

*Review of Will Bunch's*

## AFTER THE IVORY TOWER FALLS: HOW COLLEGE BROKE THE AMERICAN DREAM AND BLEW UP OUR POLITICS—AND HOW TO FIX IT<sup>1</sup>

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Notwithstanding the provocative title, Will Bunch's book does not actually demonstrate that America's colleges and universities are responsible for what he views as a total breakdown in the social compact and disintegration of our state of politics since the protests of the 1960s. Nor, despite some trying, does he make a convincing case that higher education owns what he views as the regrettable rise of Donald Trump and MAGA politics. In fact, *After the Ivory Tower Falls* focuses only peripherally on what higher education has actually accomplished in this country and certainly not at all on what it gets profoundly right for hundreds of thousands of people every year. Lacking a particularly balanced perspective on what higher education is doing and where it is indeed falling short, renders Bunch's broad indictments unconvincing and, at times, profoundly frustrating. Yet, his overarching chronicle of a country in which public higher education was once apolitically supported and prized, was largely affordable to low- and middle-income families, and has come to be lost, has reality and resonance, and some of Bunch's analyses and proposed solutions are worth hearing.

Let us begin then, as he does, with the small family-owned private, for-profit college established by his grandmother and presented as an "ideal" community-serving institution: Midstate College in Peoria, Illinois. Bunch's grandmother (who never went to college) and her husband, bought a small, struggling secretarial school in 1966 and renamed it Midstate College. Bunch's grandparents built the college, eventually obtaining accreditation to offer bachelor's degrees. How did they succeed, Bunch asks?

Partly, I think, because Arline and Midstate clung to the notion—then popular, now quaint—that education was a tool of self-betterment and not just rote career training. Students training to become executive assistants didn't just

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<sup>1</sup> WILL BUNCH, *AFTER THE IVORY TOWER FALLS: HOW COLLEGE BROKE THE AMERICAN DREAM AND BLEW UP OUR POLITICS—AND HOW TO FIX IT* (2022).

learn typing and shorthand but were required to take a general education, even a course in how to comport one's self in the world of business.<sup>2</sup>

Contrast this with the blight he believes has descended on higher education today and you will begin to get a sense of the book's, at times, rampant generalizations:

More than half a century after the baby booms and economic booms and the atomic booms of the 1950s and 1960s, we are still clinging to the fast-melting permafrost of a now no-longer-new idea that college is the American Dream. So much so that we are refusing to admit that somewhere in the middle of a long stormy postindustrial night, the dream has morphed into a nightmare. That a ladder greased with a snake oil called meritocracy has changed from joyous kids climbing higher than their parents to a panicked desperation to hand on to the slippery middle rungs. And even at the polluted top, neither bewildered parents nor stressed-out graduates are quite sure what they've just bought for all that cash (or, increasingly, a mountain of debt).<sup>3</sup>

Bunch goes on to blame the eventual regulation of for-profit colleges and universities in the 2000s for Midstate's ultimate demise:

When faith in the American way of college began to wane after years of runaway tuition, Wall Street smelled blood in the water. The growing pressure on the nation's working classes for a credential to earn a living wage created a huge opportunity for grift. It was filled with an avaricious new breed of for-profit college chains, backed by big-time financial equity. In the 2000s these sharks competed for students, and when Washington tried to impose new rules to crack down on the abuses (which left hordes of young people deep in debt, for often worthless diplomas), the good guys like Midstate suffered every bit as much as the bad guys.<sup>4</sup>

However, Bunch never explains why the new regulations (presumably those establishing standards for credit hour, state authorization, and gainful employment?) were so onerous as to force Midstate to close. And, his pronouncement that his grandmother's "seemingly ancient notions about the power of higher education, and the unexpected pathways it could open, and not just for country-club heirs"<sup>5</sup> has been jettisoned, is neither substantiated nor convincing. Certainly, one need only glance at *Inside Higher Education* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in these "post" pandemic months to find numerous articles discussing a diminution in public confidence in higher education and profound concerns about its expense. However, that is a far cry from demonstration that the country has utterly lost confidence in the power of higher education or its value over the course of a lifetime—which emerge as equally strong themes in polling and other studies.

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2 *Id.* at 8.

3 *Id.* at 4–5.

4 *Id.* at 9.

5 *Id.* at 9–10.

Bunch's first foray is to engage with what he clearly believes would be Midstate's polar opposite midwestern institution, Kenyon College. Bunch pillories Kenyon's affluent study body where "one of every five students strolling across the campus green in ripped jeans hails from the top 1 percent of the wealthiest families and, and where 60 percent of students are from the top 20 percent of income."<sup>6</sup> He cynically suggests that the college's decision to accept donor funds to build a new west quad (including a modern library and new admissions office) will "help the elite school impress kids and their parents, and entice them to pay \$75,000 a year—without which Kenyon would be unable to service the bonds that cover the rest of the \$150 million project."<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite Kenyon's accomplished student body and illustrious faculty, somehow the college community apparently remains just dumbfounded at the success of Donald Trump in the surrounding community. They certainly cannot comprehend the locals' antagonistic attitude toward slogan-chanting faculty and students who marched in protest of the Trump Administration's policies "while their *bete noire* circle around them ominously in pickup trucks with massive Trump flags."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Bunch zeros in on several students of color at Kenyon, focusing on their sense of alienation from both their affluent campus peers and the surrounding communities.

Bunch perhaps correctly sees the demographic polarities both within Kenyon and without. The college, a symbol to Bunch of elite college education, certainly inhabits a different world than the surrounding impoverished hills of blue-collar Ohio, increasingly bereft of jobs due to departed industries. And, the disparities in wealth within the student community may also be emblematic of the fragilities of campus diversity efforts and the many ways the country has seemingly splintered along race, economics, and class. Nonetheless, what Bunch's focus on Kenyon as a symbol of all that has seemingly "gone wrong" does not actually do is fairly examine what the college also is doing to educate and lift its students, nor the likelihood that the vast majority of Kenyon graduates both rich and poor, have substantially benefited from the education they received there. Posted proudly on Kenyon's website<sup>9</sup> are, for example, the following data: Kenyon is a top producer nationally of Fulbright Fellows, Kenyon ranks 8th in the country "(ahead of every Ivy)" in the proportion of STEM grad to earn a doctorate in a STEM field, ninety-eight percent of students applying to graduate school are accepted into one of their top three choices, one hundred percent of young alumni "say they learned to write better" at Kenyon, two hundred industries are represented by Kenyon's global network of alumni and parent career mentors, "who will connect you with job shadows, resume reviews, internships and interviews." Further, Kenyon commits to meeting one hundred percent of demonstrated financial need for its students for all four years. While Bunch recounts stories of the surrounding community's occasional kindnesses toward Kenyon students, and the ways both the college and the community have sought to find common ground, he apparently sees little continuity between those efforts and an earlier time in the postwar period "when

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6 *Id.* at 12.

7 *Id.*

8 *Id.* at 15.

9 See <https://www.kenyon.edu/kenyon-in-numbers/>.

college in American was widely seen as a uniter, not a divider."<sup>10</sup> Like much of Bunch's book, his bleak presentation of Kenyon as an example of what's "wrong" in American higher education feels quite unfair and therefore falls flat.

Bunch dedicates a substantial subsequent portion of his book to documentation of the postwar period, the institution of the G.I. Bill's education benefits, and the ways he believes the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s undermined support for free public higher education under the banner of one former governor of California and future president, Ronald Reagan. His driving thesis is that the country squandered a postwar opportunity to statutorily enshrine free public education as a public good before the turbulent 1960's and '70s. His narrative commences in 1944.

So what exactly was the 1944 G.I. Bill? Politically, and perhaps psychologically as well, it was a bridge between the federal intervention of the New Deal, which beat back the worst of the Great Depression, and the last hurrah of the American welfare state that would be Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Its enactment was very much in step with the dominant political worldview of the United States at the mid-twentieth century—that a benevolent government and technocratic know-how could prevent both the problems caused by unfettered capitalism and also stem ideologies like communism and fascism.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the leaders of two of the nation's most elite institutions, the University of Chicago and Harvard University, opposed the bill. "'Hobo jungles' was the alarming and offensive prediction from University of Chicago President and G.I. Bill opponent Robert Hutchins, who believed that campuses would be overrun by unqualified, uninterested young grunts who were only there to collect the months stipend." Harvard's then-president concurred: "the G.I. Bill failed 'to distinguish between those who can profit most from advanced education and those who cannot.'"<sup>12</sup> However, the snobbery of such elitists notwithstanding, the bill was "a surprise, runaway hit ... and its impact was revolutionary."<sup>13</sup>

There are the statistics—the staggering 450,000 engineers and 91,000 scientists, filling job categories that has been barely a blip in the U.S. economy prior to the war, not to mention 230,000 teachers to handle all the boom-babies now in the pipeline. But most histories are anchored by personal narratives of human pluck, showing how the sons (because they were overwhelmingly sons) of unschooled factory workers and farmers became innovators and inventors in one generation, with that adrenaline shot from the American taxpayer.<sup>14</sup>

Bunch's documentation of the impact of the G.I. Bill and the era that followed it is quite interesting and the numbers speak for themselves. "The bottom line is that by World War II, just 5 percent of U.S. adults had earned a bachelor's degree—a tiny

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10 BUNCH, *supra* note 1, at 41.

11 *Id.* at 44–45.

12 *Id.* at 48.

13 *Id.* at 50.

14 *Id.*

fraction of today's figure of 37 percent."<sup>15</sup> Bunch notes that the bill largely left women behind and that it was implemented in a racist manner by regional Veterans Administration bureaucrats who were authorized to steer applicants and did—sending many Black veterans to vocational programs or HBCUs, which were denied much of the tax support that enabled majority public institutions to benefit and grow after the war.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after the war, President Truman appointed a Commission on Higher Education to assess the state of higher education in the country and to recommend the proper role of the federal government within it. The report emphasized the importance of a liberal education: "The commission's report placed less emphasis on more down-to-earth workforce development and instead stressed lofty ideals of 'general education' which, it argued, would be 'the means to a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order.'"<sup>17</sup>

A more practical set of purposes also drove the investment in postsecondary education:

America's leaders wanted to avoid World War III—but they also wanted to make sure that if it came, their side was equipped to win it. Strohl's research shows that a key motivator of the Truman administration's education push was military research conducted at the height of the just-concluded war. It showed that college graduates performed better on an array of tasks than soldiers lacking higher education. ... Now Pentagon planners started to envision winning the world's next great war in the classrooms of the University of Michigan or Berkeley.<sup>18</sup>

Amidst this boom in federal attention to and support of higher education, Bunch launches a critique that animates his thesis—the federal government's unfortunate failure (in his view) to take "on a broader role in directly mandating or even overseeing research on campus."<sup>19</sup> This complaint reappears and resonates throughout his book, becomes even the motivating theme of his work, without any cause and effect logic ever really being established:

While this era would lead to the creation of the National Science Foundation in 1950 as a government vehicle for advancing research, the federal government declined to take on a broader role ... This happened for a variety of reasons—Truman's personal aversion to a heavy-handed federal role, concern among educators about maintaining the diversity of America's various colleges, and typically bureaucratic concerns about who would control research dollars. But the broader consequence was one of many blown opportunities to establish higher education as a public good.<sup>20</sup>

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15 *Id.* at 47.

16 *Id.* at 51-52.

17 *Id.* at 53-54.

18 *Id.* at 54.

19 *Id.* at 55.

20 *Id.*

However, it seems fair to ask why Bunch believes direct federal control over research at U.S. institutions (beyond the compelling power of the purse afforded the National Science Foundation and later federal funding agencies, such as the National Institutes of Health, to set direction and establish priorities) would have been tolerated by faculty, let alone enable the extraordinary innovation that led to U.S. dominance for generations in research across the world? And also, why does Bunch believe that Truman's wise aversion to heavy-handed federal control engendered a national failure to "establish higher education as a public good"<sup>21</sup>? What's the connection here? And another also, which is why, given Bunch's thesis that civil rights and antiwar protestors ("Yuppies, Dittoheads, and a 'Big Sort'" is the relevant coming chapter<sup>22</sup>) engendered conservative backlash, unleashed Ronald Reagan and Rush Limbaugh, led to Donald Trump, and ultimately gutted public financial support for colleges and universities. Well, how would it have made any difference?

Involving less of a logical leap but invoking a dream that cannot have been entirely realistic even in the "more optimistic era of the late 1940s"<sup>23</sup> is Bunch's additional critique:

An explicit commitment to make universal higher education a human right, backed both legally and financially by the federal government, might have rivaled other programs of the last century—such as Social Security, Medicare, or the Affordable Care Act—in rewriting the American social contract, to the benefit of millions. Has there been such legislation in the more optimistic era of the late 1940s, the pathologies of the twenty-first century—sky-high tuition, the student debt crisis, and the political divide between cosmopolitan college grads and those struggling small towns lacking access to high ed—might have been averted. But no such bill passed.<sup>24</sup>

First, one must question the view Bunch presents of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. The nation may have been in the midst of an extraordinary postwar optimism and economic boom, but it was also a country tolerating the lynching of Black people throughout the South, segregated schools, discriminatory banking and housing practices, profound marginalization of women in the workforce, and the rampaging cruelties of McCarthyism. Bunch notes these forces but does not incorporate their realities into his positing of a lost opportunity to permanently establish free public higher education for all. But, would political leadership in such a profoundly complicated nation, one that tolerated such brutalities and inequalities *really* have been likely to fund free higher education for all?

Further, for a very long time, many of the great institutions of higher education, including the extraordinary University of California system—fed by both federal research and state tax dollars—were able to keep tuition and fees at a very minimal level. That the U.S. obsession with the Cold War (and enormous infusion of defense

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21 *Id.*

22 *Id.* at 103.

23 *Id.* at 57.

24 *Id.*

research dollars into many prominent institutions) kept the money flowing for decades, also did not hurt major institutions. The federal government also began to think about providing other forms of funding for college and university students during this period. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 not only boosted campus research but also contained a new provision for student loans, per Bunch, however, containing one fatal flaw. Assuaging House conservatives who apparently called money for college education “socialism,” the Act provided for loans, not student grants, and set in motion a future where non wealthy students and their families would be expected to take out loans to pay for college.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, colleges and universities were becoming vastly more diverse, bringing in students whose life experiences and moral perspectives, per Bunch, soon came to clash with that of university leaders: “The experience on the ground of undergraduates majoring in sociology, spending summers in poor Mexican villages or writing diatribes against racial segregation was largely missed by the university presidents flying at 37,000 feet while their campuses bathed in money from the Pentagon or big-money foundations.”<sup>26</sup>

Bunch sees University of California’s (UC’s) Clark Kerr as embodying all that was right and also all that was wrong with the 1960s belief in meritocracy. “the Clark Kerrs of the world embraced the notion of merit in higher education without irony or concern.”<sup>27</sup> In April of 1963, Kerr gave a series of lectures at Harvard framing his concept of the modern “Multiversity,” describing college leaders as “wise mediators between a ‘delicate balance of interests’ involving not just the students and faculty on campus but a plethora of politicians, donors, and corporations.”<sup>28</sup> But according to Bunch, Kerr’s vision was already tottering. “Kerr’s frictionless world of savvy compromise was crumbling ... the politicization of college in America was about to begin. Clark Kerr’s machine was already making odd rumbling noises, but the explosion was still a year off.”<sup>29</sup> The title of Bunch’s next chapter says it all: “Why the Kent State Massacre Raised Your Tuition.”<sup>30</sup>

Seemingly, if we want to understand the country’s political polarization and the gradual defunding of affordable public education, we just need to look at Students for a Democratic Society’s Port Huron Statement, the Berkeley Free Speech movement, the Anti-Vietnam War protests, the Civil Rights movement, the Sexual Revolution, and every other progressive political or social movement that grew out of America’s increasingly diverse, liberal, and empowered university populations in the 1960s and ’70s. And the voice for this new anti-university perspective was one California gubernatorial candidate named Ronald Reagan.

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25 *Id.* at 59-60.

26 *Id.* at 64.

27 *Id.* at 67.

28 *Id.* at 68.

29 *Id.*

30 *Id.* at 70.

Asking, “What in heaven’s name does academic freedom have to do with rioting, with anarchy, with attempts to destroy the primary purpose of the university which is to educate our young people?” Reagan called for public hearings into what he called communism and sexual promiscuity at UC and a clean sweep of its leadership .... Reagan’s election [as Governor of California] in many ways ended the post–World War consensus that higher education should be liberal in outlook and accessible to everyone.<sup>31</sup>

Reagan’s first act as California’s governor was to propose imposition of tuition at the UC system. UC’s lobbyists were able to kill the proposal, but Reagan “got creative, spending the next eight years in office eating away at the UC system with ever higher student registration fees.”<sup>32</sup> According to Bunch, enraged (and threatened) by student protests, a conservative backlash against higher education grew that included future President Richard Nixon; the Nobel prize winning economist James McGill Buchanan (who advised the Koch brothers); and, surprising to this reviewer, future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, whose political actions and writings engendered, Bunch believes, a fundamental turn in American support for higher education.

In 1971, Powell, then a prominent Richmond, Virginia, attorney, was asked by the leaders of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to assemble a document called “An Attack on (the) American Free Enterprise System,” later known as the Powell Memorandum. Although the memo was intended to be confidential, it was leaked after Nixon appointed Powell to the Supreme Court in 1971. The memo calls the campus-based “New Left” the “single most dynamic source” of an assault on capitalism and runs through “a now-familiar litany of conservative indictments of the college environment at the dawn of the 1970s, but also complains about the growing impact in the wider American society as graduates ‘seek opportunities to change a system which they have been taught to distrust’—as journalists, or by working in education, or by entering government or elective politics.”<sup>33</sup> According to Bunch, while the impact of the Powell Memorandum continues to be debated by academics, “a quick look at the twenty-first century landscape—populated by the Heritage Foundation, Limbaugh, Fox News, the flow of cash from the Koch brothers to the economics department at Florida State—suggests the seeds planted then by Buchanan, Powell and their allies bore bitter fruit.”<sup>34</sup>

The leaps Bunch asks us to take with him unfold as follows: The Left movements of the 1960s and ’70s led to the birth of powerful conservative forces aligned against taxpayer funding of public institutions. Elitist notions of a “meritocracy” embodied by America’s most prestigious (and increasingly expensive) institutions, led to a cultural revolt against higher education in its entirety. That revolt generated the polarities of the country today and the rise of politicians such as Donald Trump.

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31 *Id.* at 87.

32 *Id.* at 88.

33 *Id.* at 95.

34 *Id.* at 95–96.

The American Dream of college—as reinvented in the 1940s, '50s and '60s—hadn't changed in most households, but the tectonic plates beneath were shifting, powerfully. It took roughly forty years for the idealism of higher education as a tool for molding smarter citizens committed to liberal democracy and international understanding to instead become the rough show-us-your-papers demand for clinging to the middle class. For the millions who still dreamed, this transformation brought a willingness to borrow whatever it took—even from the increasingly privatized loan sharks who began circling in the Reagan years—to complete this paper chase. But millions of others began to internalize that America in the college age was now a “meritocracy,” and that their failures to keep up weren't because the deck was stacked against them, but because of the arrogant eggheads who didn't know how to screw in a lightbulb telling them they lacked “merit.” And the smart elites who promoted this myth of a meritocracy apparently weren't bright enough to see that that resentment would become the driving political force of the twenty-first century.<sup>35</sup>

Bunch goes on to decry the disastrous mountain of debt assumed by so many American families (\$1.7 trillion)<sup>36</sup> and the fact that many graduates of less prestigious (or utterly corrupt private for-profit) institutions have had a terrible time finding decent jobs, let alone repaying their debt. He pillories elite institutions that accepted unqualified legacy and rich kids and that got side-whacked by the Varsity Blues scandals. Hillary Clinton's failed presidential campaign becomes the veritable embodiment of elite obliviousness to the “deplorables' ” frustrations regarding a lack of access to good jobs and a decent education. But a problem with Bunch's ultimate conclusions is not that any given point is entirely without merit, but that the generalizations and giant causal leaps he makes sound too often like demagoguery rather than astute analysis. And, even when his narrative appears a bit more balanced, he is not really talking about what happens at America's “Ivory Tower” institutions, *but instead what people on the outside apparently think they know (and despise) about them.*

Thus, there is no acknowledgment of the extraordinary teaching and profoundly important research coming out of U.S. institutions today, nor their increasing dedication to economic and racial inclusion, nor the fact that college graduates still have a far greater earning potential than their non-educated peers, nor that American higher education remains the envy of the rest of the world. Bunch's praise for higher education in countries like Germany where tuition is very low is almost comical in missing the fact that a much smaller percentage of Germans can ever dream of access to university (having been sorted in the fifth grade into academic or nonacademic track schools), nor that most German universities “specialize” in classes in the hundreds and shed substantial numbers of disappointed university students without their obtaining degrees, nor that Germans and other Europeans (and Asians, and Africans) come to this country in droves for undergraduate

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35 *Id.* at 101.

36 *Id.* at 201.

and graduate and postgraduate education because we have many of the best institutions in the world.

Says Bunch: “It didn’t have to be this way. Higher education could have flourished as a public good—instead of a fake meritocracy rigged to make half of America hate it.”<sup>37</sup> But, the brilliant students and faculty who work and learn across the country at great institutions large and small, are not a “fake meritocracy” (or at least Bunch has not given us actual reasons for believing them to be so). Yes, some may have been admitted for reasons that unduly rewarded parental wealth, legacy, or other non merit-based factors. But there is little to no evidence in this book to support Bunch’s ruthless criticisms of the American academy as a whole. Bunch’s book is not a valid critique of what America’s “Ivory Towers” have been or have achieved, but instead a chronicle of how talented politicians have been able to turn many Americans against them as a result of culture wars, illiberalism, and the frightening fluctuations of our economy after the years of postwar growth began to wane and the industrial backbone of the U.S. economy was shipped overseas.

We missed the moment, Bunch says, to make higher education a public trust that would benefit all American society through economic invention, civic engagement and general enlightenment. Instead, we privatized college and called it a meritocracy so that it could be rigged for the winners while the perceived losers are mocked and ridiculed. Liberal education was mostly overrun by the business majors who invented the financial instruments to saddle the generations that came after them with bottomless debt. The social order grew weaker, and also less free. The deep democracy thinkers of 1947 feared these outcomes if the United States didn’t make higher education accessible to all—but only in vague, general terms. It took three generations and finally the *annus horribilis* of 2020 to see what the American nightmare these postwar visionaries feared would look like—the world’s formerly most powerful nation paralyzed by climate inaction, lacking news literacy to separate fact from fiction, refusing to trust science as a virus devoured the countryside, and coming within 55,000 votes in three states of handing a second term to a president who lied 30,573 times during the first one, for the sole purpose of owning the college libs.<sup>38</sup>

Bunch is making a mountain’s worth of logical leaps in the lines above, and the load of culpability he deems fair to dump on institutions of higher education and their graduates seems profoundly disassociated from reality. It is a lengthy and impassioned extended diatribe, but is there really any evidence, for example, that had public education been more securely funded in the 1940s, the same conservative forces inflamed by the student protests of the 1960s and ’70s would not have taken action to defund them? Or that—no matter how affordable a college education might have remained—the many forces that sent factory jobs overseas, or led to other economic changes that left so many Americans behind, would not have engendered profound polarities and resentments in this country?

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37 *Id.* at 235.

38 *Id.* at 241.

Or can he possibly believe that those movements of the 1960s and '70s should have been squelched? How about the diversification of colleges and universities that led to the integration of Jewish students, women, and racial minorities previously excluded, and that caused some people to think the "wrong" people were now on campus? Bunch is quick to broadly condemn higher education for becoming a focal point for populist rage, but with few exceptions far from the heart of the academic enterprise (yes, he fairly pillories posh high-rise dorms, student centers that operate like amusement parks, cafeterias serving expensive gourmet foods, and public institutions' excessive recruitment of out-of-state and international students to fill their tuition coffers with concomitant displacement of state residents), he does not actually talk about what the academy could or should have done differently to save the country from itself. And could it have done?

Bunch suggests (in what he acknowledges to be a "gross generalization about one of the most diverse nations on planet earth"<sup>39</sup>) there are now "four people you meet in today's America," which is also part of the title of one of the book's chapters.<sup>40</sup> He believes that a person's age coupled with their attitude toward college, is critical to shaping their gravitation toward one or another of these cohorts.

If you turned eighteen in the United States before 1990 (today age fifty or older), the odds are that you either (a) attended a university when college was affordable and popular ... the perfect embodiment of the American dream<sup>41</sup> or (b) believed that anyone, regardless of education, could succeed in this nation ... right up to the moment that was no longer true.<sup>42</sup> If you turned eighteen after 1990, it's likely that (c) despite high pressure, high tuition, and—for most families—high debt, college remained the only roll of the dice to get somewhere in life<sup>43</sup> or (d) you were increasingly disconnected from middle-class dreams or civic life, in a world of low-paying McJobs fueled by various opiates of the masses, from YouTube radicalization to actual opioids.<sup>44</sup>

With the partial exception of the Left Perplexed cohort (paradigmatically represented by Hillary Clinton voters), Bunch sees all four groups as subject to debt, social and economic desolation, substance abuse, "deaths of despair," and growing alignment with illiberal forces of the extreme right. What, then, are Bunch's proposals to address the fractures in our country, our politics (and peripherally, the mess he perceives at our colleges and universities)?

Bunch commences his solutions with a laudatory description of the Williamson College of the Trades, located outside of Philadelphia. Founded by a Quaker who made a fortune in the dry goods business, Williamson is a very rich, very small, men's

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39 *Id.* at 157.

40 *Id.*

41 The "Left Perplexed" *id.* at 158.

42 The "Left Behind" *id.* at 159.

43 The "Left Broke" *id.* at 158.

44 The "Left Out" *id.* at 159; quotation, *id.* at 157.

trades school, “military-strict” in its student life expectations (Bunch meets some students while they are mopping down dorm floors and cleaning bathrooms), dedicated to providing its graduates with strong vocational credentials. Williamson’s original endowment was larger than that of Harvard or Yale at the time, and it continues to generate enough revenue to render itself tuition free. Bunch admits that there are few, if any, schools in America like Williamson, but that “doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be thinking about how to clone it. It blends a concept that’s popular with Democrats—a free trade school—with classes that adhere to an arguably conservative worldview on morality, and that’s a recipe that working for both a small sliver of the millions of young Americans who don’t want a conventional college—let alone the debt—but desire a demanding career, and for employers who insist it’s hard to find applicants like these.”<sup>45</sup> Bunch asks, “Would the college’s model work if the program were funded by U.S. taxpayers instead of the discipline-minded executors of a millionaire’s trust?”<sup>46</sup> But, apart from the unlikely possibility of government funding of a massive number of small, intensively residential, vocational, free colleges like Williamson, this is obviously a question for which there is simply no answer. Further, Bunch’s rather fleeting treatment of the scores of community colleges across the country whose tuition is reasonably affordable and who are aiming to provide just this type of training, suggests he is more interested in cluster-bombing higher education than crediting the good work being done to address the many valid problems he diagnoses.<sup>47</sup>

In any event, solution number one is his proposal for a new Truman Commission, which would take a look at the state of higher education. “Any true fix for ‘the college problem’ needs a strong set of moral governing principles, or a strategy, to be carried out before we embark down the roadmap of policies, or tactics. America owes its young citizens these foundational principles.”<sup>48</sup> He hopes that such conversations would support a reasoned move towards some vision of “universal higher education” for all.<sup>49</sup>

Solution number two is expansive student loan debt relief. Bunch feels that development of free higher education must go hand in hand with relief for the millions of Americans saddled with crippling debt as well. “We will remain an unfair and grossly unequal nation if we find a way to provide mostly free education to today’s college-age youth yet continue to saddle adults – but especially people of color and women – with hundreds of dollars in monthly payments that will weight them down, possibly for the rest of their lives.”<sup>50</sup>

Solution number three is a national recommitment to a liberal education, although Bunch fails to acknowledge the tensions between this proposal and his idealization

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45 *Id.* at 244.

46 *Id.* at 249

47 In fairness, Bunch does approvingly reference the Biden administration’s plans for free community college. *Id.* at 270.

48 *Id.* at 253.

49 *Id.*

50 *Id.* at 258.

of Williamson as providing the kind of career-focused or vocational education employers actually need.

Solution number four is development of a program of universal national service, a program that could require the young of America to contribute along the lines of the World War II generation and reward them with something like the G.I. bill:

Could America somehow rekindle the spirit of that immediate postwar era—the fleeting moment of unity, when the battle-tested sons of factory workers thrived in college classrooms alongside Boston brahmins and main line bluebloods? Could the United States somehow draft its young people—morally if not with an actual induction board—for a national crusade that would offer the benefit of winning as war, without all the carnage?<sup>51</sup>

Bunch acknowledges the similarly minded programs initiated by Presidents Kennedy and Clinton (Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps, and the later nongovernmental Teach for America). But, “Republicans like Ronald Reagan, who saw such programs as needless government social engineering slashed the Peace Corps or VISTA to the bone.”<sup>52</sup> And, “Clinton’s push to find shared national purpose, after all, came during a 1990s marked by Rush Limbaugh and the ascent of angry talk radio, by the partisan impeachment that almost took down his presidency, and by the recognition of ‘red states’ and ‘blue states.’”<sup>53</sup> But again, one must ask whether today’s—if anything—radically more polarized politics would be susceptible to the type of extraordinarily expensive national service and free education program Bunch envisions? Is there actual hope of broad student loan forgiveness, when Biden’s limited plan to forgive some student debt was met instantly with Republican opposition and lawsuits?

In the end, Bunch is an idealist and a polemicist with a passionate heart. He does advance some fair critiques and has some important ideas. Had he written a less inflammatory and better balanced book, more people might have been willing to listen to him.

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51 *Id.* at 281.

52 *Id.* at 286.

53 *Id.*