Science in the News

Religion and Aid to Education; The Peace Corps; Making Room for Educational and Public Service TV

Aside from the more direct issues, the Administration's education program will be affected by at least two incidental factors, of which one, civil rights, was reported on here two weeks ago. The other was brought plainly into focus last week when all five American cardinals met in Washington with a group of archbishops and bishops who make up the hierarchy's leaders in education and announced that they could not support, indeed would have to oppose, Kennedy's education program unless some provision were made for parochial schools. When the press asked for a White House reaction to the Catholic statement, Kennedy's news secretary, Pierre Salinger, announced that so far as the White House was concerned there was nothing to add to Kennedy's press conference remark of the day before, which was a flat assertion that aid for church schools would be "clearly unconstitutional," and therefore out of the question.

The entire business is a legislative nightmare. An aid-to-education bill passed the House last year, by a vote of 206 to 189, and the new Congress is generally reckoned to be at least a dozen votes more conservative than last year. An analysis by Congressional Quarterly, on the basis of how holdover members voted last year and the known positions of new members, suggested that even a bill limited to classroom construction would be beaten 201 to 227 if the vote were held today and all members voted. A bill including money for teachers' salaries, as Kennedy's does, faces much tougher obstacles.

Yet, aside from the civil rights and parochial school issues, at least a construction bill would go through quite easily. Both these points of controversy took support away from the bill last year, and unless they grow decidedly worse this year, it is generally assumed, on the basis of his effectiveness to date, that Kennedy will be able to work up enough popular pressure to force a bill through the reluctant House despite the apparent 26-vote deficit. But whether he can have his way on teachers' salaries in the face of the additional opposition generated by the side issues is very doubtful, and both issues will give him other troubles on the rest of his program, devoted to aid for higher education.

The Catholic position is quite simple: Catholics feel morally obligated to maintain a parochial school system while they are legally obligated to help pay for the public school system as well. They recognize that there is not a great deal they can do about this double burden, which incidentally is quite a blessing in many areas to non-Catholics, whose taxes would have to be raised sharply if all the Catholic children decided to go to public schools. But if the Catholic community cannot eliminate the burden, they would at least like to keep it from getting a great deal worse by trying to see that if the federal government becomes heavily involved in education it includes at least a moderate amount of assistance for private as well as public schools, which of course would include assistance to parochial schools. Specifically, they would like to see the school bill, which will make grants to public schools, include in addition a program of low-interest, long-term loans to private schools.

Loans for Private Schools

The Catholic position is that they do not want grants, which would probably be unconstitutional in any case, but that a loan program would be both constitutional and just. The Administration faces a dilemma on this touchy question: its proposal includes a program of loans for all colleges, which includes Catholic and other church-sponsored colleges, and there is a wide feeling that ways will have to be found to make grants to private colleges as well. It is not only that the constitutional problems are awkward, but that like civil rights, the issue of aid to sectarian schools both divides the supporters of expanded federal aid to education and adds an emotion-laden argument to the position of those who oppose the education program anyway.

There is a fairly easy line to be drawn between aid to private schools, including sectarian schools, and aid to private colleges. One is generally considered a luxury available at their own expense to people who, for one reason or another, do not choose to send their children to public schools; the other is accepted as a basic element of the nation's facilities for higher education.

To change either of these views would mean a sharp break with traditional attitudes which have, over the years, taken on a legal force as they have become imbedded, tacitly at least, in the Supreme Court's interpretation of the religion clause in the First Amendment. The Constitution says only that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." But for more than a century there has been no real dispute that the religion clause is to be interpreted very broadly. The catch phrase that a "wall of separation" between church and state has been decreed, as opposed to a mere line of separation, was coined by Thomas Jefferson.

But given this broad interpretation, the actual delineation as to just what would be constitutional in the way of assistance to private schools has been vaguely drawn, and cases involving assistance to private colleges have hardly ever reached the Supreme Court.

The most obvious effect of the tradition of keeping public funds from educational activities involving religion has been to discourage the tendency of religious groups to organize separate school systems, and so to limit the extent to which American children are brought up under a system that involves segregation by religion. Within the Administration and within the educational community there does not appear to be widespread concern about the difficulties in the way of finding approaches to provide adequate and equitable support for education without breaking the constitutional traditions.

What is worrying the Administration more is that the mere existence of this touchy area of controversy means that either meeting, or refusing to meet,

even the most reasonable claims of the sectarian schools and colleges adds a difficult complication for those who must concern themselves with the tactics of getting a program for education through the Congress.

A Role for Youth

The headquarters of the Peace Corps announced last week by Kennedy resembles nothing so much as his political campaign headquarters in the days after the Los Angeles convention. A major project, costing perhaps $50 million the first year, is being organized out of nothing in a period of a few weeks, and the disarray of the offices is not an entirely inaccurate reflection of the makeshift state of the program.

The Peace Corps is to be an organization of young Americans, primarily recent college graduates, who will serve two- or three-year tours of duty in underdeveloped countries, receiving no salary beyond an allowance kept small enough to discourage them from living beyond the normal standard of the country to which they are assigned.

It has not been made very clear yet just how they can make themselves most useful, nor just what sort of training will be necessary before they are sent overseas. The unconventional nature of the project itself, aside from the way it is being organized, practically overnight, is suggested by the fact that less than a year ago such an unconservative organization as Americans for Democratic Action refused to include the idea in its platform on the grounds that, although it sounded good, it really didn't seem very practical.

Despite all this, the response to Kennedy's announcement has been overwhelmingly favorable both at home and abroad, with the criticism coming almost exclusively from people who feel that the whole foreign aid program is a waste of money anyway. The Corps office was immediately flooded with 6000 letters from people volunteering to join, and Germany and Britain have begun to talk of forming their own Peace Corps, patterned after the American model.

The Corps hopes to have 500 to 1000 members overseas by the end of the year, working on such projects as literacy campaigns in English-speaking countries in Africa. Here at home the Corps administrators hope to organize programs in universities across the country to provide students interested in joining with specialized training in the language, politics, and culture of the countries to which they will be assigned.

But for the most part, the program is frankly an experiment, and no one pretends to know exactly how it will work out. It is not hard to find skeptics who suspect the whole thing will turn out to be a fiasco, but at the moment there is a good deal of optimism that it will develop into just what the Administration believes it will be: a convincing demonstration to the world that, as Kennedy insists, a new generation bursting with energy and new ideas has taken over the reins in America.

UHF, VHF, FCC

The Federal Communications Commission has decided to support a bill which would use federal power to regulate goods shipped in interstate commerce to compel manufacturers of television sets to make all sets capable of receiving the little used ultra-high-frequency channels, as well as the much used very-high-frequency channels. Something along these lines has been talked about for years, and if the bill goes through it should lead quite quickly to sharp increases in the variety of television fare that is available to the public, including a great expansion of educational and public service TV.

The current situation is this: For several years now there has been virtually no room for further assignments in the 12-channel VHF band. In contrast, several thousand additional stations could be accommodated in the almost deserted 70-channel UHF band.

There is a touch of madness in the situation: Sets capable of receiving both UHF and VHF cost 10 percent more than VHF only sets. So all-channel sets do not sell because there is hardly anything to see on UHF, and there is hardly anything to see on UHF because it is awfully uneconomical to run a UHF station when hardly anyone has a set that can receive the programs.

A few figures show how bleak the situation is. Of the 370 commercial stations which obtained UHF permits through 1959, only 167 ever went on the air. Ninety-two of these 167 have gone out of business, usually after heavy losses. And of the 75 stations still on the air only one-third are operating in the black.

The situation is even worse in educational TV. As of a few months ago, of 180 odd stations granted UHF permits, only 13 were on the air. In comparison, 35 of 88 authorized VHF educational stations were on the air, and most of those that were not on the air were located in small cities in the west. There was no educational station in either New York or Los Angeles, both of which have seven VHF commercial stations.

There is a general agreemeent that it is not a very sensible arrangement to have the nation's television service cramped into the inadequate VHF band, while the 70 channel UHF band goes virtually unused, but the FCC, which has been studying the situation since 1952, when it became apparent that UHF television was not developing as it should, has never been able to do much about it. The agency contented itself mainly with studying and re-studying the question to the point where a panel appointed by Congress to see what the FCC was doing came to the conclusion the FCC was just incapable of making decisions.

What efforts the FCC did make to solve the problem have not been very successful. It tried what it called "deintermixing," which meant that areas would be divided up so that some had only VHF channels, some only UHF. This never got off the ground because there always seemed to be some reason why any particular area should not be deintermixed.

The Commission then tried to get the Defense Department to trade off some of its frequencies adjoining the VHF band in exchange for some of the FCC's civilian frequencies. But the Defense Department, on technical grounds, refused to go along, and in any case this would only have provided about half a dozen extra channels, instead of the 70 available on UHF.

It is not clear whether the change in Administration had much to do with the FCC's finally going ahead with the present proposal, one of several that have been offered with the same general purpose of relieving all-channel receivers of their cost handicap in competing with VHF only receivers. But in any case, after several years of half-hearted efforts to deal with the problem there now seems to be real backing in the agency for expanding television service by the most direct route: that is, by breaking the curious circle of no UHF sets because no UHF stations and no UHF stations because no UHF sets.—H.M.