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## Reaction to America 2000: Operation Desert Drought

*Thomas Cloer, Jr.*

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I was always a daydreamer, a Walter Mitty type of fellow. Since most of my formative years were spent in sawmill villages in the highest mountains of Appalachia, it was an escape mechanism that I developed in early childhood that instantaneously took me to other places as different characters fulfilling different roles. It is also a major reason for my early interest in reading.

As I watched the Education 2000 video, I couldn't keep myself from drifting away. *Walter Mitty like, to the University of Virginia where I, the Surgeon General, was being asked with the help of only Strom Thurmond and Carroll Campbell (Governor of South Carolina) to develop America's National Health Goals for the year 2000. In my dream-like state, I felt totally inept as I often do in dreams when I am teaching my college reading classes and look down to discover that my pants are missing.*

*As I came to the podium and looked out over the audience, Tom Estes, esteemed Professor from the University of Virginia, was intimidatingly sitting with President-Elect Bill Clinton. I babbled a few words about my goals constituting an ambitious agenda, one that asks Americans to accomplish a great deal more than ever before. I used what propaganda techniques I had mastered; my forte was plain folks.*

Since my Walter Mitty transformations fade in and out, I at this point awoke back at the Forum to hear Wayne Otto talk about governors and business communities jerking educators around. I turned and watched young graduate students in the Reading Forum audience nod enthusiastically. I knew Wayne Otto had profound things to say and I actually

tried to follow. However, the fading out started and I was back again at the University of Virginia.

*In my daydreams, I was nervously trying to say something in the direction of Tom Estes and Bill Clinton when I remembered the words of Michael Kinsley on becoming co-anchor of CNN's "Crossfire" program. He declared "I know how to read a teleprompter! I can run the country now!" As I stared at the teleprompter in front of me, there miraculously was the first goal. I glanced at the words and then projected my voice toward Estes and Clinton. "All people will eat three balanced meals per day," I mumbled with little confidence or verve. Applause was scattered, but Estes and Clinton didn't budge. "Goal number two," I said with increasing confidence. "Ninety percent of our patients in American will get better." At this point the applause seemed loudest in the section where older men in pin-striped suits were sitting. I realized then that these were the governors.*

*I turned in my dreams toward Strom Thurmond and Caroll Campbell who both nodded and pointed back toward the teleprompter. "Number three goal!" I said somewhat nervously because it seemed longer and more complicated on the teleprompter. "Patients at ages 9, 13, and 21 will know how to count calories and fat grams, and every hospital in America will ensure that patients learn more about health and be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment." At this point, the Rotunda exploded in thunderous applause and I thought in my dreams that Estes nodded. But I couldn't tell without staring if he had nodded in agreement or had fallen slightly forward from boredom and fatigue.*

At this point I was awakened and jolted back to reality at the Forum as Nicki Askov talked eloquently about a project of lifelong learning at Penn State growing out of Education 2000. This project had focused on the workplace, family, and community after defining literacy in a contextual and functional manner. Askov began to state five strategies for successful programs. I needed to hear this badly because Nicki is most productive, but I felt the chemistry in my brain changing, and back I went dreamily to the University of Virginia.

*"Number four goal," I called with a glance at Estes and Clinton who now had their umbrellas in hand and were spinning them between their hands like boy scouts trying to start a fire with a stick. "U.S. patients will be the healthiest in the world by the year 2000. And now goal number five! Every American will be healthy enough to work and compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship!" I looked back at Governor Caroll Campbell and he gave me a thumbs-up sign and slightly elbowed Strom who had started to make strange noises through his nose as he slept.*

*As I looked back toward Estes and Clinton, they had each started walking toward the exit and I made one last attempt to win them over by nearly screaming the sixth and final goal. "Every hospital in America will be free of thievery and promiscuity and will offer an environment conducive to healing." Estes turned as he walked, looked directly at me from the exit door, and mouthed "That's pathetic."*

*Others attending applauded thunderously as I finished and I waved and smiled until my plastic shoulder joint began to ache. As I left the podium, Strom Thurmond and Carroll Campbell were trying to restrain a hefty academician who had approached the stage and was quite animated. I recognized immediately that it was William Bennett, former Secretary of Education. He stared annoyingly at me and said in his arrogant style. "You forgot one small item in your formation of goals! You did not include any medical doctors. How in hell do you plan to affect health care without consulting medical doctors? Just how do you plan to integrate these goals? I've heard nothing about linking health care and home. Could you tell me in that God-awful Appalachian Goober-like accent how you are going to monitor these goals and assess your progress. Have you thought of an assessment system Goob?" In this Alice in Wonderland surrealism I could think of nothing in rebuttal and no teleprompter was present. I glared back and castigated him, berated him, emasculated him with the strongest diatribe I could muster. "Listen snoot," I snarled as I put my face closer to his as the media pushed each other and put microphones across people's backs to get my learned reply. You - you, you lack family values! You should practice what you preach, spark plug!" (I meant to say drug czar, but while thinking of "a thousand points of light," the spoonerism came out spark plug.)*

*In my dreams, I was devastated, my self-esteem plummeted, I staggered away toward the security of the rest room. In there, I overheard two men talking. I recognized instantly the voices of Tom Estes and Bill Clinton. I quickly closed the door on the stall. Clinton was speaking. "The pitiful little man up there was actually embarrassing. Have we come to this in America? He didn't include a process for achieving any of those glittering generalities he called goals. He didn't discuss any changes needed in society that would affect the attainment of the goals." To that Estes replied, "People who live in glass houses or white houses shouldn't throw stones."*

As I faded back into reality and the Education 2000 session was coming to an end at the Reading Forum, I noticed some striking parallels between the Education 2000 goals and the ones the inept Surgeon General had presented. I realized how little the politicians really know about how to solve the gargantuan educational problems confronting us in America. I wondered if things would indeed change

with a new administration. As we dismissed and I walked to the next session in the Pelican Suite, I kept thinking of the words of Clarence Darrow: "When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it."