

THE SPIRIT OF LIBERTY

HAPPY WARRIOR from *National Review* (MONDAY, 06 APRIL 2009)

In his not quite State-of-the-Union address the other week, President Obama said the following:

I think about Ty'Sheoma Bethea, the young girl from that school I visited in Dillon, South Carolina — a place where the ceilings leak, the paint peels off the walls, and they have to stop teaching six times a day because the train barrels by their classroom. She had been told that her school is hopeless, but the other day after class she went to the public library and typed up a letter to the people sitting in this chamber. She even asked her principal for the money to buy a stamp. The letter asks us for help, and says, 'We are just students trying to become lawyers, doctors, congressmen like yourself and one day president, so we can make a change to not just the state of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters.' That's what she said. 'We are not quitters.'

There was much applause, and this passage was cited approvingly even by some conservatives as an example of how President Obama was yoking his “ambitious vision” (ie, record-breaking spending) to traditional appeals to American exceptionalism.

I think not. “We are just students trying to become lawyers, doctors, congressmen...” The doctors are on track to becoming yet another group of state employees; the lawyers sue the doctors for medical malpractice and, when they've made enough dough, like John Edwards, they get elected to Congress. Is there no one in Miss Bethea's school who'd like to be an entrepreneur, an inventor, a salesman, a generator of wealth? *Someone's* got to make the dough Obama's already spent.

As for the train “barreling by their classroom”, my colleague John Derbyshire checked. The closest the railroad track comes to the school is about 240 yards, or over an eighth of a mile. The President was wrong: Trains are not barreling by any classroom six times a day. And, even if they were, I'll bet that's fewer barrelings per diem than when the school was built in 1912, or the new wing added in 1957. Incidentally, you may have read multiple articles referring to the “113-year old building”. Actually, that's the building *behind* the main school - the original structure from 1896, where the School District has its offices. But, if like so many people you assume an edifice dating from 1896 or 1912 must ipso facto be uninhabitable, bear in mind that the central portion of the main building was entirely rebuilt in 1983. That's to say, this rotting, decrepit, mildewed Dotheboys Hall of a Gothic mausoleum dates all the way back to the Cyndi Lauper era.

Needless to say, the salaried stenographers up in the press gallery were happy to take the Hopeychanger-in-Chief at his word on the facts of the case. But even more striking is how indifferent they were to the bigger question: If a schoolhouse has peeling paint and leaking ceilings, what's the best way to fix it? Applying for federal funds and processing the building maintenance through a huge continental bureaucracy? Or doing what my neighbors did when the (older than Dillon) grade-school bell-tower was collapsing? The carpenters and painters donated their time, and the materials were paid for through community dances and bean suppers. If that sounds sick-makingly Norman Rockwell, well, take it from me, small town life is hell and having to interact with folksy-type folks in a “tightly-knit community” certainly takes its toll, and the commemorative photo montage of gnarled old Yankees in plaid looking colorful doesn't capture many of the disputes over the project. But forget the cloying small-town sentimentality: it's the quickest and cheapest way to resolve the problem.

It always is: A friend of mine is on the Select Board of a neighboring town. In recent years, the state highway department has condemned two bridges. With the first bridge, they were advised to apply for funds under the 80/20 state/town formula: The bridge has yet to be constructed and in that time the cost – including their 20 per cent – has almost doubled. When the second bridge was condemned, the town rebuilt it themselves, for less than half of the first bridge's original 80/20 formula cost, and in a twentieth of the time. It's called the can-do spirit, not the can-apply-for-funding spirit.

Dillon, South Carolina is a town of about 6,000 people. Is there really no way they can organize acceptable accommodation for a two-grade Junior High School without petitioning the Sovereign in Barackingham Palace? To be fair to the good burghers of Dillon, they seem to be wearying of playing the peasant extras in Barack the O-mighty's crowd scenes. They were originally proposing a municipal bond to fund building improvements, and appear to have realized that being stuck in Stimulus Hell is a high price to pay for young Ty'Sheoma's photo op with Michelle. But, even if the federal behemoth were capable of timely classroom repainting from DC to Hawaii, consider the scale of government and the size of bureaucracy would be required. Once such an apparatus is in place it won't content itself with paint jobs.

Tocqueville would weep. “It is in the township that the strength of free peoples resides,” he wrote. “Municipal institutions are for liberty what primary schools are for science; they place it within reach of the people... Without municipal institutions, a nation is able to give itself a free government, but it lacks the spirit of liberty.”

The issue is not the decrepitude of the building but the decrepitude of liberty. Maybe the President can spend enough of our money to halt the degradation of infrastructure. The degradation of citizenship will prove harder to reverse