did “unfortunately, strongly overstate his case.”

Although the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence earned little public praise in the late 1960s and early 1970s and quickly dropped out of campus newspapers, its two maligned advocates did not abandon their positions. Jensen continued writing academic articles on the question of racial differences in cognitive ability well into the 2000s and Herrnstein wrote popular press books on the subject until his death in 1994. Enlisting conservative think tank veteran Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute as a coauthor, Herrnstein’s last book, The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in America, became a best seller and brought the argument over intelligence back to the national stage in the mid-1990s.

Attempting to prove the case that the Crimson accused Herrnstein of overstating, The Bell Curve argued that I.Q. is the best indicator of an individual’s predisposition for a number of important social outcomes. Across six hundred pages of monograph and then four lengthy
appendices, Herrnstein and Murray navigated a sea of statistics in *The Bell Curve*. From economic success and crime, to family planning, civility, and citizenship, Herrnstein and Murray found correlations with I.Q. Moreover, they contended that the correlations between I.Q. and these outcomes were bigger than the leading alternative explanations like socioeconomic background and educational attainment. Collecting the most successful appeals of his quarter century advocating the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence, Herrnstein laid out his case in full over the four parts of *The Bell Curve*. He argued: (1) a cognitive elite has emerged that is increasingly separating itself from the rest of society, (2) low I.Q. is the strongest correlate of many of American society’s greatest ills, (3) racial groups have differing average I.Q.s making their members more or less likely to participate in creating social problems, and (4) the United States needs to reform its social policies by abandoning the pursuit of equality and privileging simple, but severe incentives to address the difficult realities created by variances in I.Q. Yet again, Herrnstein’s advocacy met with outrage, focused mostly on Part III of *The Bell Curve* where he and Murray discussed differences in cognitive ability between ethnic groups. Pillorying *The Bell Curve* with the same criticism Chomsky originally leveled against Herrnstein’s *Atlantic* article, critics charged Herrnstein and Murray with an ideological blindness that invented the racial differences they purportedly observed. However, *The Bell Curve* was not only a product of its authors’ preexisting ideological investments, it was also shaped by their preexisting rhetorical investments.

*The Bell Curve* is an extended exercise in the management of blame. Conforming to the preceding fifteen years of education policy discourse, Herrnstein and Murray begin their advocacy with an explanation of the presumed failure of public schooling in the United States. Instead of blaming *ex nihilo*, *The Bell Curve* espoused the account of educational failure Jensen set forth in his 1969 essay to the education scholars. According to *The Bell Curve*, societal problems—especially in education—were the result of the United States’ inability to adapt to the
bifurcation of American society into a cognitive elite and underclass. Herrnstein and Murray credited the underclass for creating large-scale social problems, but they also emphasized the elite’s failure to make laws and policies that take into account the genetic intractability of human intelligence. As Herrnstein and Murray worked to prove one blame narrative, they sought to disprove another. The book’s lead author was himself the object of public blame. Labeled a racist and an ideologue for his 1971 Atlantic article, Herrnstein wrote not just to recover the hereditarian perspective’s public image, but also his own. The Bell Curve is a prolonged exercise in ideologically driven social critique, but it is also a conduit through which Herrnstein transfers public blame away from himself. Negotiating the conflicting expectations that The Bell Curve both deny and place blame, Herrnstein and Murray strained to achieve suasion.

**Figure 4-1: Herrnstein and Murray’s Graph Defining Cognitive Classes**

**Defining the cognitive classes**

![The Distribution of IQ](image_url)

Although Herrnstein and Murray strongly oppose the redistribution of wealth and educational resources, they register their opposition in a protracted bid to redistribute blame. The Bell Curve shifts blame away from its lead author through the invention of cognitive classes, five hierarchized groups corresponding to the five standard deviations in a normal distribution—
typically represented graphically as a subdivided bell-shaped curve (See Figure 4-1). By classifying Americans based on their comparative I.Q.s, cognitive classes serve as the causal starting point from which they reallocate blame. The two lower cognitive classes are the predominant source of social ills according to *The Bell Curve*. Their inability for high cognitive functioning dooms the bottom 15.8% to create and recreate burdensome social problems. By contrast, the members of the cognitive upper class benefit from their high I.Q.s and possess a strong stake in a status quo that advantages them. According to Herrnstein and Murray, these elites are so blinded by their emotional investment in a society that assumes everyone has the potential to succeed that they cannot accept the scientific veracity of the hereditarian hypothesis.

Rebutting the charge of racism leveled against Herrnstein, *The Bell Curve* begins with a series of dissociations. Herrnstein and Murray claim for themselves, and a few select others including Jensen, an apolitical understanding of the true nature of human intelligence. Herrnstein’s purportedly scientific perspective, retained heroically despite its astounding unpopularity, exonerates him of any public wrongdoing. After arguing for the scientific-ness of Herrnstein’s position, *The Bell Curve* makes the case for its rectitude. Exploring a correlation between I.Q. and social ills, Herrnstein and Murray try to identify the source of social problems within the cognitive underclass without blaming them. However, Herrnstein and Murray’s position repeatedly spills over into blaming as they setup their case for policy change. At the end of *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray outline a set of policy reforms aimed at the simplification of consequences for participating in various social problems. Having eschewed blame for some five hundred pages, Herrnstein and Murray assert a system of punishments grounded in the confident determination that individuals should be held to account for participation in larger social problems, even if those problems have the genetic basis Herrnstein and Murray assert for them. Altogether, *The Bell Curve* presents a troubled, contradictory, and failed attempt to shift public blame.
In the wake of the controversy stirred up by “I.Q.,” the *Atlantic* offered Herrnstein an opportunity to make his case in greater detail by authoring an installment in its book series. Two years after his controversial article hit newsstands, the resulting *I.Q. In The Meritocracy* detailed the case for the consideration of I.Q. in the creation and revision of social policy. More than a dispassionate academic monograph, *I.Q. In The Meritocracy* began with Herrnstein’s history of the controversy surrounding his article. The first chapter, “A True Tale from the Annals of Orthodoxy,” took up roughly a fourth of the two-hundred-page book. In the chapter, Herrnstein detailed a series of attacks by “radicals,” attacks he considered unfair. He recalled colleagues denouncing his article in national newspapers, student groups at Harvard and other universities disrupting his classes and invited lectures, and newspapers mischaracterizing his arguments. Herrnstein reprinted posters and flyers from the University Action Group and the Students for a Democratic Society, one of which declared him, “WANTED FOR RACISM.” Toward the end of the chapter, Herrnstein also reprinted an extended exchange between himself and economist Richard Musgrave. The correspondence concerned Musgrave’s *Crimson* article on the campus controversy over “I.Q.,” particularly, Musgrave’s assessment of Herrnstein’s evidence as “skimpy.”

At the end of *I.Q. In The Meritocracy*’s first chapter, Herrnstein summarized his experience in dour terms: “The hostility of the radicals, the obscurantism of some academics, the one-sided coverage in the news, the increasing reluctance of scientific periodicals to publish hereditarian findings or scientific agencies to support hereditarian research—these are all signs of a political orthodoxy on human equipotentiality to which scholarship has become hostage.” For Herrnstein, this hostile milieu was the condition of his audience for *The Bell Curve*. Moreover,
these charges of racism and academic incompetence constituted a public act of blaming that warranted a detailed response.

Explicitly addressed to America’s power elite, *The Bell Curve* undertakes politics by academic means. Although the book concludes with a chapter of policy recommendations, it commences some five hundred pages earlier with a history of the study of intelligence. Beginning with Sir Francis Galton’s attempt to demonstrate the heritability of intelligence by surveying British nobility, Herrnstein and Murray trace the scientific pursuit of intelligence over the preceding century and a half of Western history. The history they proffer is one of progress. New studies beget new tests, as the elusive g factor—the social scientific designation for measures of cognitive ability—slowly comes into view. Although Herrnstein and Murray’s history proclaims steady advance, it is not devoid of reflection. They pause to praise the role of civil service examinations in imperial China and to condemn the contributions intelligence made to the development of the American eugenics movement. Above all, Herrnstein and Murray lament what they see as intelligence’s unfairly bad reputation. According to their history, an antagonistic relationship between those who study intelligence and America’s power elite emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Diagnosing a shift from the pursuit equal of opportunity to a quest for equal outcomes, Herrnstein and Murray situate their work as a fair-minded account of the difficult reality that is cognitive inequality.

Throughout their history of intelligence, Herrnstein and Murray ply dissociation, the strategic separation of a “unitary term” into “two parts.” They separate intelligence, as a political concept, from the academic study asserting their position as academics. They delineate schools of thought within the academic discipline of intelligence distancing themselves from two of the three. And, they bisect American political history in the 1960s, grouping various socialist movements together and holding them responsible for inspiring unsuccessful social policies like the Great Society. This process of dissociation begins on the first page of the introduction with
the two paragraphs that initiate the substantive narrative of the book. The first paragraph
describes intelligence as a historical concept that Herrnstein and Murray pronounce both
“universal and ancient.” In an imaginative flourish, the authors speculate that varying level of
cleverness among members of hunter-gatherer tribes must have been the subject of much
prehistoric campfire gossip. Transitioning into their second paragraph, Herrnstein and Murray
contrast the preliterate origins of intelligence conceptualized as a genetic trait with “the last thirty
years” during which “intelligence” became “a pariah in the world of ideas.” From Herrnstein and
Murray’s perspective, intelligence’s genetic provenance is a self-evident truth that
contemporaneous policymakers ignore contrary to several millennia of human history. The Bell
Curve thus dissociates Herrnstein and Murray’s concept of intelligence from its popular
reputation as either an “artifact of racism” or act of “academic fraud.” At the same time,
Herrnstein and Murray devalue intelligence’s negative reputation as—in relative terms—
historically perfunctory. Again and again, Herrnstein and Murray dissociate their concept of
intelligence from its popular reputation to try and separate themselves from various prejudices
against the hereditarian hypothesis they identify in their audience.

One particularly damning criticism Herrnstein and Murray respond to in their history is
the charge that the discipline of intelligence studies bears a responsibility for the crimes of Social
Darwinism and the American eugenics movement. Turning to dissociation once again, The Bell
Curve exonerates the study of intelligence from these transgressions by strategically excluding
various experts from the discipline. Throughout their history of intelligence, Herrnstein and
Murray distinguish between legitimate and mad social science. Whereas figures like Galton and
Jensen approach intelligence as a natural feature of the human experience explicable through
responsible scientific study, eugenicists like Lewis Terman and William Shockley—despite their
scientific training and contributions—push ill-conceived social engineering as misguided “testing
enthusiasts.” Because Galton and Jensen begin with science and reason toward social policy,
they offer trustworthy recommendations in Herrnstein and Murray’s estimation. Terman and Shockley invert and thereby pervert this process. Herrnstein and Murray structure The Bell Curve itself to live up to their dissociative injunction. Their introductory history attempts to position them in such a way that they can provide a trustworthy, science-first perspective. Moreover, despite working for the American Enterprise Institute, Murray—the more recognizably political of the two authors—adamantly maintained that his interest in writing The Bell Curve was scientific, not political.¹⁷

Even as they set aside their dichotomy between politics and academics to tend to academics exclusively, Herrnstein and Murray replicate their dissociative maneuver. Within the academic study of intelligence, they distinguish between three didactically named schools: the classicists, the revisionists, and the radicals. According to this tripartite scheme, the classicists and revisionists share a commitment to the premise that intelligence can be measured as $g$, an independent variable. Although the classicists work to refine a structural theory of intelligence and the revisionists study the $g$ factor as a collection of processes, they both attribute intelligence to individuals as a singular trait, genetically possessed. Herrnstein and Murray put Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences into the radical camp because he rejects the notion of a singular measureable $g$, instead breaking intelligence into seven categories independent of each other.¹⁸ The Bell Curve’s authors identify themselves as classicists, but decline to categorize the study of intelligence’s harshest critic, Stephen Gould. They acknowledge Gould’s work in their history, but position it along with the sensationalistic journalism they characterize as laying siege to intelligence. Despite Gould’s expertise as an evolutionary biologist, Herrnstein and Murray refuse to position his work inside the study of intelligence. The Bell Curve discusses Gould’s writing in violent terms calling it “the height” of the “assault on the integrity of the discipline.”¹⁹ For Herrnstein and Murray, Gould commands an invading force. The Mismeasure of Man features as the culminating example in a section of The Bell Curve entitled, “Intelligence
Besieged.” Like Terman and other embarrassing figures from the study of intelligence, Herrnstein and Murray use dissociation to reposition Gould outside the study of intelligence. Reclassifying the paleobiologist’s outside the discipline of intelligence studies, Herrnstein and Murray estrange Gould from the gravitas of expertise they claim for themselves. Herrnstein and Murray wield their expertise as evidence for the rectitude of their position, and they also brandish their position to confer or deny the expertise of others. Without its grounding in Gould’s scientific standing, Gould’s criticism is debased.

In the same way Herrnstein and Murray strategically include and omit others from intelligence studies as a response the to critics instead of their criticisms, they also appeal to the United States’ social history as an end run around various critiques. After centuries of increasingly sophisticated approaches to assessing and applying intelligence, the social and intellectual changes in American public life during the 1960s and their subsequent codification into federal policy constitute a grave departure according *The Bell Curve*. Bringing the social history of the 1960s to bear on the study of intelligence, Herrnstein and Murray offer an alternative explanation for the abandonment of intelligence as a useful category for policymaking. Instead of the political misadventures of “testing enthusiasts,” the social tumult of the 1960s explains the popular decline of intelligence studies. The pervasive socialist aspirations of the baby boomer generation supply a political motive for critics like Gould. Herrnstein and Murray identify a “fundamental shift” in the “received wisdom regarding equality” and diagnose that shift as the overzealous pursuit of equality stemming from the Civil Rights movement. Ascendant socialism riding a crest of civil rights victories explains policy changes like the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty and the shift among psychologists from the study of genetic to the study of environmental difference. Herrnstein and Murray’s version of the history of intelligence studies consequently portrays Jensen’s 1969 article in the *Harvard Educational Review* as a responsible call for caution in the face of rapid and “fundamental” change, not a
reactionary outburst of academic and political aggression. As Herrnstein and Murray dissociate their critics from the credibility conferred by expertise, they also dissociate themselves from the tumult of politics by postulating the 1960s as the volatile origin of intelligence’s fall from policymaking grace.

As Herrnstein and Murray dissociate their way through the history of intelligence studies, they simultaneously contextualize *The Bell Curve* as the subject of intense controversy. Instead of downplaying their book’s contentiousness, Herrnstein and Murray seem reluctantly to embrace it. They announce the “heterodox” nature of *The Bell Curve* on the first page of the introduction. Emphasizing the acrimonious nature of the public discussion over intelligence studies, Herrnstein and Murray introduce a model of inappropriate discourse against which they favorably contrast their own advocacy. This overarching piece of dissociation positions Herrnstein and Murray’s in defense of a body of scientific knowledge that has come under attack from polemic critics. Portraying its adversaries as aggressors, *The Bell Curve* alleviates Herrnstein of blame. Not only are Herrnstein’s critics responsible for initiating the controversy over intelligence; but their rudeness also becomes an alternative explanation for why Herrnstein was labeled a racist. As opposed to racial assumptions underlying his politics, *The Bell Curve* presents the invidious vehemence of Herrnstein’s critics as the source of his racist reputation. Their moral indictment is reduced to name-calling.

*The Bell Curve’s* introduction is a history of controversy, but also a history of blame. The introduction provides useful information for their readers in the form of an intellectual history of intelligence as well as a narrative frame in which *The Bell Curve’s* authors are trustworthy voices of reason in an irresponsibly sensationalized public debate. Through dissociation, Herrnstein seeks to shed the allegation of racism as Murray seeks to shed the public perception of bias stemming from his political activity. Leaving the question of their own blameworthiness behind, Herrnstein and Murray turn to the task of proposing who or what is rightfully blameworthy.
Blame IQ: The Pains of Being Pure at Cause

Transitioning from *The Bell Curve*’s introduction to the main body of the book, Herrnstein and Murray confront a rhetorical fork in the road. In their introduction, the authors contest a blame narrative that labeled Herrnstein a racist by proffering their own history of intelligence studies. In the body of *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray advance their argument that I.Q. is at the core of the United States’ social ills. The social scientific validity of intelligence’s role in the production of societal problems is *The Bell Curve*’s thesis, but it is also an integral part of the argument to exonerate Herrnstein. According to the introduction, Herrnstein is no racist. Instead, he is an uncommonly principled scientist willing to defend an unpopular but valid scientific conclusion. Of course Herrnstein’s position must be substantially verifiable for it to excuse his controversial advocacy. As *The Bell Curve* leaves the direct consideration of Herrnstein’s reputation behind and sets out to make its social scientific case for I.Q., Herrnstein and Murray confront a difficult rhetorical choice: will they answer blame with blame?

As academic experts, Herrnstein and Murray have more rhetorical options than blame for disputing cause. Although blame is a particularly efficient rhetorical maneuver for arguing over policy because it assigns cause to an agent—usually an opposing policy advocate—blame holds no monopoly over public reasoning. Indeed, blame has some downsides. Blaming can come across as petty, impugning Herrnstein and Murray’s congenial professionalism. Answering a preceding act of blame by responding in kind might appear overly defensive or even reactionary. Moreover, blame’s purchase on agency is a philosophical construct impossible to falsify. As a way of administering cause, blame forfeits the objective authority often accorded to science. In lieu of blaming, Herrnstein and Murray work to approximate the logical relationship communicated by blame through their extensive case for correlation. However, their efforts to
prove the correlation between I.Q. and social strife stray repeatedly onto the causal grounds of blame.

Although Herrnstein and Murray rely on correlation throughout The Bell Curve, they state their position explicitly at the beginning of Part II: “We will . . . argue that cognitive ability is an important factor in thinking about the nature of the present problems, whether or not cognitive ability is a cause.”25 Whereas Part I works to establish the existence of the “cognitive elite,” a group of Americans separated from the rest of society by the privileges resulting from their high I.Q.s, Part II advances a corresponding claim. Just as those at the top of the I.Q. pyramid owe their propitious socioeconomic fortunes and intensifying isolation to their high cognitive abilities, those at the bottom owe their mounting misfortunes to their low I.Q.s. "Whatever the path of causation,” Herrnstein and Murray reason, the “simple correlation, unadjusted for other factors . . . between cognitive ability and social behaviors is socially important.”26 By asserting the sufficiency of correlation for policymaking, Herrnstein and Murray advocate policy reform on the grounds that, whatever the cause, if groups of people are disproportionately afflicted with some social malady, then a policy solution is required. To make this argument, The Bell Curve relies on Herrnstein and Murray’s ability to make the case first, that cognitive classes exist, and second, that various social concerns like poverty, criminality, and single parenthood disproportionately correspond with low cognitive ability.

As The Bell Curve’s considerable length suggests, correlation can be a difficult case to prove. However, its strategic value extends beyond Herrnstein and Murray’s scientific and professional ethos. Discussing the relationship between cognitive ability and social problems as correlation allows Herrnstein and Murray to evade the rudeness of cause. The audacity of two Harvard-educated, well-compensated, white men insisting that low cognitive ability predestines individuals to social problems is pretty damning to the prospect of persuasion. For Herrnstein and Murray, correlation is rhetorically valuable as an argumentative nicety. Having begun the book
by insisting on the controversial nature of their advocacy, Herrnstein and Murray transcend the contentious expectation they created for their advocacy.

Despite the best of their intentions, Herrnstein and Murray’s strategic pursuit of correlation as the exclusive evidence for their position requires a great deal of rhetorical self-denial. Managing cause without blame is a discursive ideal, not a practicality. Indeed, Herrnstein and Murray write in causal terms fairly frequently, but almost always in the guise of hypothetical speculation. As blame intrudes on *The Bell Curve’s* attempt at bloodless suasion, the origins of the book’s atrocious academic reception become clear. Moreover, Herrnstein and Murray’s effort to sublimate the blame directed at Herrnstein in the early 1970s turns to displacement. As they survey the wreckage of American education, the authors find others worthy of blame.

Probably in pursuit of readability, but also as an aid to their reader’s understanding, Herrnstein and Murray provide brief narrative examples as they argue for correlations between cognitive ability and a number of social ills. In “Schooling,” the second chapter of Part II, Herrnstein and Murray explore the relationship between academic achievement and cognitive ability. They argue that high and low cognitive ability correlates with success and failure in school, particularly that I.Q. scores powerfully predict the likelihood of high school graduation and dropout. As they turn their attention in the chapter to those who earn a certificate of General Educational Development (GED), Herrnstein and Murray “speculate about what lies behind the numbers.” They describe three levels of high school dropout corresponding to family income:

First, there are middle- and the upper-class parents who find it unthinkable that their children should drop out of high school—call the therapist, find a special school, do anything, but keep the child in school. Then one thinks of working-class parents (most of whom are somewhere around the mean on the socioeconomic index), urging their children to get an education and do better than their parents. Finally, one thinks of lower-class parents, the Pap Finns of American folklore, complaining about their children wasting all that time on book learning. The NLSY data are consistent with these popular images.27
Herrnstein and Murray’s descriptions are less than flattering for everyone involved. The upper and middle-class parents take excessive, coddling action to try and save their children’s academic futures, but at least they find the thought of their child dropping out of school “unthinkable.” Implicitly, dropout is a somewhat more acceptable outcome for working and lower-class parents who Herrnstein and Murray describe in stereotypical terms. Working-class parents’ have no choice but to saddle their children with the traditional American narrative of hard work and upward mobility in their attempts to keep their children in school. However insensitive the impotent response Herrnstein and Murray imagine for working-class parents concerned about their children’s educations, the authors’ characterization of lower-class parents belongs to a different category of insulting. Herrnstein and Murray invoke Mark Twain’s Pap Finn as the archetypal lower-class parent, describing lower-class parenting as abusive and drunken. Given this dramatic and offensive hierarchy, the skeptical reception to the notion that Herrnstein and Murray possess an accurate account of the United States’ complex social problems expressed by many of The Bell Curve’s reviewers seems understandable.

Cause attends Herrnstein and Murray’s hierarchy of parenting excellence. Working-class children have a greater propensity for dropping out because their parents either lack the wherewithal to offer more than an inspirational message in support of their education and lower-class children have a greater propensity for dropping out because their parents are abusive, drunk, and belligerently anti-intellectual. By entering their hypothetical narratives into the analytical record, Herrnstein and Murray provide more than lively description for their audience and they also provide more than anachronistically class-based moral judgment. Herrnstein and Murray postulate a causal explanation for disparities in dropout rates. Bad parenting, tied to economic status and cognitive ability, is the cause. Herrnstein and Murray’s parents are culpable for the children’s scholastic failures.
In particular, Herrnstein and Murray identify a failure on the part of parents to instill a strong work ethic in their children as the attribute that differentiates high school graduates from dropouts. As a justification for their statistical decision to group GED recipients with high school dropouts as opposed to graduates, Herrnstein and Murray explain that people with GEDs suffer from a “social background that has not inculcated a work ethic that makes for success in the labor force.”^28 This incapacity for hard work, however plausibly reasoned, takes dropout rates out of the blameless realm of widespread social phenomena and reframes it as an individual failure for which each student who drops out is culpable. Lower class people simply do not work hard enough to succeed, according to Herrnstein and Murray.

Although *The Bell Curve* slips overtly from correlation into causation when reasoning like work ethic provides a causal rationale that Herrnstein and Murray are confident enough to share candidly, the book also makes elaborately qualified causal claims that maintain the appearance of correlation. Chapter 10, in which Herrnstein and Murray posit a relationship between parenting and I.Q., typifies this softened approach. Herrnstein and Murray begin Chapter 10 with remarks on the great power parents possess to determine their children’s futures. Then, like the other chapters in Part II of *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray embark upon several meta-analyses. Looking at the various potential sources of “malparenting,” all of which are ascribed to some attribute existing in the individual parent, Herrnstein and Murray perform a sort of step-by-step regression. For each potential correlate of bad parenting, Herrnstein and Murray list existing academic studies and characterize the scholarly knowledge they draw from considering the group. At the end of the chapter, Herrstein and Murray review the results of their investigation.

Concluding their discussion of parenting, Herrnstein and Murray seek to solidify their readers’ understanding of the chapter. “The relationship between cognitive ability and parenting,” according to Herrnstein and Murray, “is unmistakable.” Then, courting the assent of their more
skeptical readers, Herrnstein and Murray admit the contestability of aspects of this “relationship” while admonishing their readers “not to take the easy way out” by dismissing the authors’ definition of good parenting as the mere preferences of the middle-class. Herrnstein and Murray then appeal to their readers’ “best understanding of the realities of child rearing” as confirmation that “smart parents tend to be better parents.” Having previously acknowledged that *The Bell Curve*’s audience is composed primarily of the middle and upper-middle class cognitive elite, Herrnstein and Murray’s petition for their audience’s “best understanding” of good parenting that is not the mere preference of the middle class is a circular argument.29 Again and again, Herrnstein and Murray struggle to differentiate distinctions made on the basis of genetics from those made on the basis of class.

In addition to requesting that *The Bell Curve*’s readers use their best judgment regarding parenting, Herrnstein and Murray ask that their readers exercise judgment at the extremes. Concluding Chapter 10, Herrnstein and Murray assert that, “some environments are so bad that no one can seriously dispute that they are bad, and even the most resilient children have difficulty overcoming them. These truly disadvantaged homes are disproportionately associated with women at the low end of the intelligence distribution, even after other contributing factors such as poverty and socioeconomic status are taken into account.”30 Here, Herrnstein and Murray identify a threshold. In “some environments,” the disadvantages of “malparenting” are so egregious that they cause bad outcomes. Herrnstein and Murray continue to use the language of correlation by asserting an “association” between mothers with low I.Q.s and the bad parenting outcomes they discussed earlier in the chapter. However, their subsequent clarification that this association holds “even after” accounting for “other contributing factors,” introduces a temporal relationship between parenting outcomes and the mother’s I.Q. The quality of maternal cognition is a “factor” that Herrnstein and Murray analyze as an input. Herrnstein and Murray do not just argue that maternal I.Q. coincides with “malparenting” outcomes, they argue that mother’s I.Q.
“contributes” to “malparenting.” Moreover, Herrnstein and Murray carefully parse indisputably bad environments from general parenting to facilitate their readers’ judgment. The parents that cause bad outcomes are thoroughly other: poor, female, and—above all—dumb. Once quarantined to an extreme, the attribution of cause becomes a moderate judgment. Additionally, once a temporal relationship between maternal I.Q. and outcome is posited by Herrnstein and Murray and sanctioned by the reader, confining that causal alignment to the quarantined group of very low I.Q. mothers requires continual effort as Herrnstein and Murray apply the relationship elsewhere.

Herrnstein and Murray complicate their readers’ efforts to patrol the borders between correlation and causation by drawing their correlational claims across chapters throughout Part II. For example, as they insist on the significance of the relationship between I.Q. and “criminality,” Herrnstein and Murray point to the correlational claims they make in other chapters, treating those claims as evidence. *The Bell Curve’s* chapters on unemployment and education become proof in its chapter on crime. Connecting I.Q. with crime, Herrnstein and Murray reiterate their argument “that low intelligence often translates into failure and frustration in school and in the job market.” Instead of rehearsing the reasoning behind this claim, Herrnstein and Murray assert it as causation; low intelligence “translates.” “If,” they reason, “people of low intelligence have a hard time finding a job, they might have more reason to commit crimes as a way of making a living.” Their assertion trades on the plausibility of correlational claims. The connection between I.Q. and scholastic and/or employment success are appealing as common sense. Even insofar as a reader might object to Herrnstein and Murray’s generalization as overbroad, they insist “at the least” that the “failures” those with low I.Q.s experience “in school and at work may foster resentment toward society and its laws.” For Herrnstein and Murray, one social problem always leads to another. As long as I.Q. has one deleterious societal outcome, it contributes meaningfully to a whole range of such problems. At the end of their chapter on criminality, Herrnstein and
Murray explain that people are “correct” when they think of “criminals as coming from the wrong side of the tracks,” but that the underlying cause this criminal behavior is not the environment, but a failure of “coping with cognitive disadvantage.”

In each of *The Bell Curve’s* chapters on social problems, Herrnstein and Murray argue that I.Q. is the subtending explanation that is at the root conventional explanations for the sources of social problems. In addition, Herrnstein and Murray’s articulation of these maladies as overlapping makes each chapter in Part II evidence for the core claim in each other chapter in Part II. These interlocking claims make a sort of stick bomb out of Part II. Altogether, Herrnstein and Murray’s chapters support each other, but like a collection of popsicle sticks held together by tension, the lack of any permanent attachments—such as a thorough case for causation—makes all of Part II susceptible to a failure of any one of its chapters.

Simultaneously advancing several appeals for correlation, Herrnstein and Murray seek the rhetorical force of blame without the responsibility for having blamed. With hypothetical examples hypothetically evidencing causation, a focus on extreme cases, and appeals to causal claims, Herrnstein and Murray insist they have established across Part II, *The Bell Curve* provides a great deal of support upon which their readers conclude that low I.Q. is not just correlated with social problems, but a cause of them. Part II establishes the causal influence of I.Q. and simultaneously suggests that those with low I.Q.s lack agency over important aspects of their lives. Herrnstein and Murray suggest at various points that people with low I.Q.s fail to understand the decisions they are making or do not possess an adequate work ethic to make the long-term trade-offs that their more cognitively gifted peers do to get ahead in the world. In the guise of a careful consideration of the circumstances that make for disturbing trends, Herrnstein and Murray uncover the source of social problems in the people who suffer from them. However, instead of then imagining a way to harness this individual decision making power as the path to a
better future, Herrnstein and Murray instead advocate a series of policy solutions grounded in the removal or simplification of individual agency.

**Shifting Blame: Prevailing Upon the Cognitive Underclass**

Having dissociated their brand of intelligence studies from the troublesome history of Social Darwinism and having correlated I.Q. scores with pressing social problems, Herrnstein and Murray shift their focus to the future as they shift their blame to the cognitive underclass. In the final chapter of Part IV, Herrnstein and Murray describe their vision for a better America proposing a program of social policy reform. Codifying the causal relationship they posit between social problems and the cognitive abilities of the people who participate in them, *The Bell Curve* achieves its goal of dispersing the blame leveled against Herrnstein for being racist. If Herrnstein’s observations in 1971 were scientific, presumably, they were not racist. Additionally, in making the scientific case for the relationship between I.Q. scores and social problems, *The Bell Curve* also presents a competing blame narrative: the degradation of America’s social welfare by the cognitive underclass. However, before discussing the minutia of Herrnstein and Murray’s policy program, some account of Part III must be given. Part III, innocuously titled “The National Context,” is the elephant in the book.

Herrnstein and Murray begin “Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability,” the first chapter of Part III, by breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging “that many readers have turned first to this chapter” presumably to see what all of the fuss is about.\(^3\) Delivering their controversial news in effusively polite terms, Herrnstein and Murray do not disappoint their impatient readers. In what came to be an especially notorious piece of social reform advocacy, Herrnstein and Murray argue that I.Q. is, to a significant degree, determined by genetics. Moreover, they go to great lengths to demonstrate their conclusion that I.Q.’s genetic origins ensure statistically significant
differences in cognitive ability across ethnic categories. Citing studies, including Jensen’s academic work, they point to differences in aggregated I.Q. scores between white Americans, East Asians, and black Americans, hierarchizing the three groups with Asians at the top and blacks on the bottom. Herrnstein and Murray not only take the position that these test score differences are significantly the result of genetics, but they also interpret aggregated differences in test scores as an explanation for other statistical variations between the three ethnic communities like educational attainment, economic success, parenting, and several other measures of social achievement. The extent of the controversy surrounding *The Bell Curve* is easy to understand when considering the offensive content in Part III. Not surprisingly, the racism expressed in Part III has been noted widely and in detail by both popular and academic reviews of the book.  

Instead of deducing yet another proof toward the indisputability of Herrnstein and Murray’s expressed racism in Part III, I have chosen to focus my attention on the more obscure Part IV, building my analysis on this already extensive critical effort. The majority of the voluminous body of criticism concerning *The Bell Curve* is directed—with good reason—at Part III. Although a number of critical responses are available in print, my analysis assumes more than any other Gould’s critique from the revised and expanded edition of *The Mismeasure of Man*. I agree with Gould’s conclusions that: (1) Herrnstein and Murray are, despite their insistence to the contrary, expressing and advocating Social Darwinism, (2) studies of the environmental influence on the average I.Q. of groups of people prove a stronger causal connection than studies of the genetic influences, (3) Herrnstein and Murray ignore the contemporaneous debate about the ability of I.Q. tests to measure cognitive ability without cultural bias, and (4) although Herrnstein and Murray assert correctly that I.Q. correlates with some social outcomes, they present little or no data concerning the strength of the correlations, which upon further investigation prove too weak for their advocacy. Gould concludes that *The Bell Curve* is “a manifesto of conservative
ideology” and I agree adding that the particular brand of conservatism Herrnstein and Murray espoused in the middle 1990s included many unseemly assumptions about race.35

As a work with rhetorical ambitions, The Bell Curve’s problems are first and foremost personal. Like any rhetorical expression, blaming “implies an auditor” replete with motive and ideology.36 However, blame also identifies a culpable party who can be, but is not always the same as the implied audience. Whether the culpable party is or is not an audience for the act of blame, the culpable are still personified through the attribution of motive and ideology. Like an audience, the blamed party is represented in the text as what Edwin Black called a “second persona.” In the case of the blamed, this persona prescribes a sense of agency underwriting the culpable party’s blameworthiness. In other words, the culpable must be personified as an agent or group of agents simultaneously capable of the act for which they are to blame and free to act in ways that are blameless. The ascription of blameworthy agency to those with low cognitive abilities through the argument that cognitive ability is to a significant degree determined by genetics and thus tied to race is the personification that troubles so many of The Bell Curve’s auditors. Herrnstein and Murray argue that the same genetic heritage that makes someone black, white, or Asian also predisposes that person to better or worse socioeconomic outcomes. Their depictions of the cognitive underclass as statistically doomed to social problems along with the speculation that those social problems are the result of various failings—ranging from general haplessness to alarming malevolence—suggest an unflattering persona for the cognitive underclass and all those Herrnstein and Murray identify as genetically disposed to be members of that underclass.

By loading a set of comparatively negative and positive attributes onto the racial categories white, black, and Asian, Herrnstein and Murray’s endorsement of the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence is racist, but is it blame? If people who test in the lower two quintiles for cognitive ability are statistically more likely than those in the top three to be a part of
larger social problems, and if the test scores that determine this likelihood have their origins in
genetics, do these individuals possess the agency to act otherwise? Although Herrnstein and
Murray are keen to leverage their endorsement of the hereditarian hypothesis as a dispassionate
alternative to blame, the persona they elaborate for the cognitive underclass does seem to have the
requisite agency to be blameworthy, if only conditionally. The cognitive underclass—who are
disproportionately black and poor according to Herrnstein and Murray—are not responsible for
their genetics. Although members of the cognitive underclass are the biological vessels of social
problems, Herrnstein and Murray excuse them—most of the time, but not always—of ill intent
characterizing their supposed role in the creation of social problems as an unfortunate reality.
However, Herrnstein and Murray do insist that members of the cognitive underclass should be
rewarded and punished when they succeed or fail at resisting their genetic predisposition for
delinquency.

Similarly, Herrnstein and Murray characterize the cognitive elite—their presumed
auditors—as bound by orthodoxy. The cognitive elite are so emotionally invested in the idea that
anyone can succeed in the United States through hard work, insist Herrnstein and Murray, that
they are unwilling to face the reality that a large portion Americans, owing to their genetics, lack
the cognitive potential to succeed, even through hard work. Like the cognitive underclass, the
cognitive elite have agency, but only provisionally. Herrnstein and Murray are often at pains in
_The Bell Curve_ to get their elite audience to consider their heterodox position. The cajoling tone
they take toward the cognitive elite suggests that—contrary to their position that the cognitive
underclass are the persistent cause of social problems because they lack a capacity for reasonable
consideration that the cognitive elite supposedly possess in excess—Herrnstein and Murray do
not believe that their elite peers have sufficient control over their emotional investments to give
the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence careful consideration. Even among the
cognitive elite, agency is hard to come by in _The Bell Curve_. Judgment, however, is not.
“A Place for Everyone,” the last chapter of Part IV of The Bell Curve, contains Herrnstein and Murray’s vision for a better tomorrow. Describing a regime of “simplified” and severe consequences for participation in social problems like crime and divorce, Herrnstein and Murray hope to incentivize a more virtuous and functional America. For the first step, they propose abandoning the quest for equality. Herrnstein and Murray argue that the United States can better provide a valued place in society for every citizen if it can let go of efforts to manipulate those places so that they are equal in prestige and compensation. Not only do Herrnstein and Murray argue that intelligence hierarchizes people in terms of social position, but they add that it should. Within the hierarchy, however, Herrnstein and Murray envision individuals finding valued places filling needed roles. Although, in this final chapter, Herrnstein and Murray no longer make extensive arguments for the hereditarian hypothesis—resting on the case they have made—their call for policy consequences continues to build a blameworthy persona for the cognitive underclass. Their places are lower in the hierarchy The Bell Curve envisions and the reforms Herrnstein and Murray propose are aimed at engineering the behavior of the cognitive underclass.

Although Herrnstein and Murray foresee a better future by letting go of the quest for equality of social and economic outcomes, they do not urge a concomitant letting go of the quest for equality before the law. Herrnstein and Murray, having defined crime as a problem emanating predominantly from the cognitive underclass, seek to help them commit fewer crimes. Hence, The Bell Curve proposes a swifter and more severe justice system that focuses on “a few obviously wrong acts” like: “assault, rape, murder, robbery, theft, trespass, destruction of another’s property, fraud.” Identifying a list of crimes, none of which require access to elite power or money—except in the case of fraud, where that access is stolen—Herrnstein and Murray’s proposal contributes to their continued personification of the cognitive underclass. Grounding their policy prescriptions in James Q. Wilson’s conservative moral philosophy, Herrnstein and
Murray seek to ensure that the punishment for each of these crimes “hurts.” According to Herrnstein and Murray, if the consequences for criminal behavior are complex, “a person with comparatively low intelligence” will have “much more difficulty following a moral compass.”

For Herrnstein and Murray, the goal public policy is to condition the cognitive underclass to make decisions that defy their supposed genetic predisposition to criminality and dependency while encouraging the cognitive elite to embrace their supposed dispositions for the opposite. Consequently, Herrnstein and Murray’s concept of criminal justice relies on deterrence to reduce crime through the behavioral modification of the underclass. Inspired, perhaps, by Herrnstein’s work developing the Matching Law with pigeons, deterrence, in turn, relies on the sort of blame that reaches and entire population. The persona Herrnstein and Murray develop for those they blame for crime condemns individuals for past actions, but also discourages others from taking future action, lest they be grouped with the loathsome blameworthy. The Matching Law, Herrnstein’s chief contribution to behavioral psychology, dictates that the rate of reinforcement for a given behavior will correspond to the rate of response. So, conceptualizing the cognitive underclass as a unified entity, the more severe and frequent the punishment, the less criminal their behavior will be. Making the consequences for crime swift and hurtful, Herrnstein and Murray hope to make their prescribed “moral compass” easy to read and formidable.

Again and again, Herrnstein and Murray account for social problems by speculating that people with low I.Q. scores fail to think their way around to the correct life decision. “It has become much more difficult for a person of low cognitive ability to figure out why marriage is a good thing,” Herrnstein and Murray declare. “The sexual revolution is the most obvious culprit. The old bargain from the man’s point of view—get married, because that’s the only way you’re going to be able to sleep with the lady—was the kind of incentive that did not require a lot of intellect to process and had an all-powerful effect on behavior.” Without statistical evidence to suggest that divorce is a more common problem among the cognitive underclass than the
cognitive elite—a counterintuitive supposition given that Herrnstein and Murray repeatedly admonish the cognitive elite for their permissiveness—the authors reduce marriage to a broken sexual bargain between lower class couples. After conceding that “restoring” marriage as a sexual contract “is not feasible,” Herrnstein and Murray propose to replace the commitment-inducing power of sex with money and children: “we urge that marriage once again become the sole legal institution through which rights and responsibilities regarding children are exercised. If you are an unmarried mother, you have no legal basis for demanding that the father of the child provide support. If you are an unmarried father, you have no legal standing regarding the child.”

Setting aside the complications that would result from Herrnstein and Murray’s “simplification” of family law, their suggested consequences for divorce project shadows of the personae the authors attribute to parents in the cognitive underclass. Herrnstein and Murray assume men will be the primary breadwinners, that women’s parental responsibilities are irrevocable whereas men’s are optional, that marriage is always a more preferable outcome than divorce, and that all parents can legally marry in the United States. What seems to worry Herrnstein and Murray are all the ways in which divorce results in people defying what Herrnstein and Murray estimate is their valued place in society. Again, Herrnstein and Murray see the way to a better society through blame’s capacity for deterrence. Codifying the stigmas surrounding divorce, *The Bell Curve* seeks to hold people to their places in Herrnstein and Murray’s preferred social hierarchy; in other words, their places along the bell curve.

After offering deterrence through the codification of blame as their solution for crime and divorce, Herrnstein and Murray consider the prospect of addressing these social problems at their purported source: genetics. In a section entitled “Dealing with Demography,” Herrnstein and Murray address the “uncomfortable” eugenic implications of hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence. “A society with a higher mean IQ,” Herrnstein and Murray lament is, “likely to be a society with fewer social ills and brighter economic prospects.” Moreover, they add: “The most
efficient way to raise the IQ of a society is for smarter women to have higher birth rates than
duller women.” From these two conclusions and tempered by their “apprehensive” feelings about,
“what might happen when a government decides to social-engineer who has babies and who
doesn’t,” Herrnstein and Murray offer a policy intervention that they characterize as less
manipulative than deterrence. Instead of preventing the cognitive underclass from reproducing,
Herrnstein and Murray recommend that the United States remove incentives that encourage
reproduction among the cognitive underclass. Much like their position that unmarried women
should not be able to compel financial assistance in the form of child support from unmarried
fathers, Herrnstein and Murray “urge” an end to “the extensive network of cash and services for
low-income women who have babies.”

Attaching blameworthiness to genetics in an actionable policy context, Herrnstein and
Murray take the dramatic step of declaring the very existence of the cognitive underclass itself a
social problem. According to The Bell Curve, a low I.Q. makes one existentially and extensively
blameworthy. Both the existential and extensive aspects of Herrnstein and Murray’s blame
narrative assist in shifting public blame away from Herrnstein. At the existential level, Herrnstein
sheds blame as his intellectual achievements in the field of psychology and professorship at
Harvard University evidence a genetic predisposition to avoid the social maladies of the cognitive
underclass. Murray’s undergraduate degree from Harvard presumably provides the same
exemption. Although Herrnstein and Murray do not laud their own qualifications, their apparent
membership among the cognitive elite they largely exempt from participation in social problems
is a straightforward implication of their book. At the extensive level, Herrnstein and Murray’s
faith in genetically-assigned blame as a deterrent applied so broadly in the arena social policy
shifts a preponderance of blame from Herrnstein onto the cognitive underclass. The cognitive
underclass’s biological inclination to crime, divorce, “malparenting,” unemployment, educational
failure, welfare dependency, and incivility itself is responsible for the truth Herrnstein defended
in spite of its social repercussions in 1971. According to The Bell Curve, Herrnstein and others who have told what he and Murray understand to be the truth about intelligence are punished for doing so. If the cognitive underclass were not inherently to blame for a broad set of social problems, Herrnstein would have had no need to write to The Atlantic and suffer the resulting backlash. Herrnstein’s public embarrassment is, at last, displaced onto the cognitive underclass as he and Murray uncover its origin in their life choices.

**Shifts and Starts: Public Blaming as Cyclical**

In the last subsection of “A Place for Everyone,” Herrnstein and Murray wonder aloud: “What good can come from writing this book?” They give four answers. They wrote The Bell Curve to: (1) clarify the historical record, making sure that everyone knows what portion of the United States population has caused an increase in social problems during the later half of the twentieth century, (2) improve public policy through a proper understanding of intelligence as a scientific concept, (3) prevent the waste of educational resources on increasing I.Q. scores that will not rise, and (4) inspire a return to individualism in American policymaking, specifically to overcome the pursuit of equality. Although Herrnstein and Murray are right to identify these as four of the core rhetorical goals of The Bell Curve, they leave out—perhaps for good reasons—a fifth. Beginning with a historical discussion of the controversy over the nature of human intelligence including a dramatic episode of public blame leveled at Herrnstein, The Bell Curve develops an extensive act of public blame implicating the cognitive underclass for the most pressing social issues facing the United States in the 1990s. As it courted controversy, The Bell Curve also shifted blame.

When The Bell Curve shifted blame from Herrnstein to the cognitive underclass, it also shifted blame from an individual phenomenon to a group phenomenon. The aggregated behaviors
of groups of people, as scientifically discernable social phenomena, alone meet Herrnstein and Murray’s threshold for culpability. They dissociate a politicized version of intelligence studies from their scientific version, putting the blame Herrnstein suffered in 1971 into the political category. Thus, a mob of zealous elites including Gould, Chomsky, and Poussaint ganged up on Herrnstein to accuse him of racism. Herrnstein, the individual, was not at fault for this episode, the group of distinguished minds was. Using a series of regressions to make an argument for correlation, Herrnstein and Murray assert that the culpability of the cognitive underclass is simply a statistical reality, not a matter over which blame can be placed. Once again, a mob is at fault. As Herrnstein and Murray load collective behaviors with blame, the prospects for social policies the support, instead of punish, people in groups slips away. Although The Bell Curve addresses a much larger field of public policy than Arthur Jensen’s lengthy article in the Harvard Educational Review, both conclude that the prospects of education policy as an engine of social uplift are limited. Moreover, Herrnstein and Murray, like Jensen, insist that education efforts beginning with the hopes of equalizing outcomes are chiefly to blame for failures of public education through the 1970, 1980s, and early 1990s.

Received on its own ground, The Bell Curve presents an account of educational failure in which Americans themselves are not to blame. If I.Q. is as deterministic as Herrnstein and Murray assert, cognitive class is culpable for social problems and the members of each class are mere victims of their I.Q.s. In this scenario, blame is removed from Herrnstein and sublimated as the ineffable nature of intelligence takes credit for the social problems identified in The Bell Curve. However, if I.Q. is not as deterministic as Herrnstein and Murray insist—the prevailing position of the audience to whom they address the book—then the cognitive elite and the cognitive underclass are to blame after all. The Bell Curve thus presents a grim choice for its auditors: either relinquish agency over the United States’ public policy problems or accept culpability for them. As Herrnstein and Murray work to restructure their blame narrative so that
those who rejected it a quarter century earlier might instead endorse it, they—ironically—present their audience with countervailing reinforcements. Unwilling to view themselves as the unwitting victims of their cognitive class, *The Bell Curve*’s audience not only rejected Herrnstein and Murray’s attempt to dissipate blame, but responded by renewing the cycle of public blaming.

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16 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 1, 4-5.


18 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 14-16.


20 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 4-5.

21 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 4-5.


26 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 117-118

27 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 142-143.

28 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 143.


33 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 270.


40 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 544-545.

41 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 544-545.

42 All quotations in this paragraph taken from: Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 548-549

43 Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 549.

44 Keith Gilyard points out Herrnstein and Murray’s propensity for distrusting groups, while conscientiously maintaining the potential innocence of individuals. “Getting Off the Hook—I Mean Curve,” Keith Gilyard, *Let’s Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature, and Learning* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 120.
Conclusion

Assessing Blame: Language and Policy

Every day, as people make their way through the world, they ascribe outcomes to agents. They credit and blame groups, individuals, objects, and even themselves. Sometimes, these episodes of instinctive blame, expressed impromptu in moments of urgency or confusion, make their way by chance into public discourse. The four case studies in this dissertation are not this compulsive kind of blaming. Milton Friedman, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Jonathan Kozol, Richard Herrnstein, and Charles Murray, all exercised blame in the form of premeditated rhetorical performances. They connected outcomes and agents in rhetorical acts designed to make some difference in the world. Like any rhetorical action, blame has consequences that echo in the words that follow it. But, as an intervention into a deliberation over policy, public blame can also have consequences in the decisions that follow it. Reverberating in a public conversation where words acquire the force of law, blame has high stakes for life as well as language.

Blame, as the public declaration of a negative judgment of someone or something, sets a constellation of ideas about the world into rhetorical motion. For P.F. Strawson, blaming requires a metaphysical commitment to the existence of freewill.¹ For Kenneth Burke, blaming a scapegoat bespeaks an investment in the life and health of one’s community.² For Aristotle, blame is the defense of a disregarded virtue.³ The broad philosophical assumptions Strawson, Burke, and Aristotle describe as endemic to acts of blaming attend each of the case studies in this dissertation, but so do some more modest assumptions. Each act of public blame featured in this dissertation assumes that there is something severely wrong with public education in the United States. They do not all agree on what exactly is wrong, but none of these rhetors write or speak in
defense of the public education status quo. This consensus stretches across a broad spectrum of political views. In each case, the specific acts of blaming reflect the particular political position or philosophy of the rhetor or group of rhetors doing the blaming. When taken together, these acts of blame reveal an assumption held inviolate in four of the most prominent political statements on public education in the 1980s and early 1990s.

On the basis of this consensus condemning the condition of public education, a diverse set of influential policy advocates treated education policy reform as inevitable. Instead of considering the wisdom of policy change through an evaluation of whether the public education system was really in such dire disrepair, the public deliberation over education policy in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s elided the stasis of fact. Instead, the public conversation about who or what was to blame for public education’s purported failures presumed the necessity of reform. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, the reform of federal policy they imagined had already begun. At almost the same time The Bell Curve began appearing on bookstore shelves and in newspaper headlines, Congress passed the Improving America’s School Act of 1994 (IASA). The IASA reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and, for the first time, “required states to set curricular standards for all public school students and to assess student performance on those standards.” Turning to the consolidated federal power provided by Jimmy Carter’s Department of Education, the IASA began to move towards a national curriculum. When the IASA itself was eventually reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), it took on the language of “accountability,” codifying a new test-based system for the management of public schooling as well as a blame narrative that put the responsibility for the failures of public schooling on the shoulders of teachers and administrators.

In sum, the public blame of the 1980s and 1990s structured the public policy of 2000s.

Examining prominent acts of public blame from the 1980s and early 1990s lends some insight into the rhetorical process by which accountability, a blame narrative, became the central
policy reform of NCLB. The ubiquity of blame in prominent contributions to the education policy discourse of the late twentieth century habituated accusation and faultfinding as permanent features of public conversations about improving education. Moreover, the diversity of blame narratives—malevolent bureaucrats, national complacency, failed desegregation, and inherited intelligence—created a rhetorical milieu wherein the cause of public education’s difficulties was difficult discern. With an excess of finger pointing, there was no telling which account of the nation’s education policy needs should be trusted. A rhetorical setting where almost every prominent voice agreed that American schools were in peril and where almost none of them presented the same explanation for the cause of that peril was ideal for introduction of accountability.

Accountability not only blamed, it condensed some of the most effective features of the blame narratives from the 1980s and 1990s. Accountability held bureaucrats and teachers responsible for public education’s problems, just like Friedman had in 1980, with no need to contest the popular narrative of systemic decline.8 Ironically, accountability combined disdain for educational bureaucrats with the tools of educational bureaucracy, demanding the standardization and testing recommended by A Nation At Risk. The endorsement of testing as the arbiter of success and failure, or praise and blame, lent accountability the objectivity of a science, elevating accountability as a more trustworthy blame narrative. Indeed the consolidation of blame narratives in NCLB extended beyond Friedman and A Nation at Risk to calls for greater equity in the quality of schooling and educational outcomes. No Child Left Behind borrowed its name from the slogan of the Children’s Defense Fund and President Bush lauded the accountability mechanism’s capacity to address precisely the kinds of concerns Kozol wrote about Savage Inequalities.9 Because blame had been a consistent rhetorical strategy for both Republicans and Democrats, blame was able to serve the basis for a bipartisan policymaking consensus that generated one of the most dramatic policy changes in the history of American education.10
Blame as a Rhetorical Tactic

Together, the four acts of public blaming examined in this dissertation provide a rough outline of a decades-long trend in the rhetoric of education policy. This long-term examination reveals blame operating at the level of strategy, slowly reconfiguring the ends to which public education is administrated. But, blame is also a tactic. In addition to contributing to the development of an overarching discursive trend, blame intervenes in an immediate rhetorical context every time it is deployed. Individually, each case study selected for this dissertation offers an opportunity to examine the rhetorical functions of blame as a purposive response to a deliberative situation. As each of the four acts of blaming takes aim at some party it deems culpable for the failures of the United States’ public education system, its implementation of blame exploits some facet of the rhetorical process of blaming to generate a deliberative advantage. Exploring how these rhetors blame reveals the rhetorical anatomy that makes blaming a persuasive act.

In “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Milton Friedman skillfully mixes blame and deliberation. Although each of the four case studies addressed by this dissertation involve the use of blame in the context of deliberation, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” is the only act of blame that actually contains its own bounded deliberation. A television episode split into two halves, “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” began with a half-hour, newsmagazine-style report in which Friedman blamed bureaucrats for ruining the public schools and ended with a half-hour debate between Friedman and several prominent education professionals. Labeling his opponents “bureaucrats,” Friedman demonstrated blame’s capacity to influence rhetorical agency by poisoning the well. Friedman’s delivered the charge that his interlocutors’ point of view on education could not be trusted due to their investment in the bureaucratic status quo as the accusation of a conflict of interest. In particular, Friedman characterized American Federation of
Teachers president Albert Shanker as too blinded by his ideological commitment to unionism to assess the state of public education accurately. As the other participants in the deliberation agreed with Shanker and opposed Friedman, they appeared to be the scornful bureaucrats were ganging up to bully the individual Friedman lending more evidence to Friedman’s charge.

By blaming bureaucrats for the failures of public education and arguing that they were motivated to retain their professional power, Friedman’s act of blame left little ground for the educational professionals to participate in the debate portion of the “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Voicing their views on the issue of school vouchers, the educational professionals played into Friedman’s blame narrative appearing to speak as bureaucrats. As an alternative to debating the issue at hand, Shanker, Gregory Anrig, and Thomas Shannon could have contested the design of the deliberation, but that is a difficult case to make involving an appeal to the rules of fair deliberation might itself come across as bureaucratic. By identifying his interlocutors as the cause of the problem at hand, Friedman biased the deliberation against them, constricting their means of persuasion, making even the basic rhetorical act of advocating their own positions blameworthy. In “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” Friedman used blame, not just to argue with his opponents, but also to delegitimize their voices. The structural advantage Friedman created through blame, accomplished within the legitimacy of a seemingly open deliberation, created a strong, although ethically questionable, persuasive appeal.

In “What’s Wrong With Our Schools?” blame’s capacity to restrict the rhetorical agency of those who are identified as at fault proved critical to Friedman’s persuasive strategy. By contrast, in A Nation at Risk, blame’s capacity to expand the rhetorical agency of the blamed proved critical for the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s (NCEE) persuasive strategy. Whereas Friedman blamed an other to gain a rhetorical advantage, the NCEE blamed themselves in the same pursuit. In A Nation at Risk, the NCEE exercised self-blame by accusing the American people of complacence toward their system of public education. As a blue-ribbon
commission made up of American citizens, the NCEE was just as blameworthy as the rest of the nation. Having blamed themselves along with everyone else, the NCEE took the additional step of accepting blame for the failures of public education.

Just as the placing of blame has rhetorical consequences that can alter the course of a deliberation, so too does the acceptance of blame. When blame is placed, the accused is loaded with the burden of somehow responding to the accusation as part of his or her participation in the ongoing deliberation. When blame is accepted, a portion of the deliberation takes a new shape. Accepting blame usually comes in the form of an agreement between opposing sides of a deliberation. This newfound agreement becomes a moot point, another shared premise on top of which further deliberation occurs. *A Nation at Risk* capitalizes on the consensus-building power of blame acceptance by taking what is typically a dialogic process and deploying it as a monolog. Instead of blaming an other who is unlikely to accept the accusation, the NCEE blame themselves and then accepts their own blame. As the NCEE agreeably resolves the question of who is at fault for the purported failures of American education, they simultaneously resolve the questions of what those failures are—test score and economic slumps—and who must take action—not just the government, but each individual American.

Although Friedman placed blame and the NCEE accepted it, both made rhetorical appeals that helped advance education policy toward a more neoliberal future. Friedman advocated vouchers and *A Nation at Risk* placed education at the center of the United States’ economic policy. In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol depicted a very different crisis in public education. For Kozol, the United States’ educational woes stemmed from a failure to complete the task of desegregating American public schools. Instead of envisioning a more competitive economic future for the United States or greater autonomy for individual citizens in their economic and educational choices, Kozol described a future with greater educational—and thus socioeconomic—equality. Kozol upheld a different set of priorities for American education than
Friedman and A Nation ask, and yet, Savage Inequalities relied on the same rhetorical device to make its case, blame.

Although Kozol disagreed with Friedman and the NCEE as to what was wrong with U.S. public education, their differences were ideological, not practical. All three acts of blame proceed on the assumption that public education was in such dire shape that it required reform. Seeking support for his version of policy reform, Kozol did not make a television show or issue a governmental report, he wrote a book. And, instead of blaming to create or destroy rhetorical agency, Kozol blamed to reveal structural inequality. Savage Inequalities relies on blame’s capacity to manage the relationship between agent and context. Advocating desegregation on the grounds that racially divided schools create unacceptable inequality, Kozol weaved his vivid descriptions of social demography together with stories about the students, teachers, and schools he encountered on his cross-country tour of America’s poorest and wealthiest public schools. In Savage Inequalities, the barriers created and maintained by the socioeconomic geography of places like East St. Louis, Illinois and Cherry Hill, New Jersey are themselves culpable for educational failure. Kozol used blame to convincingly reveal structural inequality. However, when Kozol amplified his blame narrative in East St. Louis by describing the ailing Midwestern town as a third world city, his metaphor pointed his readers away from racial isolation toward economic disparities as the source of educational failure. His book about desegregation was represented as a book about funding reform.

For Strawson, the coherence of blame is dependent on the presumption of certain kind of universe, one in which people possess and exercise freewill. In Savage Inequalities, Kozol portrays an American landscape that, like a deterministic universe, predestines certain outcomes. However, instead of obliterating blame, Kozol’s deterministic take on the socioeconomic terrain of 1980s America directs blame onto geography. The students, teachers, and schools in Kozol’s America cannot be blameworthy because their environment—its rigidity and remarkable
cruelty—has evacuated the educational agency from their lives. Both *Savage Inequalities* and *The Bell Curve* rely on a trade-off between the culpability of individuals and their circumstances to direct blame away from agents and toward contexts. For Kozol, the agency needed for individuals to be responsible for their educational future is recoverable through improved public policy. By describing the unfairness of structural inequality as vividly as possible, *Savage Inequalities* makes a dramatic accusation in the hopes of shocking the United States into a reconsideration of its education policy.

Like Kozol, Herrnstein and Murray courted the attention of their audience through public controversy. Herrnstein’s history as a public supporter of the hereditarian hypothesis of human intelligence embedded him in a controversial public discussion, not just as a participant, but also as the target of considerable blame. Unlike Kozol, Friedman, or the NCEE, Herrnstein and Murray entered into their act of blame with the need to contest a preexisting blame narrative. Like Friedman’s bureaucrats, Herrnstein had to explain himself before contributing to the ongoing conversation about education policy. Consequently, when *The Bell Curve* places one blame narrative it also displaces another. *The Bell Curve* shifts blame from Herrnstein to the cognitively challenged. Like each other act of blame addressed here, Herrnstein and Murray argue that better public policy can inspire better outcomes for the Americans who are the target of their preferred policy. Fundamentally, though, cognitively challenged people will remain cognitively challenged. When aggregated as a statistical class, Herrnstein and Murray assert that the cognitively challenged are prone to making costly life choices. Attaching the socioeconomic fortunes of the cognitively challenged to their genetics, *The Bell Curve* shifts blame away from Herrnstein to the cognitive underclass. Like *Savage Inequalities*, *The Bell Curve* shifts blame from an individual agent to an environmental influence, but unlike *Savage Inequalities*, the environmental influence *The Bell Curve* blames is not external, but internal to the Americans who fail to succeed in the public schools.
In order to argue that the cognitive underclass is the source of many of America’s social problems, *The Bell Curve* constructs a persona for those it blames. Using preexisting survey data and statistical methods found questionable by opponents like Stephen Gould, Herrnstein and Murray explain educational failure—among a number of social ills—as the result of the incorrigibility of the cognitive underclass. Herrnstein and Murray explain each of the social problems the cognitive underclass has a propensity for participating in as stemming somehow from their inability to engage in the higher order thinking required to come to the best decision. Along with a low I.Q., members of the cognitive underclass taken-on several character flaws that impede their contributions to society in *The Bell Curve*. When making important life decisions, the cognitive underclass: fail to think in long terms, devalue education, and lack the work ethic needed to achieve professional success. Herrnstein and Murray’s use of blame, focusing on the characteristic of those they deem blameworthy, mirrors Kozol’s in *Savage Inequalities*. Although Kozol blames a malevolent American landscape for educational failure as opposed to the genetic inheritance of those who receive low I.Q. scores, Kozol, like Herrnstein and Murray, blames the land by endowing it with blameworthy characteristics. America’s socioeconomic geography is isolating, poisonous, violent, disorganized, and discouraging for poor black Americans.

Both *The Bell Curve* and *Savage Inequalities* place blame on objects instead of directly on persons troubling whether their rhetorical act can rightly be called blame. However, when an object is blamed, a person is not. Functionally, both objects and people serve as candidates for blame. Whether the object can possess culpability, it is chosen or not chosen along with persons at the moment of decision that makes blame a rhetorical act. Additionally, both *The Bell Curve* and *Savage Inequalities* construct blameworthy personae for the structures they fault for educational failure. Although *The Bell Curve* locates the core of its accusation in the genetics of a group of people and *Savage Inequalities* maps its blame onto the land where those people live, both place blame on the basis of measureable characteristics instead of actions. Blaming
observable aspects of the natural world for educational failure, both books seek tangibility for their accusations. Kozol works to reveal structural inequality by observing its relationship with physical geography whereas Herrnstein and Murray insist upon the scientific legitimacy of their elitism by tracing the statistical origins of social problems to genetics that, they insist, determine I.Q. Blaming objects instead of people, *The Bell Curve* and *Savage Inequalities* pursue an elusive certainty for blame narratives that are either hard to believe or easily ignored. Moreover, in the case of Kozol, his blame narrative largely escapes the difficulties of blaming people who have complex lives and can respond to the accusation. However, in both cases, object-oriented blame helps build a stronger case for an argumentative underdog.

From close attention to these four prominent acts of blame from the public discourse of education policy in the 1980s and early 1990s, some general observations can be drawn about how blame can operate rhetorically in a deliberation. When directed at persons, blame affects deliberation by altering the rhetorical agency of its participants. Blame can limit rhetorical agency, constructing barriers to participation by calling into question the competence or intentions of those it accuses. Blame can also enhance rhetorical agency by providing the accused with an opportunity to build consensus through acceptance. When an accuser blames him or herself, the dialogic process of blame becomes a monologue and the acceptance of blame can be exploited to build consensus without first enduring the risks of deliberation. Choosing to blame objects instead of agents, blame can combine tangibility of direct observation with the urgency of moral judgment, making a strong deliberative appeal for chance. Additionally, blame directed at objects can get around the difficulties of faulting people with complex lives who can respond to the accusation. In each case, blame can have a tactical upside for those who deploy in the hopes of affecting the outcome of a deliberation.
Living With Blame

Assessing a century of constant public school reforms and just as constant deliberation over those reforms, David Tyack and Larry Cuban exclaim: “Schools can easily shift from panacea to scapegoat.”15 Although Tyack and Cuban are social historians, the strong language of education policy seems to have inspired them to a flight of rhetorical criticism. Explaining their declaration, Tyack and Cuban marvel at how public education is often held up as a solution for a broad range of social problems far exceeding academic achievement and then just as often blamed for failing to solve or prevent an equally broad range of social problems. They characterize this love-hate relationship as amusing and somewhat irrational, reprinting a political cartoon from The New Yorker in their book to literally illustrate their point. Considering the harrowing rhetoric in the acts of public blame analyzed in this dissertation, Tyack and Cuban’s expressed shock is understandable. But, how bad is it? Is blame bad for education policy, perhaps itself the cause of some the failures it purports to explain?

Speaking to the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Bernard Bailyn observed that, “education not only reflects and adjusts to society; once formed, it turns back upon it and acts upon it. The consequences of this central transformation of education have significantly shaped the development of American society.”16 When Bailyn made this declaration about the transformative power of education for American society, he was speaking of the development of education in the United States from a private effort carried out in the home for religious purposes to a professional enterprise pursued in school buildings for the public good. Nonetheless, one wonders what the consequences are the United States, having habituated a rhetoric of blame for the management of public education. Like any rhetorical appeal blame can be effective, even appropriate. However, Tyack and Cuban are right to express concern when blame is undertaken without thorough consideration. If at all, blame should be assigned carefully.


8 Lee W. Anderson, *Congress in the Classroom: From the Cold War to “No Child Left Behind”* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 163.


10 McGuinn describes NCLB as a “new regime” and notes that it is the result of “a real opening for a far-reaching reconsideration of the federal role in education.” Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 165-172.

11 The educational professionals could also have agreed with Friedman, giving up their both their deliberative and professional positions.


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