The Softening of American Education
Schools in the Real World

Hard America, Soft America: Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation’s Future
By Michael Barone
Crown Forum, 2004, $22.00; 188 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Reading the title and subtitle and some of the jacket copy of Michael Barone’s new book, one could conclude one has gotten the point immediately, and it is hardly necessary to go further. Quoting from the book, the jacket copy says, “From ages six to eighteen Americans live mostly in what I call Soft America—the parts of our country where there is little competition and accountability. But from ages eighteen to thirty Americans live mostly in Hard America—the parts of American life subject to competition and accountability.” Driving the point home, it claims, “Educators, for example, protect children from the rigors of testing, ban dodgeball, and promote just about any student who shows up. But most adults quickly figure out that how they do depends on what they produce.”

But it would be an error to simply leap to the conclusion that the contrast between “hard” and “soft” America is all that’s being said. Barone, one of the founders and authors of the dense and fact-filled Almanac of American Politics and the author of a history of the United States in the 20th century (Our Country: The Shaping of America From Roosevelt to Reagan), knows a great deal about our country and provides much to chew on in his reprise of our history since World War II. That war, as we might expect, revealed America in its hard aspect, and it came immediately on the heels of a prolonged hard period of American life: the Great Depression, preceded by a period of rapid industrialization, absent any public programs for the poor and the unemployed and the maimed and the widowed. This was the world of Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, in Barone’s presentation. Softened somewhat by the tentative beginning of social programs under the New Deal, it was still a hardened America that fought World War II. Then quite rapidly, according to Barone, we entered an extended period of increasing softness.

Barone begins each chapter with discussion of a characteristic novel of the period. The softened postwar America is in the background in Raymond Chandler’s The Long Goodbye of 1953 (it is not the detective but his clients who have become softened) and John Updike’s Rabbit Is Rich of 1981. Rabbit is now selling well-made Toyotas rather than flabby and undependable General Motors Buicks. The softened America at its nadir—with undemanding schools, unpunished crime, rampant welfare, a feeble army under a timid national policy in Vietnam—is the setting for Saul Bellow’s Mr. Sammler’s Planet of 1970 and Tim O’Brien’s If I Die in a Combat Zone of 1973. But a new period of hardening ensues, at different times for particular segments of American life, and in his conclusion Barone is enthusiastic about the performance of American business and entrepreneurship and American military might in Iraq (both wars) and Afghanistan. No novel as yet characterizes this period of increasing and satisfactory hardening.

Barone thinks that today we are close to the right balance between hardness and softness—except in education. In fact, the chief example of Soft America throughout this account is American education, and, in particular, the public schools, elementary and secondary. The story begins with the triumph of progressivism in education before World War II, and matters do not improve much thereafter. Barone is fair in his treatment of John Dewey, and he writes that progressivism’s “advocates misinterpreted Dewey’s ideas, as he himself protested in 1938.” Barone does note a brief period of attempted hardening after Sputnik, in 1957, when SAT scores reached their high point, in 1963. But this effort at hardening was abandoned with the rise of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s.

Barone applauds the civil-rights movement, but nevertheless sees it as
contributing to a destructive softening in education. Convinced of how unjustly and unfairly they had treated blacks, he writes, “Americans were determined to assuage and compensate for [the past]. And compensating for such injustice meant softening many parts of American life—the criminal justice system, welfare programs, schooling, and more.” Affirmative action in colleges and universities was another example of a softness that lowered standards. Barone records in some detail the efforts since 1983 to make American education tougher, more competitive, but he notes the obstacles to setting higher standards for education. His account of the travails of American education is competent—he is guided in large part by Diane Ravitch’s excellent histories—but not particularly searching.

Intriguing as his master concepts are, and useful as they are in suggesting one way of ordering our recent history, his own effort is somewhat undermined by a degree of partisanship that peeks through his account and upsets its balance. In his conclusion, for instance, referring to the just-concluded presidential campaign, he says: “Important issues of Softness and Hardness are at stake [and] two key issues are whether to retain the Bush tax cuts and whether to add individual investment accounts to Social Security.” These are favored causes of the current administration and the Wall Street Journal, but I do not see as clearly as Barone does their connection to softness and hardw. Lower taxes are not commonly seen as acts of hardw: to Barone they are. For Barone, the economic record in the 1990s is a vindication of hard policies. But this decade of success, in his account, owes nothing to a Democratic president: Even welfare reform, a clear success for hardw, is attributed to the Republican Congress.

Barone is not uniformly an opponent of softw: He realizes that a mix of softness and hardw is necessary in any enterprise, though clearly his heart is on the side of hardw. In his telling, softw in America was overcome in punishment of crime, in welfare, in the easy life in stable and unchallenged corporations, in armed forces that had lost sight of what it meant to win. But softw in education has successfully resisted change. Our schools are the chief holdout against hardw in his drama, and here the usual culprits are at fault—the schools of education, the eminences in the field of education, the school bureaucracies, the unions. But nothing new is brought to the indictment.

Barone does not dwell on some anomalies in this story. In Europe, he says, schools are hard; but then life becomes soft because of the benefits of the welfare state. In the United States we see the reverse. Barone does not bother to explore whether this is a better balance. Perhaps Europeans need to work less (they do) because their schools do more? Is it the current bias in certain circles against “Old Europe” that prevents him from inquiring into whether this might be a better balance?

An even deeper question troubles me. Certainly, in its standards American elementary and secondary education is soft. Barone has a good word for post-high school education. He approves of community colleges, higher education generally, even vocational education—they teach real skills and how to work. Hard America for him begins at age 18. But it is not my impression that American education is as soft for students as Barone assumes. For those aspiring to college, a very large fraction, there is a good deal of anxiety and pressure. Even those not aspiring to Ivy League and similar schools feel the pressure—getting into the four-year state schools, rather than the community colleges, is demanding for many. What explains this combination of low standards and felt pressure? Perhaps our problem is the number of students, compared with those in Europe, who come from immigrant and non-English-speaking homes and the number who come from minority groups still suffering the consequences of various kinds of deprivation. Barone has made a good first cut in making the distinction between Hard and Soft America, but one would have to go deeper to understand the chief holdout against a hard America, American public education.

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