

JIM SLEEPER

Teaching Toughness

Al Shanker was more than just a punchline. He embodied a noble strain of liberalism that deserves a second look.

TOUGH LIBERAL: ALBERT SHANKER AND THE BATTLES OVER SCHOOLS, UNIONS, RACE, AND DEMOCRACY BY RICHARD KAHLENBERG • COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2007 • 552 PAGES • \$29.95

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Albert Shanker, the combative leader of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) during the 1970s and 1980s, should rank with Horace Mann and John Dewey as a great champion of American public schooling. The first strong leader of New York's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in 1964 and, from 1974, leader of the million-member AFT for 23 years, he fought tirelessly for both public schools and teachers' unions (upon whose electoral clout schools' funding and regulation depend). He fought against ideologues left and right, adversaries high and low, and dangerous social undertows. More than a power broker, he was at times a visionary reformer of trade unionism itself and of the nation's understanding of what's at stake in its public schools.

Yet these days Shanker, who died in 1997, is little remembered, owing as

JIM SLEEPER, a lecturer in political science at Yale and a former columnist at the New York Daily News, is the author of The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York.

much to what has become of education as to what became of him in the school wars of his time. In his new biography, Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, works impressively, if also a bit hagiographically, to repair Shanker's reputation and shore up his "tough liberal" faith, which for 20 years has been sitting, punch-drunk, at the edge of a ring taken over by meaner ideological combatants, particularly on the right. It's a daunting challenge, but Kahlenberg's efforts to vindicate that faith can only strengthen current attempts to plumb liberalism's prospects.

Shanker wanted schools to advance the democratic vision of American citizenship exalted in Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" and Mary Antin's book *The Promised Land*. Antin's testament, misremembered now by some as a tract for assimilation and flag-waving nationalism, glanced back sadly at the parochialism and poverty of her early Russian childhood and chronicled her epiphanic encounters with America in its public school system—that mighty and, for her, sacred crucible of civic-republican liberalism that turned refugees from old blood feuds and superstitions into citizens of the United States—and, through it, the world.

Becoming an American in this way meant standing up against bonds of "blood and soil" that narrow other people's horizons and also sometimes against a narrow individualism that undermines trans-racial, republican justice and comity. Neither capitalism nor socialism alone would free the huddled masses from penury and hatred without guidance from a distinctively American civic liberalism. Trained in its arts and graces, an American citizen would stride on a left foot of social provision and a right foot of irreducibly personal responsibility and initiative.

Shanker was a believer. "Our public schools have played a major part in the building of our nation," he wrote in 1980 in one of his "Where We Stand" Sunday *New York Times* columns, underwritten by the AFT. "They brought together countless children from different cultures—to share a common experience, to develop understanding and tolerance of differences. The public schools 'Americanized'; they taught our language and our history," disposing young citizens to bond democratically, across lines of class and color. He toughened this vision with admonitions from Dewey, Mann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and George Orwell and made it the AFT's guiding philosophy. Wielding teacher-union power in 1978 to defeat a conservative push for private-tuition tax credits that would have drained public schools, Shanker also spearheaded reforms in faculty lounges and union halls. Against the bigger, more genteel National Education Association, he made trade-unionism a precondition of teachers' professionalism, through better pay and protections against arbitrary management. But he also challenged

teachers to conduct peer reviews to reward those who truly broadened students' skills and horizons. As a result of his pugnacity, he won enough tactical gains and internal reforms to help public schools survive the assaults from which his broader civic liberalism hasn't fully recovered.

Shanker's liberalism rested on three pillars: confident, intensive citizenship training (like Antin's) that elevates working people's aspirations as well as wages, thus deepening their support for schools; colorblind racial integration as a precondition of a common civic faith and its coalitional power; and an aggressive foreign policy to advance democracy and workers' rights against communism. This three-pillared liberalism might have prevailed, Kahlenberg believes, had not myopic leftists and some self-indulgent liberals abandoned trade unions for chimeras of revolutionary solidarity and self-marketing; sidelined racial integration for identity politics; and flirted with a vapid one-worldism or isolationism. But Kahlenberg downplays the ways even mainstream liberals, including some of Shanker's close associates, found his tough urban liberalism wanting.

Today's liberalism is a far cry from Shanker's, but there is much that liberals can learn from him about what values to hold, what fights to engage, and what mistakes to avoid. Now that another decade of electoral, legislative, and judicial setbacks to labor and public schools have highlighted the importance of unions and a common civic faith, a harder look at why Shanker's liberalism waned is even more necessary.

Perhaps the most admirable thing about Kahlenberg's Shanker is that he was both apostle and statesman of his faith. "The marriage of ideas and power, idealism and pragmatism, was perhaps his greatest strength," Kahlenberg writes. "Not many union leaders are ABD [all but dissertation] in philosophy at Columbia. And not many intellectuals command a union membership of one million." But Shanker had other, less admirable contradictions. Ungainly in appearance, mercurial and obdurate in private life and in politics, he was immortalized in Woody Allen's futurist film *Sleeper* as the man who had ended civilization by getting a hold of a nuclear warhead. But mainly he was blindsided by strong social tides, betrayed by opportunists who feigned accommodation, and let down by associates whose civic visions and interests led elsewhere. By the end of the 1970s, Shanker faced a society far less responsive to liberal hopes than its immigrant Jewish enthusiasts had imagined, and in some respects he was unprepared and perhaps unwilling to keep up.

To be sure, Shanker often fought admirably, going to jail for leading strikes when bad labor laws foreclosed other ways of defending teachers' rights. He worked to toughen the "left foot" of social provision, insisting that government

enable social mobility through, for example, the GI Bill and New York's City University and public healthcare systems. He fought for legislation to enable the labor organizing essential to creating such institutions through hard bargaining in legislatures, not just workplaces. A republic, he understood, needs unions not as revolutionary forces but as countervailing and intermediating powers that wrest respect for ordinary people from employers and officials. It requires convincing other groups to support one's agendas for reasons of their own, making everyone say things that don't always mean what they seem.

But it was not easy. Shanker had to fight alongside some unions that were racist, sexist, and corrupt. He had to deal with black leaders who drained interracial coalitions' power with a politics of racial paroxysm that often recapitulated elements of racist segregation. He had to fight off leftists who made race a vessel of thwarted revolutionary desires.

He had to indulge liberals who were too comfortable with "the system" to seriously challenge its deepening inequities, yet who were too uncomfortable to defend it wholeheartedly and therefore resorted to moral posturing that spared their prerogatives and moral self-regard. Some of these, he believed,

were elite liberals like New York Mayor John Lindsay, the Ford Foundation's McGeorge Bundy (who funded poorly planned experiments in black community control), and Dwight Macdonald (who defended those experiments). These men had integrity and moral intelligence, but, ignorant and guilt-ridden about poverty, they could not see the flaws in the solutions they were commending to the less fortunate. From the other side, Shanker had to hold off conservative champions of parochial education while dancing with conservatives who sang Edmund Burke's "great melody" of traditional social cohesion, even as they ravaged workers' material and cultural well-being.

Shanker thought civic faith a more reliable mainstay of that well-being than religious faith in the public arena. But something remained unresolved that haunts his legates. It is fashionable now for self-described "fighting liberals" (such as Peter Beinart, whom Kahlenberg cites approvingly) to invoke Reinhold Niebuhr's chastening Christian realism, as Shanker himself sometimes did. But it's not clear how many besides Shanker, along with such battle-toughened comrades as A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, have really shared Niebuhr's dark intimations of an America too steeped in original sin to be redeemed without a deeper, bolder faith. Early civil rights activists were willing personally to

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provoke dangerous responses—not violently, as “fighting liberals” like Beinart are eager for other Americans to do abroad, but nonviolently at home, after the example of Randolph, Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Eastern Europe’s true leaders of 1990. To this list we should add Albert Shanker, but not all who claim his legacy.

With so many poseurs chasing chimeras of liberation across the political spectrum—in black Brooklyn, on Wall Street, or in Saigon—Shanker often found himself defending a civic center that would not hold. Fighting Shanker in 1966 over race-based hiring, the black militant Stokely Carmichael rejected nonviolence and integration in the name of a black power that was mostly racial theater. The most explosive and defining of Shanker’s struggles—with black militants demanding race-based “community control” of some Brooklyn schools in 1967—coincided with the Six Day War, which some black and white leftists considered a racist, imperialist victory by Israel and neo-colonialist powers. Neoconservatism was born in reaction in the years following, as friends of Shanker who had usually backed unions and integration—Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Irving Kristol, Carl Gershman, Ronald Radosh, Linda Chavez, and Jeane Kirkpatrick—recoiled from “black power” and joined people who had real power, better rhetoric, and apparent moral clarity about threats abroad, but also an active hostility to unions and even public schooling. That November, largely in response to the Los Angeles Watts riots 15 months earlier, former Democrat and actors’ union president Ronald Reagan won California’s governorship and Republicans picked up 47 seats in Congress. This confirmed Shanker in his belief that race-based “community control” heralded not black empowerment but black impotence.

For similar reasons, he would later fight “community control” by whites in Brooklyn’s Canarsie neighborhood who were trying to keep out black students assigned to their local junior high school. He also helped block some New York private employers’ offers, supposedly in the spirit of “civil rights,” to accelerate black promotions by dismantling seniority protections that were benefiting whites. Shanker realized that those jobs would no longer be secure for workers of all colors. But it was almost impossible to persuade blacks, who’d have been promoted quickly, to support his longer-term, hard-headed view of the consequences.

Shanker became Woody Allen’s target because he could be hot-headed as well as hard-headed: He played into the hands of black purveyors of anti-Semitic rhetoric who knew that Jews were white folks whose skin they could get under. Coming barely 20 years after the Holocaust, their rhetoric was shockingly and

painfully dismissive of Jews who held Lazarus' and Antin's high civic hopes. But Shanker saw that such attacks were also naïve. If blacks were spouting anti-Semitism, the message would have less appeal to white ethnics. Knowing this, he made and distributed thousands of copies of a few hateful leaflets that had been left in some Jewish teachers' mailboxes. But his convictions had gotten the better of his political acumen: His leaflets fanned Jewish fears of poor blacks and others' contempt for them, reaping a whirlwind of liberal moral censure.

The Jewish dimension of Shanker's career is worth examining more closely than Kahlenberg does, deferring, as Shanker usually did, to unspoken rules of a "tough liberal" public discourse that emphasized universal aspirations over parochial loyalties. While Kahlenberg discredits the most facile and fanatical reasons some people gave for abandoning tough liberalism, he might have focused less

on elite moralism and black political infantilism and more on the lower-middle-class Jewish liberalism of Shanker's own teachers. Long denied the dubious comforts of "blood and soil" ties to ancestral homelands and unable to rely on the strength in numbers in America that enabled others to convert ethnic loyalty to raw electoral power, Jewish

Americans had learned to use other, more liberal strategies—to convince others into accepting configurations of power that raised the state and meritocracies above tribal loyalties. (No wonder so many Jewish Americans became teachers, journalists, and civic poets like Antin and Lazarus.)

In New York, Jews did have some strength in numbers found in unions like Shanker's, and, before then, in garment unions; for a while those numbers provided Shanker with moderate, mass support. But Jews weren't long in leaving union solidarity for sole proprietorship or professionalism. "What's the difference between the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the American Psychiatric Association? One generation," an old joke has it. In many occupations, Jews in New York even had replaced WASPs and the Irish in the city bureaucracy. Thus, to the 900,000 African Americans and Puerto Ricans who had arrived between 1950 and 1960, as 800,000 whites had left for the suburbs, everyone in authority seemed Jewish. At the same time, many Jewish Americans were daunted by blacks' needs and alarmed by demands for their hard-won municipal jobs and neighborhood turf. The irony was that blacks, like Jews, had the highest stakes in the country's fulfilling its egalitarian promises, and they had produced exponents of those promises even more eloquent than

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Antin or Lazarus.

But that didn't guarantee the cohesion of the labor/civil-rights coalition. While inner-city teachers in New York were disproportionately Jewish, female, and liberal, most craft and industrial unions were white-ethnic, father-son organizations—sexist and racist almost by definition. Blacks and Jews had to embarrass AFL-CIO President George Meany into trying to get his old New York plumbers' union local to take on black members (Meany failed to budge his erstwhile allies). Liberal Jews understood rightly, and earlier than most, that a larger American civic culture urgently needed to be enriched and vindicated. But perhaps that realization came too early; by the late 1960s, many liberal Jews were becoming disenchanted with the Shankerian liberal project. The future neoconservative intellectual Irving Kristol, who had assured *New York Times Magazine* readers of the mid-1960s that blacks then arriving from the South would advance like the immigrants of yesteryear, would later declare that “a neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality”—an apothegm whose racial implications even some politically liberal Jewish Americans had begun to accept.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time before Shanker himself followed his former like-minded liberals toward the right. The displacement of neo-conservatives' hopes from his liberalism into a Vulcan foreign policy was endorsed, in large part, by Shanker himself. “You won't have very much education if you don't have a free country,” he explained lamely in 1982, even claiming that South Vietnam's fledgling labor unions (whatever they were) had justified America's intervention. In the 1980s, Shanker backed aid to Nicaraguan contras because, Kahlenberg says, Sandinistas reminded him of the vicious Stalinist left in Orwell's Catalonia (though Orwell had never backed fascist insurgents against the Spanish republic).

It was one thing for Shanker's friends in the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM) of the 1970s—an early neoconservative advocacy organization, whose supporters included his AFT protégé Sandra Feldman, Decter, Kristol, Gershman, Ben Wattenberg, and Penn Kemble—to try to “save” the Democratic Party from George McGovern's color-coded, appeasement-oriented “New Politics.” It was another thing for many of them to leave the party to join with people who really hated unions, public education, and integration. Kahlenberg doesn't explain why they left, nor does he satisfactorily explain why Shanker danced in and out of their cheering lines, endorsing Ted Kennedy against Jimmy Carter in the 1980 primaries but simultaneously moving with his old colleagues toward an increasingly aggressive, right-wing foreign policy.

By the late 1980s, neoconservatism, at least in its first iteration, was discredited by Central American death squads and peaceful, labor-led anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe. But Shanker and the AFT had gotten too close to people demanding open war against communism while peddling a militarized “democratic capitalism” to regimes that crushed unions. To find historical lessons for a robust domestic liberalism today, we must better understand why Shanker’s efforts turned out as they did. In part he shared neoconservatives’ vengeful anger at leftists and liberals who’d been pathetically naïve about the dangers to democracy of black demagoguery and communist totalitarianism. But partly, too, Shanker was wishful, confusing his support for Polish Solidarity’s pro-union, anti-communist struggle with support for more spurious, supposedly anti-communist adventures abroad that were themselves pathetically naïve.

Shanker “bridge[d] the worlds of power and ideas, of liberals and conservatives, of education and business, and of unionists and education reformers,” as Kahlenberg puts it. But he also misjudged history’s tides, sometimes desperately. He brought Reagan to address the AFT in 1983, two years after the president had fired unionized air-traffic controllers for striking, as Shanker had, in defiance of laws against public-union walkouts. A year before his death, Shanker had to watch as Bob Dole recommended a book by Shanker’s old friend Ronald Radosh—mangling his name as “Ronald Kardosh”—about the follies of Democrats who had abandoned tough liberal agendas for special interest groups like labor unions. Months earlier, in his nomination-acceptance speech at the 1996 Republican National Convention, Dole had made the denunciation of teachers’ unions a critical theme of his campaign.

At least Dole lost to Bill Clinton, whom Shanker and the AFT had endorsed. But something else seemed to have been lost: the “tough liberal” contribution to Mary Antin’s promised land. Too many of its claimants have forgotten—or, having made Faustian political bargains, can’t acknowledge—the ways in which American corporate capitalism, for all its liberating wonders, is dissolving the civic-republican freedoms they think they’re advancing abroad and at home. Now that organized labor has dropped from 36 percent of the workforce when Shanker entered it to 10 percent, and now that integration is being displaced in some quarters by a dubiously faith-based, race-based “community control” or by simple malign, unapologetic neglect, even those who have found justified fault with tough liberalism can see the electoral, civic-republican, and economic costs of having been too sweeping and imprecise about those faults and too slow to stand up for the strengths. ■