



John Walton—A Warrior in the Battle for School Reform

BY LARRY P. ARNN

John Walton, one of the richest men in the world, was recently killed in the crash of a small airplane in Wyoming. He was the son of the founder of Wal-Mart. Not a titan of industry like his father, he was in his own right a great man of a different kind.

I first met John Walton in a meeting about an initiative to pass school choice in California in 1993. He was tall, lean, handsome and quiet. He had a gift for saying a lot in a few words, simple and clear. Most people in the meeting did not know who he was until it was over, but they listened to him nonetheless.

I was soon enough in other meetings with him. Early on we had some disagreements of a friendly kind. His heart longed to do something about the miserable education system in this country. It seemed to him so simple to see what was wrong, and he was sure he could get everyone to agree with him if he just explained. He thought even the teachers' union could be persuaded to see sense. As he said once to me in his home in San Diego: "Surely we can all agree to do what is best for the children."

I replied that surely we do agree to do what is best, but alas, we do not agree about what that is. There is the rub. Everyone wants to help children. The charitable want to help them because they are precious. Ambitious people want to help them because they are the future, and the best way to influence the future is to influence them. If one wishes to know who is strongest in a society, ask who influences education. At the beginning of our country, everyone knew that education was vital, and so they contrived a wonderful system for its local control. Today, living under a different principle, we know that education is vital, and so we control it from the center by rules and the authority of bureaucrats.

John was reluctant to believe this disagreeable thing. This was a credit to him. It came certainly from no lack of toughness, not in this soldier who won the Silver Star in Vietnam rescuing fallen comrades, not in this pilot and motorcycle enthusiast. It was not a weak but a generous spirit that made him want to fix the schools, and that same spirit made him believe at the beginning that most everyone else would agree with him.

The last time I saw him was a decade later, in 2003 in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He had adopted this beautiful place as his new home, and it would be very soon the place where he would die. He was still urgent and enthusiastic when he spoke of school reform. He had become a master of the subject. He had traveled countless miles in that cause, and over the years he had never tired. He had learned a lot, he said. He thought now that it was possible to win only by increments, and he knew that there would be fierce fighting at every step. All the while he stuck to his usual way, which was to speak always of the excellence and achievement of others. He had almost nothing to say of himself.

Why would this man work so hard, and suffer so much opposition, in a cause that is so far from the fashionable? Why, for that matter, would this man serve his country so gallantly in an unfashionable war?



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He was, after all, born to privilege on a scale known only to a tiny few in all of history. I saw him once on television sitting at a baseball game next to Ted Turner, who then owned the Atlanta Braves. He could have kept this kind of company all his life.

I asked him once why he had chosen to fight this difficult battle that separated him from so many among the elite. He said that he had not grown up thinking of himself as part of the elite (his family has about \$100 billion). Anyway, he asked, could not anyone see what must be done about education?

The service John Walton has done for his country cannot be completely celebrated for a long time. Both of the causes in which he was a warrior are still divisive today, and so there can be just now no consensus of appreciation for what he has done. This means that extra honor is due him. In some good day, when the bureaucracy that runs education in our country is broken, he will be paid that honor in full measure.

John Walton was a much richer man even than his vast wealth would indicate. He had the kind of wealth that endures beyond any single life, beyond time itself.

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