

A Nation at Risk and Education Reform: a Frame Analysis

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Abstract

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This study focuses on the language and ideas presented in the US government report *A Nation at Risk*. Education reform in the 1980's came to national attention when *A Nation at Risk* was released. This paper analyzes *A Nation at Risk* in order to determine the salience of the frames and their effect on the dialogue and actions. Methodologically it uses a frame analysis focusing on the problem frames, solution frames, and motivational frames embedded in *A Nation at Risk*. The central finding is that *A Nation at Risk* focuses on three main discourses of educational mediocrity: national security, competition, and ineffective classrooms. Each discourse includes a motivational frame that these reforms must be acted upon in order for the US to maintain its economic security in a changing world. *A Nation at Risk* framed the debate surrounding educational reform and its suggestions became guideposts for educational reform in the 1980's and to some extent still influence educational reform now. The focus on content, curriculum, teacher preparedness, time, standards, and testing have become the buzz words used to describe how education should be reformed now. This study hopes establishes a basis for future comparisons of both previous education reform frames, such as for the period after Sputnik, as well as modern frames from the post-9-11 period, and how they continue to influence educational policy.

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Problem Statement

In 2010 the movie “Waiting for Superman” (Guggenheim) helped stir the debate regarding educational reform. The premise was simple: education in the United States was broken and needed to be fixed.

This was not the first time that the educational system had been accused of mediocrity at best and potentially dangerous to the security of the United States at worst. In 1953, shortly before Sputnik raised concerns about American security and comparisons of our education system versus the Soviets, Arthur Bestor (1953) wrote critically of the “educational wastelands” of progressive education.

Similarly, in 1983, the US government commissioned a study on educational excellence, culminating in the published report, *A Nation at Risk*. The report shocked and troubled the American public with statements such as, “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.” *A Nation at Risk* focused on some key issues— that the United States’ position in the world is no longer guaranteed, global competition is growing stronger while we have remained idle, and finally if we do not reform our way of life, individual freedom and civic discourse will erode.

Once again similar narratives emerged shortly after September 11, 2001, with increased writings on whether our students and citizenry were capable of ensuring our own physical security, understanding the new threats in the world, and competing in a new “flat” and globalized economy.

More recently education reform movements in states around the country have once again initiated the narrative of school reform. Education reformers continue the narrative that our educational system is failing to prepare our students for the new economy.

In each instance the problem frame of national security and global economic competitiveness emerged. The solution frame advocated education reform that would better prepare our students to maintain the United States' status in the world.

These frames share much in common with frames used in current education reform movements identified as international education. Walter Parker (2011), in his study of the international education movement in US public schools, identified three main frames or discourses used to advocate education reform. First, the US was no longer economically competitive, and advocates argued that because American students were competing with students from around the world, our ongoing economic competitiveness was dependent upon the strength of our education system. Second, the national security of the United States depended on strong education, and for the sake of military security, if we didn't change our education system we could not understand or manage our enemies. Third, the school system was broken and failing to educate and prepare our students for the global economy. All three of these frames mapped to a greater argument that our country's national security would be at risk if changes were not made to our education system.

Each of these frames has been used by elites and social movement activists alike to elicit change in the educational system. Post-Sputnik, the United States pushed for a stronger and more effective science and math curriculum. *A Nation at Risk* spurred an educational discussion that focused on standards for both curriculum and achievement, while international education focused on preparing students for the global challenges they face now and in the future.

What does each of the frames regarding educational reform have in common? Better yet, how did each of these educational reforms successfully frame the issue in order to help facilitate and advocate for education reforms? While the question of how all three connect together is incredibly interesting, it is too much to examine in this paper. The thesis will use a frame analysis of *A Nation at Risk* and will determine if the meanings embedded in the report were successful at framing discussions regarding education reform policy during the education reform movement of the 1980's, and how those frames continue to influence educational policy. While a fully comprehensive study may examine the frames at both a national and state level, for the purposes of this thesis, this frame analysis of *A Nation at Risk* will be conducted exclusively at the federal level.

Frame analysis involves the study of how a perceived problematic condition and potential solution are defined for the intended audience (Binder 2002, Benford and Snow 2000). The questions I hope to address through this frame analysis are: (1) Which problem and solution frames were used to advocate for educational reforms? (2) How and why did each of these frames resonate during the 1980's? (3) How have these frames been used to advocate for educational reform since then?

The proposed study extends the work in issue framing and applies it to educational reform of the 1980's. According to Benford and Snow (2000), frames are constructed in order for movements to come to a "shared understanding" of a problem or condition, assign blame, and urge others to work for change. Davies (2002) states that frames are the vehicles that reformers and activists use to shape meaning and convey their claims, grievances, and proposals. These groups use cultural references to make their goals resonate by connecting them to popular beliefs. Amy Binder (2002) expands on this definition by noting that movement leaders creating

frames must both *diagnose* the problem, but also to provide a *prognosis*. Both Johnston and Noakes (1996) agree with Binder and Davies that in order to be successful, the frames must resonate with the general populace.

This thesis intends to use frame analysis retroactively to previous issues of educational reform to determine the frames and their resonance. These same frames, and their long-term effectiveness from Sputnik to 9-11, could be examined in future research. Specifically this thesis will look at the frames imbedded in *A Nation at Risk* that have impacted how the general public, reformers, and government officials define both the problems and the solutions needed to “fix” education in the US.

Context

In 1980 President Reagan campaigned for the presidency advocating educational policies that would abolish the Department of Education and downgrade the importance of education in national policy discussions. Additionally President Reagan was in favor of policies that promoted prayer in school, as well as a voucher system that would allow parents to transfer their students from public to private schools and offset any tuition increases with public money (Guthrie and Springer).

President Reagan appointed Terrel H. Bell as Secretary of Education following his election in 1980. Secretary Bell created the National Committee on Excellence in Education with a mandate to examine the US school system. David Gardner, the chair of the National Committee on Excellence in Education, stated that the mandate was:

1) to assess the quality of our nation's schools and colleges; 2) to compare and contrast education in the United States with the educational systems in several advanced industrial countries; 3) to study how college and university admission requirements have affected the high school curriculum and how the latter has influenced the former; 4) to identify and study schools and education programs that are successful and those that are not; 5) to assess how major changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement and the schools; 6) to make practical recommendations for action intended to improve the quality of schooling in America with the special emphasis on the education of teenage youth(as cited by Hunt and Staton).

Secretary Bell believed he needed a "Sputnik-like occurrence" to spur education reform(Bell, 1998). Essentially Secretary Bell believed in order to spur reform he needed to make the American public believe that the US educational system was threatening the economic welfare of the US, much like Soviet scientific gains during the 1950's spurred US educational reforms in the math and sciences.

According to a 1977 Gallup poll, prior to the release of *A Nation at Risk* over 50% of Americans had a “high level of confidence in the public schools” (Guthrie and Springer). Certain aspects of the educational system, such as busing to create racial balance, were controversial. However the average parent was “satisfied” with the education their children were receiving (Harris, Handel, and Mishel).

Satisfaction with the education system posed a problem for Secretary Bell. According to Camicia (2008), controversial issues are characterized by power relations, and it is difficult for the dominant ideology, or “worldview” to acknowledge challenges to their worldview. In order to challenge public confidence in education, Bell needed that “Sputnik-like occurrence” or alarm to create a perceived threat to the economic way of life in the US.

In 1983 the National Committee on Excellence in Education released their report: *A Nation at Risk*. By most accounts Secretary Bell achieved his goal of creating a “Sputnik-like occurrence.” Following the release of the report, the US government printing office received over 400 requests for copies of the report in a single hour, and during the next year they distributed over 6 million copies worldwide (Guthrie and Springer). McIntush (2000), in her study *The Rhetorical Enactment of Ideology in A Nation at Risk*, stated that “The day after it was released, large portions were reprinted in newspapers across the nation.” She cites Kurt Senske’s writing that “The press clipping service for the Department of Education revealed that the commission's report made the front page of almost every major newspaper across the nation. Similarly, the evening news of the three major networks featured the release of the report as their lead story.” Additionally McIntush cites Edward B. Fiske as saying the report was “Brilliantly conceived... enormously important political document,” and Janet Kerr-Tener called it a “Best-seller-report”

Immediately upon publication, *A Nation at Risk* created a desire to reform education in the United States and bring greater economic and national security. Tyack and Cuban (1995) state that the report generated educational reform at the state level and generated “more education laws and regulations than they had generated in the past twenty years.” In 1984 the Task Force for Education on Economic Growth released its report *Action in the States: Progress Towards Education Renewal*, stating that over 250 state task forces were created to study education and recommend changes (Guthrie and Springer).

The report itself provides an alarm to a threat to the American economy and way of life by comparing students’ global test scores, illiteracy rates in the United States, declining SAT scores, and a myriad of other factors showing a decline in the knowledge and skills of American students. It proceeds to contrast that with ever changing technology and competition in the global marketplace. While looking at student performance it then proceeded to examine curriculum and teaching, finding each lacking. Students were too often taking “general studies” tracks that left them without enough mathematical skills, not enough time in the classroom and also a general lack of study skills. The report proceeds to look at the quality of teachers, citing too many teachers being drawn from the bottom quarter of high school and college, poor teacher training, low salary, and shortages of math and science teachers.

Cogan and Derricott (1996) believe that the success of the report was based on the fact that the American public believed the United States was losing its competitive edge in the world. The report argued that the culprit was not the economic crisis, nor the rise of other nations, but the k-12 education system that was not preparing our students for the real world. Cogan and Derricott provide two answers to the question of why the report was commissioned: 1) The Reagan administration used Japan’s economic prowess to promote an agenda for education

reform in the United States; 2) This education reform would once again make the United States competitive with the economic powers of the world. The Reagan administration modeled its educational reforms after the Japanese example, which was credited for Japan's economic growth in the 1970's and 1980's. Cogan and Derricott argue that the Japanese example provided the Reagan administration with a blueprint for reform that also played into the administration's ideological philosophy of free market, individualism, accountability, and a minimum of government intervention. In order to fix the education problem and regain competitive edge, they hoped to institute a common core curriculum of classes and standards where both teachers and students were accountable.

The reform resonated both with the public and political elites. Berliner and Biddle (1995) explain that the education system and American society were facing problems prior to the report. The economic crisis of the 1970's and early 1980's had led business leaders to demand changes in education. Additionally the education system and curriculum had been asked to do more than it had ever before, with outside pressures and groups asking for a multitude of educational changes.

The *New York Times* ran an article that hypothesized that the initial report was written to make education a political issue at all levels. Its initial goal was to force decision makers to confront the issue of education and its reform (Fiske, April 27, 1983). Secretary Bell described the report's goal as not just to diagnose the problem, but to initiate the reform in order to solve the problem (Holton, 1984).

Gerald Holton, a member of the National Committee for Excellence in Education, wrote in his article *A Nation Revisited* that *A Nation at Risk* described their charter as examining the nation's educational system, and to make practical recommendations so that public officials,

educators, parents, and others could work to solve the problems (Holton, 1983). Holton stated that the hope was for this report to succeed where other reports had failed and described the process as data-driven. According to him, the state of American students and education system was unbelievably “arid and parched” (Holton, 1983). Holton proceeded to explain the rationale behind the report’s solution – educational standards for teachers, and educational standards for students - adding that the future of education in this country depended on the federal government’s “marshaling of forces” to fix education. That stood in contrast to President Reagan’s policy goal of eliminating the Department of Education. Holton believed that the success of *A Nation at Risk* was not that it signaled alarm, but it was the fact that it was publicly recognized once the President announced it, and quoted it to the press. In essence Holton believes the report forced President Reagan to acknowledge both the problem of declining educational excellence and the federal government’s role in fixing it.

Thomas Hewitt (2008) argues in *Speculation on a Nation at Risk: Illusions and Realities* that the political success of *A Nation at Risk* was because it was recognized by government officials as a way to keep the federal government in education. The Democrats saw it as a way to collect all of the funding of education into one place, and the Republicans believed it could be useful in promoting specific causes they cared about, such as charter schools, vouchers, and faith-based initiatives. Thus, both Republicans and Democrats used the report’s finding as evidence to support their own arguments on education reform (Hewitt, 2008).

Landon Beyer (1995) agrees that the goal behind *A Nation at Risk* was inherently political, although he disagrees with the roots of the political change. Beyer argues that *A Nation at Risk* is a cover-up for the real problems of social inequality in the United States. The

problems in the US were more the result of economic inequality than a faltering school system. *A Nation at Risk* used this economic instability to argue for education reform.

A Nation at Risk analyzed the problem—mediocre education and increasing competitiveness in the global economy – and provided the solution – educational standards for teachers, and educational standards for students. The commission recommended four years of English, three of mathematics, three of science, one half year of computer science, three years of social studies, and a recommendation that students work towards proficiency in a foreign language in high school (Borek, 2008). The report also recommended higher standards for classes, class admissions, and college admittance to force students to perform at a higher level (Borek). It also included recommendations to increase the amount of time students have in schools. Lastly, the report suggested an increase in teaching standards, advocated that teachers get more education, and suggested that teachers have salaries that are market-driven, competitive and performance-based (Borek). Chester Finn (2008) argues that *A Nation at Risk* alerted Americans to problems in education and caused others outside of the education system to initiate reform.

While Finn may argue that the nation’s passions for education were stirred, Diane Ravitch (2008) points out that *A Nation at Risk* created controversy and that not all were happy with the report’s analysis of education or the solutions to the problems it posed.

Again we return to the goal and questions this paper hopes to address. This paper will examine frames used in *A Nation at Risk* and answers the following questions: What problem and solution frames were used to advocate educational reforms? How and why did each of these frames resonate during the 1980’s? How have these frames been used to advocate educational reform since the report was written?

Theoretical Framework

This study proposes to use a frame analysis in order to analyze data surrounding *A Nation at Risk* and education reform in the 1980's. Lakoff (2003) popularized the work on frames by applying them to political problems. He defined frames as “a mental structure that we use in thinking.” Benford and Snow (2000) expanded on Goffman (1974) to define frames as a “schemata of interpretation” that allow people to “locate, perceive, identify and label” occurrences in their life and the world. Frames effectively make meaning, organize our experiences, and potentially guide actions. Frame analysis, according to Eyerman and Jamison, examines how movement activists frame the problem and solution. In this case the activists – President Reagan, Secretary Bell and others – define the problem frame as educational mediocrity causing a threat to the national and economic security of the United States. This defines their solution frame as reforming the nation's educational system in order to create a competitive workforce. Benford and Snow (2000) expand and add the motivational frame, which is the rationale for action. In this case, the motivational frame is that if the country doesn't act it will fall behind economically.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) look at the repertoire of contention – the tools a social movement or activists have to advocate for change – in order to examine the potential for success of a social movement. The education reform movement of the 1980's was initiated and started by Secretary of Education Bell and the members of the Committee on Excellence in Education. With the Reagan administration arguing for a decreased role of the federal government in education, Secretary Bell was left with few tools. With little support from the White House for a federal role in education, Secretary Bell used a commission to help achieve his goals for reform in education. J.P. Vitteriti (2004) cites Daniel Bell's (1964) article

Government by Commission, published in 1966, describing the many functions of blue ribbon panels. Blue ribbon panels have the ability to “provide as a mechanism through which constituents can advise policy makers, serve as a sounding board to explore the feasibility of certain actions, offer elite groups a forum for direct participation in governing, or act like a public relations device to call attention to a problem or build support for a policy” (Vitteritti).

Successful framing is often the key to the success of a social movement (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Framing occurs when social movement leaders define a problem through the use of images, symbols, or descriptions (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Successful frames use these images or symbols to relate the problem to the evolving knowledge and concepts of the public or target audience. Strong frames also set the parameters for the discussion of the movement, providing both a problem frame and a prognostic or solution frame that resonates with the public (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Benford and Snow, 2000). By providing a compelling and coherent picture of the problem or problem frame – American educational mediocrity posing a substantial threat to both American national and economic security in an globalized world – social movement leaders or insiders hoped to persuade the American public to side with their preferred solution frame. That is, reform of the educational system is necessary to create new educational standards for teachers and students offered in *A Nation at Risk*, and its counterparts.

The resonance of a frame is strictly the response of the audience to the frames of a particular issue. A successful frame will resonate well with the target audience, influencing its opinion (Benford and Snow, 2000). Resonance examines both the problem frame and the solution frame and often answers the question of why some frames are successful and some are not. They define resonance as: “The degree to which a movement frame resonates depends on

whether or not the audience of the frame believes it is credible, and whether or not the frame is salient” (Benford and Snow, 2000). Essentially, resonance can be determined by whether the public believes the frame, believes it is important, and fits with their understanding and notion of the world. Benford and Snow argue that the credibility of any frame is determined by: 1) Frame consistency - are the frames consistent and do they agree? 2) Empirical credibility – does the frame make sense based on the data? 3) Credibility of the people framing the argument- are the people making the argument believable or in a place of knowledge and authority? (Benford and Snow, 2000). Additionally, Benford and Snow believe that the more central the frames are to the public’s understanding, the more salient they will be, and hence they will resonate more. The frames in a *Nation at Risk* were provided for many audiences. For President Reagan, the frame used was an economic threat that would force him to acknowledge the report and the potential federal role in education. For the American public, the frame of a weak economy, coupled with the challenge of US economic domination by Japan, would garner attention.

The long-term effect of educational reform, starting from *A Nation at Risk*, has greatly impacted the educational system as we know it. Jamison and Eyerman's (1991) work on social movements and Benford and Snow’s (2000) work on framing have provided a tool to help understand the frames in *A Nation at Risk*, which was successful at defining both the problem and the solution to education reform in the 1980’s. Analyzing the education reform movement during the 1980’s with a focus on national security and the arguments posed by *A Nation at Risk* will provide a blueprint for further examination of education reform during other major events, such as after the launch of Sputnik and the events of September 11, 2001.

Methods

The context of this thesis revolves around how perceived challenges to national security can create the need for educational reform in order to be effective. The data used in this thesis will be documents gathered from a number of professional and governmental sources. These documents will then be subjected to a frame analysis (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991, Benford and Snow, 2000).

The data for this frame analysis will be documents gathered from a number of professional and governmental sources. Specifically, these sources include *A Nation at Risk*, media sources both national and local sources, and congressional action including reports and bills such as Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, the Democratic Working Group on Economic Competitiveness, as well as numerous individuals from the Department of Education, including Secretary of Education William Bennett (1984-1987), Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell (1981-1984), Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, and Assistant Secretary of Education Chester Finn. The data will also include quotes from Walter Mondale and President Reagan during their competing 1984 campaigns for the presidency. The data will also comprise national and local media reports from *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Seattle Times*.

A frame analysis requires substantial study of the language used in a social movement. Social movements are collective challenges to the status quo (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). In defining social movements, Eyerman and Jamison specifically focus on the cognitive praxis, essentially the concepts, ideas, and intellectual activities that provide social movements their *identity*. In order to study the cognitive praxis, sociologists often use a frame analysis. While *A Nation at Risk* is not a collective challenge to the status quo, one can use a frame analysis to

analyze the cognitive praxis provided within.

This thesis will use the methods of frame analysis on *A Nation at Risk*. The data will focus on the language used, and where appropriate, will be analyzed using four analytic categories: the problem frame, solution frame, motivational frame, and resonance.

- Problem Frame: how the problem is defined, or what Benford and Snow (2000) refer to as “diagnostic framing” (p. 616) in which the movement shares understanding of the problematic condition or situation in need of change;
- Solution Frame: the proposed solution to the problem or what Benford and Snow refer to as “prognostic framing” (p.616) to provide a proposed solution to the problem frame from the data collected;
- Motivational Frame: Benford and Snow define the motivational frame as a “call to arms” or the rationale for immediate change or reform (p.617);
- Resonance: Benford and Snow define resonance as the “mobilizing potency of proffered framings.” Johnston and Noakes (1996) add that a frame is resonant if the group finds its “interpretations and expression of grievances compelling” (p.619).

This study will examine the language of the movement, specifically the problem frame, the solution frame, and motivational frame (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Bender and Snow 2000). This study will look for the frames surrounding: (1) Mediocrity in education, due to perceived failures of the US educational system; (2) National security and competition, including the perceived failures of our school system to compete with the rest of the world, as well as educational expectations; (3) Ineffective classrooms, including the perceived failure to attract and train qualified teachers, as well as declining student expectations and standards; (4)

The intellectual decline of the United States.

The resonance of frames from the social movement will be examined through an analysis of the media. This study will use the problem frame and the solution frame developed by the social movement theory and used by social movement actors and media elites to indicate resonance with the public and government officials.

Findings

We return to the goal and questions this paper hopes to address. This paper will examine frames used in *A Nation at Risk* and answers the following questions: What problem and solution frames were used to advocate educational reforms? How and why did each of these frames resonate during the 1980's? How have these frames been used to advocate educational reform since the report was written?

The problem and solution frames in *A Nation at Risk* focus on (1) Mediocrity in education; (2) National security and competition; and (3) Ineffective classrooms. *A Nation at Risk* is consistent in both its problem frames-- that our educational system has become mediocre and is not providing the United States with an educated workforce necessary to compete in a rapidly changing world, and the solution frame -- in order to compete we must improve our educational system in both standards for curriculum and amount of time, quality of teachers, create a learning society and create more effective classrooms.

In the following section each of the three major frames (1) Mediocrity in Education; (2) National security and competition; and (3) Ineffective classrooms will be addressed by examining both the problem and solution frame, motivational frame, and resonance. In each section the predominant frame will be examined in the context of *A Nation at Risk*. Besides these major frames, subframes will be addressed in the appropriate context of the major frame. The section will end with a summary of the key points addressed.

Mediocrity in Education

The overarching frame of *A Nation at Risk* is: the United States educational institutions

have become mediocre and are not providing our students with the tools they need to be successful in the global economy. This is evidenced when the report states that: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people.” This problem frame resonated well with the public. In fact, in a study of articles from the date of publication on April 27, 1983 to January 1, 1985 there were 109 articles (appendix A) published in newspapers nationwide that cited “rising tide of mediocrity” in reference to education. Public confidence in education plummeted at the release of the report, from a high of over 50% in 1977 to a low of 40% in the months following the report (Guthrie and Springer). The frame that our mediocre education system is not adequately preparing our students permeates the entire report. It is the basis of the other two major problem frames regarding national security, competition, and ineffective classrooms.

This problem frame resonates well with the public and with the elites who had the ability to control the education reform effort. Both President Reagan and presidential candidate Walter Mondale made education part of their campaign strategy. From the publication of the report until the end of 1984, President Reagan made 44 speeches directly addressing education. Former Vice President and presidential candidate Mondale promised to make education a focal point of his campaign and proposed \$11 billion in new funding in order to allow communities to help define excellence in their schools, increase standards, conduct summer training for teachers and principals, and create a fund for merit based fellowships in subjects of need (Hechinger).

The solution frame of *A Nation at Risk* is simple enough: enact these reforms and our students will be more prepared to compete in the global economy. Once again the solution frame is focused upon increasing our educational system, through reforms that will end

educational mediocrity.

The motivation frame here is that if the US does not enact these educational reforms our students will not be prepared for competition, and therefore we risk our place in the global economy.

National Security and Competition

The frames in *A Nation at Risk* are all connected to or built upon the central problem frame: through our lack of action our educational system has become mediocre, which has allowed growing global competition to erode our economic and national security. The frames of national security and competition are prevalent throughout *A Nation at Risk*. The section examines those frames as well as the subframes of (1) Excellence in education; (2) Learning society ;(3) tools at hand and (4) public commitment. Each play a role in the broader frame of national security and competition.

A Nation at Risk, opens by declaring that “Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.”

The report continues by citing industrial success by Japan in automobiles, steel mills in South Korea, and machine tools in Germany, ultimately declaring “New developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe.” This ultimately develops the problem frame as global competition for jobs and wealth: economically we cannot compete and our competitors are finding new ways to succeed and innovate while we are remaining stagnate.

The problem frame is expanded to focus on education when it declares “the educational

foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people.” This educational frame is tightly linked with the frame of competition and national security. We are allowing our educational system to become mediocre while our competitors are improving thus endangering our ability to be competitive in the new global world.

The report cites indicators of risk that include international comparisons of United States students to international students. It cites international academic tests where the US was never first and last in seven cases. Additionally it cites illiteracy statistics, achievement on standardized tests, declining scores on the SAT, College Board exams, and higher order thinking. Adding to the evidence, it cites business leaders and military leaders indicating a decline the basic skills of reading, writing, spelling, and computation. The report specifically points out the decline in math and science skills, quoting educational researcher Paul Herd stating: “We are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate.” And John Slaughter, former director of the National Science Foundation, says that “a growing chasm between a small scientific and technological elite and an citizenry ill-informed, indeed uninformed, on issues with a science component.” The report ultimately cites Paul Copperman: “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 our parents.” And as the report states, ”others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”

This ultimately sums up the problem frame—with growing worldwide competition for high-skilled jobs, we are losing our preeminence because our students and our public are not as prepared, skilled or trained as the rest of the world. Implied in this frame is the idea that the source of our economic troubles comes directly from educational mediocrity, and if the US

could address these issues of education, it could once again achieve its economic strength.

The problem frame resonated well with the public and even became part of the campaign for President. President Reagan and former Vice President and presidential candidate Walter Mondale sparred over Mondale's \$11 billion plan to reform education(Hechinger).

The solution to this problem of our mediocre educational system is simple: our educational system has caused our schools to be mediocre, and only through reforms focused on educating our students effectively can we once again reach economic dominance in the global economy. Our growing inability to compete effectively in the global marketplace stems from our "mediocre educational performance," and can be fixed through "Reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land."

Furthermore the solution frame is defined in the report when it states that in order to reform the system and compete globally we need to achieve four things: (1) Excellence in education; (2) Create a learning society; (3) Utilize the tools at hand; (4) Make a public commitment. Each of these items expands on the solution frame of high-skilled and trained employees.

Excellence in education

The problem frame and solution of frame of excellence in education are closely linked. Only through excellence in education, individually and as a society, will we deal with the problem of our inability to compete in the global market. The report defines excellence in education —both individually and from society-- as "Performing on the boundary of individual ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners..."

Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.” It further states “These workers... will need further education and retraining if they—and we as a nation – are to thrive and prosper.” Thus if our nation is to compete in the “rapidly changing world” we must demand excellence in education, and ourselves. Ultimately the solution frame places the emphasis on the American people. The problem is that the American people have not demanded excellence from themselves, and in turn have allowed our educational system to become mediocre. The solution is that only through the public’s demand for excellence, both in society and in our schools, will we ultimately be able to once again become economically dominant. The American people must make education a priority and in turn the economy will improve.

Learning society

The report frames the solution as not entirely a schooling issue, but that schools themselves must create a learning society. Thus education is not only responsible for providing students formal schooling of knowledge and skills, it must create a society that values lifelong education skills “In a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger and of ever-larger opportunities, educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a learning society.... Formal schooling in youth is the essential foundation for learning throughout one’s life. But without life-long learning, one’s skills will become rapidly dated.” This solution is closely linked with the problem of ever-stronger competition from the global community. We can’t let our students, or our society, stop learning for fear that other nations will be more successful and weaken our economy, creating fewer jobs, and those that are less well-paying. Once again this connects to the larger frame of national

security and competition.

Tools at hand

The tools at hand affirm that we have the talent and the ability to compete we just need effective leadership. “Raw materials needed to reform our educational system are waiting to be mobilized through effective leadership.” Here the frame also plays upon the idea of competition, arguing that we have the raw resources and talent, but we need leadership to mold those items into a school system that allows us to compete with other countries. Additionally this frames resonates with the public, in that we were once “unparalleled” in our educational system, and that we can once again achieve that level of success.

Public’s Commitment

The public’s commitment puts forth that the public is aware and frustrated with the problem of being less competitive than previously, and that it knows that in order to compete we need a stronger education system. The report itself cites a 1982 Gallup Poll that draws the conclusions that “people are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country. They even considered education the more important than developing the best industrial system or the strongest military force, perhaps because they understood education as the cornerstone of both....the primary importance of education...a secure nation.”

The report itself identifies the problem—our national and economic security is at risk as we lose the worldwide competition for jobs – and then sets the stage for the solution—the public’s commitment to excellence in education and lifelong learning can secure our nation.

Both the problem and solution frame have the motivational frame embedded in them, which can be found in each of the sections and the title “*A Nation at Risk*.” The message is

essentially, if we do not reform education now, we risk our way of life. “If the tasks we set forth are initiated now and our recommendations are fully realized... this would reverse the current declining trend.” This provides a strong motivational frame with the title *A Nation at Risk*.

Ineffective Classrooms

The problem frame of declining national and economic security from global competition is solved through the solution frame of excellence in education. The report expands on the problem and solution frame by focusing on the decline of educational performance stating that “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might as well view it as an act of war.”

So what then are the problems that the report identifies? They are: (1) Content; (2) Expectations; (3) Time; (4) And teaching. *A Nation at Risk* lays each as a problem that caused the overall “mediocre” educational system. Each contributes to the problem frame, but more than that each creates the solution to fix our educational system.

In each of these areas, the solution frame is provided and defined by the problem frame. If the problem is lowered expectations, then the solution should be to raise those expectations.

Content

The report defines content as curriculum, the “stuff” of education. Here the problem is framed by the failure of schools to provide a basic education. Instead schools are provided students with a “smorgasbord” of choices where students have moved from vocational and college prep programs to “general track programs.” This in turn creates a citizenry unprepared for life after high school.

The problem frame states that there is a smorgasbord of choices that allow students to

ignore the basics of a good education and take less rigorous courses. The solution frame is simple—basic education graduation requirements that “lay the foundation” during the four years of high school. The “new basics” will consist of four years of English and three years of math, science, and social studies, with one half-year computer science.

Expectations

The report defines expectations as the “level of knowledge, abilities and skills school and college graduates should possess.” It additionally states “time, hard work, behavior, discipline, and motivation are necessary for high student achievement.” The report states that the US school system has several problems, notably: (1) Homework has decreased while grades have risen and average student achievement has declined; (2) Other industrialized nations spend more time on courses of mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, and geography; (3) Standards are declining so schools lack requisite requirements to make their competitive. In some cases students are not required to take a foreign language, and students are allowed to take less demanding courses. This sets the problem frame clearly that our educational system does not demand the time, hard work, behavior, and discipline required for economic competitiveness. It links the problem of global frame of educational mediocrity to the requirements for our students to succeed in the global marketplace.

The solution to these problems comes in the manner of standards. The report asks for school districts, colleges, and universities to adopt more “rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct.” These standards will help solve the problem of declining academic achievement and create a public that is prepared, skilled and ready to compete with our competitors worldwide.

Time

The problem frame of educational mediocrity and competition are prevalent in *A Nation at Risk's* discussion of time. The report states that American students spend far less time on school work, and when they do it is often ineffective. Additionally schools are not providing enough help or willingness to help students develop the skills to make students more efficient. The report states that in other industrialized nations “It is not unusual for academic high school students to spend eight hours a day at school, 220 days per year.” This is compared to the US system of 180 days a year for six hours a day. Once again the problem frame compares the “mediocre” US educational system with the educational system in other nations. It illustrates the problem: that others are striving for excellence, while we are complacent with mediocrity from ours.

The solution is once again provided by the problem. If we need to compete with other countries' school systems to provide highly skilled and trained workers, then we need more time to study the new five basics outlined in content. This would provide for a longer school day and more time in the classroom.

Teaching

A Nation at Risk also adds effective teaching to the problem frame surrounding educational mediocrity. It concludes that the quality of teachers is inadequate because not enough academically successful students are becoming teachers, and teacher preparation programs need improvement.

The solution here is more complex, but is also defined by the problem frame—in order to successfully educate teachers we need to attract better candidates with more pay, time, and resources. This can effectively help teachers move from beginning teachers to master teachers.

Each of these frames can be demonstrated in the presidential candidates' stances

on education. President Reagan advocated encouraging good teaching through promotions of good teachers and merit pay, while former Vice President Mondale proposed plans for attracting good students to become teachers and summer training for principals and teachers.

The Frames in a Nation at Risk

This section begins with the goal and questions this paper hopes to address: What problem and solution frames were used to advocate educational reforms? How and why did each of these frames resonate during the 1980's? How have these frames been used to advocate educational reform since the report was written?

The problem and solution frames identified in *A Nation at Risk* specifically relate to the global threat of economic competition and the way of life in the US. The problem frame sets up the mediocrity of the education system, with declining test scores, as directly impacting the foundations of American society. *A Nation at Risk* creates a frame that links that mediocrity in education directly to the idea that our nation's foundation is being eroded through an education system that fails to provide adequate education and skills needed to compete with other nations. In turn the solution is fairly simple: the American public must demand better education for their students, including standards for teachers, standards for student, more time in the classroom, and higher academic achievement.

During the economic downturn of the 1980's these frames resonated strongly with the American public. It was a simple solution to why the US was perceived to be no longer competitive. While the Japanese economy was going strong, the US economy was significantly weaker, and with high unemployment. The American public was desperate for a solution to their problems and comparisons to other successful educational systems allowed Americans to believe educational improvements could lead the way back to prosperity.

Discussion

This main focus of this thesis was to examine three major questions regarding *A Nation at Risk*: What problem and solution frames were used to advocate educational reforms? How and why did each of these frames resonate during the 1980's? How have these frames been used to advocate educational reform since the report was written?

This section examines the three main questions through the problem frame, solution frame and the resonance of each. The section begins with an examination of the problem frame and why it resonated with the public. The solution frame and its resonance is examined further in the focus of and on education. The impact of these frames is discussed in more depth in *A Nation at Risk* and modern education reform.

The Problem and Why it Resonated

A Nation at Risk was one of four major reports in the 1980's advocating for educational reform. What makes *A Nation at Risk* special was the impact the language had on the reform movements geared towards improving education. An education historian and former assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (2003) called it "the most important education reform document of the 20th century"

To this day *A Nation at Risk* is referenced when education reform is discussed. *Education Week* has analyzed the impact of *A Nation at Risk* on the 5th, 10th, 20th and 25th anniversaries of its publication. Numerous other publications, such as the *Christian Science Monitor* or the *New York Times*, have analyzed its effect 20 and 25 years later, respectively.

A Nation at Risk is as relevant today as it was in 1983. In similar fashion to 1983, the

US economy was recovering from a recession. The reforms and questions advocated in *A Nation at Risk* are similar to the reforms being advocated today by education reform groups such as the Gates Foundation and Stand for Children.

The problem frame in *A Nation at Risk* was clear that our education system had become mediocre and was endangering our national and economic security. The solution was to reform education before it was too late, and we will prepare ourselves for the new global economy. While this was not a new sentiment, Arthur Beyer talked similarly in *Educational Wastelands*, and other reports had similar ideas. What made *A Nation at Risk* effective was the frame.

Few other reports were as explosive as *A Nation at Risk*. Prior to publication of the report, President Reagan had discussed eliminating the Department of Education as federal government largess. While his rhetoric on the department did not change, his tone towards education became focused upon educational success. Why?

The problem frame in the report related education directly to the economy and national defense. In 1979 President Carter had given the “Crisis of Confidence” speech, followed by the recession of 1980. Secretary Bell characterized the nation as “not in happy shape in 1981. Inflation was at double digit level, interest rates were high...unemployment was widespread (1998).” While the economy had begun to recover by 1983, anxieties were still high. *A Nation at Risk* connected education directly to our economy. Underneath the obvious frames was the subtle undertone, that if we were not careful and did not reform, we could easily fall back into tough economic times.

Additionally the report linked our tough economic times with successes in other countries, such as Japan, who had a more stringent educational system and a stronger economic engine. These frames used strong rhetoric such as “act of war”, or “our once unchallenged

preeminence is being overtaken by competitors.” Our status in the world economically and by implication, security, is directly linked to education. This is done throughout the report by comparisons of the US and other countries economic and educational success.

The rhetoric of the problem frame may be less in focus now, but the frame took hold. The report became iconic in part because the alarm took hold and became a major discussion point in the 1984 campaign for president. Congress responded with work and study groups and President Bush dubbed himself “the education president.” Later, President Clinton released a report called “*A Nation Responds*.” The report had fulfilled Secretary Bell’s wishes – it had a “Sputnik like” effect.

The problem frame catapulted education to the forefront of American thoughts, and the solution frame had a similar effect. Upon publication, states began or renewed education reform efforts. While controversial, many of *A Nation at Risk*’s solutions became the focus.

The Focus of and on Education

The problem frame was designed to focus the American public on the problem. The solution frame was designed to limit the focus of education reforms to core principles in the United States. In 1984 the Department of Education released the *A Nation Responds* report, detailing reforms enacted or in the process of being enacted since *A Nation at Risk* was published. The report stated major achievements that had been proposed, enacted or in the process of being enacted, such as curriculum reform in 45 states, increased graduation requirements in 48 states, more testing in 42 states, or teacher preparation improvements in 47 states. Critics have claimed that many of those reforms were already in process when *A Nation at Risk* was released. While some evidence shows that the frames in *A Nation at Risk* had some

effect, and still do, it would be an oversimplification to state that *A Nation at Risk* is responsible for the entire bulk of education reform since its publication.

The solution frame was to better prepare American students by fixing ineffective classrooms through reforms focused on content—the stuff of education or the classes students are required to take, curriculum-- specific testable items that could be guided by standards, time—more effective time in the classroom, expectations—increasing the time, hard work, and academic rigor required, and teacher quality—increasing the quality of teachers in the profession.

One clear example of these frames that still have an effect would be core curriculum and standards. *A Nation at Risk* would define this as the content. These are graduation requirements or standards that would come from the “new core” comprising a curriculum of English, math, social studies, and science. Despite funding issues school districts could focus their funds on these subjects and achieve success. This would eliminate the “smorgasbord” of choices that students were taking at that time, allowing education to focus on what needed for the global economy. The solution resonated as many states adopted the standards. Even recently, the Board of Education in Washington State passed Core 24, a curriculum requiring four years of English and three years of math, science, and social studies. The only subject left out from *A Nation at Risk's* recommendation is computer science. The Washington State Board of Education explained the new standards as a means to create an educated citizenry with living wage jobs. Inherent in this statement is that the previous curriculum requirements were not or would not be successful creating citizens with the skills to compete.

National standards under development in the late 1980's and early 1990's eventually fell short due to political issues. However, standards have been adopted in most states, and the

current No Child Left Behind law requires standards and testing. National standards have been resurrected, through the National Common Core Standards that have been adopted in 45 states and 3 territories. The Common Core State Standards initiative states that these standards for content in the classroom are the “first step in providing young people with a high quality education.”

While many may credit *A Nation at Risk* with bringing standards to the forefront, many local school boards were debating the subject of academic standards before *A Nation at Risk* was published. A prime example of this would be in Mississippi, where a major education reform act was passed in 1982.

A Nation At Risk did bring many of the issues to the forefront, and its recommendations can be seen in many of the current reform proposals. This is a reflection of how impactful the report was at the time of its release. Its importance required both President Reagan and former Vice President Mondale to address the issues in *A Nation at Risk*. While President Reagan’s plan may not have followed *A Nation at Risk* entirely, the report itself created a crisis that forced the presidential candidates to address the issue.

A Nation at Risk and Modern Education Reform?

It would not be hard to say that modern education reform discussions spring out of *A Nation at Risk*. At the same time, in many ways it seems difficult to connect them entirely. *A Nation at Risk* and the frames the report used placed much of the fault on the US public. It urged the public to care about education and the subjects that were being taught, as well as to better train and pay teachers more, and then hold them more accountable. The problem frames in the

modern education reform movement are very similar – in order to compete in the global economy we need to educate our students better. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Asia Society actively promote this frame “In matters of national security, environmental sustainability, and economic development, what we do as a nation and in our everyday lives is inextricably intertwined ...beyond our borders. This new reality helps us more clearly define the role that education must play in preparing all students for success in an interconnected world.” (Jackson, ND). The solution frames are similar to those in *A Nation at Risk*, and at times different—some refer to public funding, others such as the Gates Foundation focus on placing quality teachers in every classroom, and finally common core standards have reached most of the nation, helping create better curriculum.

Conclusion

Education reform in the 1980's came to national attention when *A Nation at Risk* was released. With economic issues at the forefront, the report attached educational success to economic success in the United States.

This study used a frame analysis and found three main discourses or frames: (1) Mediocrity in education (2) National security and competition; and (3) Ineffective classrooms. Within each of these frames was the embedded motivational frame suggesting a failure to embrace these reforms and improve our educational system would come with great peril, both in national security and in the economy.

The questions it hoped to answer were: What problem and solution frames were used to advocate educational reforms? How and why did each of these frames resonate with the during the 1980's? How have these frames been used to advocate educational reform since the report was written?

The problem frames in *A Nation at Risk* are similar to ones educational reformers such as the Asia Society use now. Essentially if we do not prepare our students for the global economy our way of life will be forever changed for the worse.

The solutions frames in *A Nation at Risk* were beacons for educational reform and educational reformers in the 1980's and to some extent now. The solution frames present six main proposals: (1) Content – focus on core curriculum instead of smorgasbord of choices; (2) Teacher preparedness – teachers must be better educated; (3) Curriculum – more challenging curriculum; (4) Time – more time learning; and (5) Standards and testing — higher expectations. The frames emphasize the need to carry out these reforms in order to make the United States competitive again. These frames were emphasized when citing comparisons of current

educational practice regarding US students to educational practice in other countries such as Japan. The framing of these solution frames has been successful, and current reformers use these frames like buzzwords to describe educational reform.

By no means was *A Nation at Risk* the first to address these topics or to connect them to economic well being. The problem frame sensationalized the issue and forced the public and the government to pay attention by using such language as “an act of war” to describe the situation.

The frames themselves moved the debate from the classroom to the nation. If we did not reform our educational system we could wind up without our economic edge. The frames clearly resonated with a public struggling with a weak economy and high unemployment. The nation was uneasy, and with strong economies in Japan and South Korea, the nation began to look for answers as we faltered. *A Nation at Risk* used these comparisons to explain why the US educational system was weaker than it should be. In essence the Japanese had a better education system and their economy was successful. This resonated with the American public, and this “Sputnik-like occurrence” was designed to make the American public, and President Reagan, pay attention to education.

The motivational frames in *A Nation at Risk*, in conjunction with the problem frames, created an urgency that drove the discussion of educational reforms suggested in the solution frames.

By no means were all the solutions in *A Nation at Risk* put in place, nor can one credit the booming economy of the 1990’s with educational reforms. However it is difficult to ignore the impact that *A Nation at Risk’s* had in framing the education reform debate. The solution frames can be extended to the modern debate about educational policy reform by looking at the common core curriculum standards currently working through different states. Additionally

discussions over teacher quality and evaluations are occurring nationally and in the state of Washington. Content is also currently being addressed with Washington State's Core 24 program, placing more requirements on students graduating high school. Concerns arise over Core 24 when critics point out the lack of elective choice in the new required content. Proponents argue that it is required for our students to be better prepared for entering the workforce.

The frames studied here can be compared back to reforms after Sputnik, or current movements in educational reform surrounding standards and teacher evaluation. This study allows for future research to compare frames over time surrounding educational reform that coincide with economic turmoil, economic competition such as the current recession, or foreign technological advances.

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