

## 1/24/1960 Rickover on Meet the Press - Main topic is Education in America

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**Speakers** Rickover (60%), Speaker 1 (14%), Mr. (9%), Speaker 2 (9%), Speaker 3 (5%), Speaker 4 (2%), Speaker 5 (0%)

1

Speaker 1

0:02

The monitor brings you Meet the Press, the prize winning interview program produced by Lawrence e Spivak. Ready for the spontaneous, unrehearsed conference, are four of America's top news reporters. Their questions do not necessarily reflect their point of view, but may be their way of getting a story for you. And now here's the moderator of Meet the Press. Ned Brooks,

1

Speaker 1

0:24

welcome once again to meet the press. Our guest today is Vice Admiral Hyman Rickover, widely recognized as the father of the atomic navy. His achievement in applying atomic energy to submarine propulsion is ranked as one of the great scientific contributions of our time. In 1958 Congress voted him a special gold medal. Last year, he was assigned by President Eisenhower to accompany VICE PRESIDENT NIXON on his visit to the Soviet Union. Admiral Rickover has aroused nationwide interest in his crusade for fundamental changes in our educational system. He believes that education holds the key to our survival. He has become one of the sharpest critics of the school system at all levels. He has made a deep impression on the country by his brilliance and his refusal to be diverted when he considers the goal important. Admiral Rickover is making his first appearance today on a panel interview program, now seated around the press table, ready to interview Admiral Rickover, are Ernest K Lindley of Newsweek magazine, Chalmers Roberts of The Washington Post, James Reston of The New York Times, and Lawrence e Spivak, our regular member of the eat the press panel. Now, Admiral

R

Rickover

1:37

Rickover, if you're ready, sir,

R

Rickover

1:39

we'll start the questions with Mr. Spivak,

MS

Mr. Spivak

1:41

Admiral. Some of your critics are saying Admiral Rickover is a great engineer. Why doesn't he stick to engineering and leave education to the educators. Will you tell us why you've taken so much of your valuable time to attack our educational system?

R

Rickover

1:57

Mr. Spivak, do you remember what Clemenceau said about war, it was too important to leave to the military people and education is too important to leave to the educators. The educators are public servants as such. They have every right to be criticized by any citizen in a democracy. When you cannot criticize your public servants, then you have the Russian system. Therefore, if we cannot criticize, we do not have democratic education.

MS

Mr. Spivak

2:28

Admiral, about two years ago, in an article for this week magazine, you wrote this, and I quote as a people, we have been caught napping that the launching of Sputnik may well do for education what Pearl Harbor did for industry and the military. Would you say that the hope you expressed two years ago has been fulfilled?

R

Rickover

2:49

No, sir, it has not. There is some little activity going on. There's some lip service being given to better education, but it's by fit and starts. Our people do not yet recognize, yet recognize how far we're falling behind. Admiral

MS

Mr. Spivak

3:06

Arthur Fleming, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, who certainly is in a position to know, or ought to be in a position No, says, I do not agree with those who say we're behind Europe and Russia in education. Take the educational system as a whole, we have the best there is anywhere at the present time. What do you base your judgment?

R

Rickover

3:27

If that's the case, why is he asking for more money for education? If we already have the best educational system in the world? I base my estimate on the fact that the United States Office of Education has published examinations which are asked of about 1.6 million Russians at the age of 17 in mathematics and physics and chemistry and history in foreign languages and so on. Very few of our high school graduates can pass that examination. When our children can pass an examination as severe as that, and that examination is not as severe as children in Western Europe can pass, then I will be satisfied with our school system.

R

Rickover

4:13

Mr. Reston,

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Speaker 1

4:14

Admiral Rickover, is our trouble that we are we are lacking brains, or that we are not using the brains we have.

R

Rickover

4:24

We have plenty of brains in this country. Mr. Reston, we simply are not using them. The children in our schools are wasting their time on many subjects which have nothing to do with education whatsoever. Of course, this makes many jobs for guidance counselors, athletic coaches, school administrators and so on. But it does not add to education. Well, Admiral, it

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Speaker 1

4:49

seems to me, there's a paradox here. We may be behind in missiles, but in atomic submarines, for example, we apparently are needing the world. I. You manage to recruit an extraordinary group of people and bring them in. Now, why do we not do that in other forms, in other fields of endeavor in the country? I

R

Rickover

5:12

can't answer that, Mr. Reston, I can only tell you this, I did not recruit extraordinary people. I recruited people who had extraordinary potential, and then I trained them. There are no good people waiting to be hired. All the good people already have good jobs, and the only way you can do it is to get promising people and devote most of your time and energy to training them. And I am sure if people have charge of other projects who do that, they could have better luck too.

R

Rickover

5:41

What are you looking for? Brains or character?

R

Rickover

5:46

I'm looking mostly for brains at the present time. You can't build submarines with character.

1

Speaker 1

5:55

You mean you can, you can take a heel, and if he's smart, you can, you can, you can whip him around. You'll take your chances if he does

R

Rickover

6:02

a good design job. Mr. Eston, I don't care what else he does in his spare time. Mr. Roberts,

2

Speaker 2

6:09

Admiral, starting with the fact that this country is in favor of general free public education for everybody, and recognizing the fact that we don't all have the same amount of brains. You're the only one in the room that could do anything about this submarine none of the rest of us could. Is your quarrel with the total nature of our system, or only that it doesn't pull out of it, the relatively small percentage of our people who can do these extraordinarily skillful jobs that seem to be needed to be done in this competition with the communists,

R

Rickover

6:51

my objection is to the total system. I believe that many, many more of our youngsters can be trained to be good scientists, good engineers, good administrators, good musicians and good artists. If we simply made the try. The United States Office of Education claims officially that 60% of our youngsters cannot be trained in the way I would wish, I think that many can. We simply are not trying hard enough we give up too soon. This is my basic complaint against our education system. Now,

2

Speaker 2

7:26

if I understand from what you've been saying and writing, one of your ways or proposals to solve this is to have a much more federal much more federal control. You said there are too many school boards, and people on local school boards are not equipped to run education and yet, isn't this the basic objection of most Americans? They don't want the Office of Education to run the local schools. Isn't this the problem that you're up against. We

R

Rickover

8:00

don't have to run our schools federally, but we can set up federal standards. Education has not been improved anywhere else in the world without first setting up standards. Now we have standards for railroad transportation. We have standards for airplane travel, for lipstick colors, for the size of socks that we have no standard for education. We have standards for what goes into people's mouths, but we will not even permit permissive standards for what goes into their heads. I advocate that a federal permissive standard be set up for what every boy or girl at age 18 should know, then every parent can tell how well his children have done in school, how well the teachers are doing wherever this has been done, it has inevitably resulted in an upgrading of the school system.

3

Speaker 3

8:55

Mr. Lindley, Admiral, although your work requires a high degree of specialization, you advocate a liberal education as the foundation of education in this country, and as you indicated a moment ago, you think with that type of education, that many people who are now not now

considered good students could be driven or encouraged to enlarge their minds. How far would you carry that? How many years of general liberal education do you think every American should have?

R

Rickover

9:28

I thoroughly agree that the basic education should be liberal. In Western Europe at the age of 17 or 18, the boys and girls who go to the academic high schools have acquired a liberal education, which is about the equivalent of what we get after three to four years at college. And this, I advocate for all of our children. I would let them go just as far as they could if, after a while, they were not able to assimilate it, they'd have to get off into. Technical training, but first of all, I would try as hard as I could to get every child in the United States a liberal education through high school, at least through high school. Now, the Russian system recently was changed, at least a change was announced. I don't know whether it's been carried through to make it more difficult to get into the university, and in effect, to require two years of work, or two or three years of work in factory or in the fields after high school, or the equivalent of high school. Do you think that is a good thing in Russia, only about 30% of the high school graduates can go to college, and so therefore they have far more people wanting to go to college, and they can accommodate so they can be choosy. I talked with Mr. Khrushchev on his very point. He said there were too many people who were just going to school for the sake of going to school, but they have not carried that thought into effect fully. The smart youngsters getting out of college go directly getting out of high school, go directly to college. The others go to work for about two years and study at nighttime and then go on to college.

3

Speaker 3

11:15

Do you think that would be a good plan to adopt in this country?

R

Rickover

11:19

I personally do not believe in is working after high school and before college. I think that the children should go on immediately after high school, because the mind can grasp more the younger it is, the younger the child is.

11:35

Mr. Spivak,

MS

Mr. Spivak

11:35

I don't quite understand this. Do you think too few people are going on to higher education, or too many, or some of both, I

R

Rickover

11:44

think too many are going on into higher education in the United States who are not prepared for it. I think we could probably stand having more going on to higher education we do now, but that they should be better prepared than they are at the present time.

MS

Mr. Spivak

12:02

Well now Admiral, you yourself are the product of our American school system. You went to Annapolis. You went to the public schools. Here they tell me that you've done pretty well. What's wrong with a school system that can produce someone like you? Well,

R

Rickover

12:16

my education consists of the few technical things I learned at the Naval Academy, plus about 40 years of study and reading and thought in science and literature and art and history and engineering. Those 40 years plus my public school education have made me what I am today. In

MS

Mr. Spivak

12:38

short, you found plenty of opportunity to educate yourself here, if you have the desire to do so.

R

Rickover

12:44

Of course, anyone who has the desire to educate himself can do so, but most people are lazy. Their children see that they're lazy, and the children follow the habits of the parents. Well, how

MS

Mr. Spivak

12:55

are you going to instill this desire? You say our educational system can take care of the people who want an education, because certainly took care of you. You had a chance to study and get what you

R

Rickover

13:05

wanted, not by not to our educational system.

MS

Mr. Spivak

13:09

You did it right here in this country,

R

Rickover

13:10

though, didn't you? Yes, but not in the educational system. I did it in spite of our educational system.

MS

Mr. Spivak

13:16

What major steps would you take if you were a dictator of education today, if you could, if you could change the system, what would be your first step? What would you go

R

Rickover

13:24

about going the first thing I would do is set up a standard. As I said, before you cannot get anywhere unless you have standards. For example, when we went to nuclear power in the Navy, we had to set up new standards for the welding of stainless steel and many other types of standards, we found, unless we had those standards, the shipyards and the factories could not do a good job. This is true everywhere in life. So we met first as a standard. Second, I would get better teachers. Third, I would knock off some of the administrators who are really running our schools. For example, in one state, 60% of the public school principals are ex athletic coaches. People of that type should not be running our schools. In fact, the voice of education is not the voice of the teachers. It's the voice of the administrators. The teachers never get to talk. I get many letters from teachers who tell me about conditions in the schools, and they say, please don't use my name. I'm afraid

MS

Mr. Spivak

14:24

you talk about standards, but we have standards here. I mean, a boy has to get certain grades, he has to pass certain subjects in order to get through Harvard or Yale or any any college. So that we do have standards. What do you mean by standards? You'd set your own standards. I'm

R

Rickover

14:41

talking mostly about the grammar schools and the high schools. The high school diploma in this country has very little meaning because the the requirements are so different in various parts of the country. Merely means, in general, that the child has been is sat in school for four years. It does not. Have anywhere near the same meaning that it has in Western Europe.

R

Rickover

15:05

Mr. Ruston,

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Speaker 1

15:06

Admiral Rickover, you said you talked to Mr. Khrushchev about this. Have you ever talked to the President about it? No, sir. He's never asked you to come and talk. What about Mr. Fleming? Anybody in the government at all? No, Mr. Brooks said you've made an enormous impression on this country with your

R

Rickover

15:29

well. Now, why is that?

R

Rickover

15:30

You will have to ask our governmental leadership about that.

1

Speaker 1

15:34

Going back to what Mr. Spivak said earlier, you managed to do all right now, what about the what about the responsibility of the home and all this?

R

Rickover

15:48

I believe that if the parents fit did their job, we could have much better educated children. It's been found out after considerable research that how children do in school, not only here, but even in Russia, is based on the influence of the home. If the home is a place where there's simply good surroundings, where the children simply get good clothes and lots of entertainment, and there's no intellectual discussion in the home that has quite an effect on the children, you'll find many, studies show that the parents are the greatest influence in how well their children do, and until and unless the parents recognize that if they decide to bring children forth into this world, that they have a deep responsibility to look out for their posterity, until they decide that, until they understand That that is their most important function in life. We will not have better schools today, the parents are mostly satisfied with having a good time and with looking out for things that are not concerned with the intellect of their children.

1

Speaker 1

16:53

What do you do though about the kids who come out of good homes and go to good universities and where there is agitation for standards of excellence in the family intellectually, and then they use this excellence in very secondary endeavors, whereas in Russia, which you're always quoting, they direct their brains to the place where the state needs those brains the most. What do you do about this problem?

R

Rickover

17:24

We can do the same thing here without state compulsion. If our values were not such that we gave material possession such a high place in our scheme of things, if we were taught now that this is really an affluent society where everybody really has enough to get along on that there are many other things in life besides possessions fill our homes with new things every day. The nursery rhymes on TV and radio urges to buy new things, new things. If we've learned that these things are thrown in the ash can in a couple of years, but what you put in the child's mind stays there forever. If we realize that that, that the intellectual life, the life of the mind, was just as important as getting money and material things, I believe many of these youngsters would go on to do intellectual

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Speaker 1

18:15

what you're talking about now is the whole philosophy of the country, just the values of the country, that's the educational system. Is this the heart of the problem?

R

Rickover

18:24

Well, our education, the education of our country, is a part of the sum total. You can't divorce the educational system from the country, nor can you divorce the responsibility of all the people from our educational troubles. You can't blame one group of society. It's our collective fault.

R

Rickover

18:45

Mr. Roberts, I'd

2

Speaker 2

18:46

like to ask you about one proposal you've made specifically, if I understand it correctly, and that's the idea of doing something more for those so called bright kids in our schools who I understand your criticism and that of others have been often lost by making schools the lowest common denominator. Bright kid is lost in the mass Am I right that you want to have a separate school system for the brighter kids? Or how would you take give pull that boy up or that girl up above the level of mass of the kids.

R

Rickover

19:25

Mr. Roberts, I believe that every child in this country, no matter where he comes from, what the financial status, status of his parents is, what his social status is, should have an equal opportunity to develop himself to the maximum I would give federal aid to education as necessary to accomplish this. I would not stop any youngster who was brilliant. I would not have him held back by anyone else. I would let each child proceed at his maximum. I would not have separate schools now. Necessarily, you could have it in separate parts of the same school, but I would group children after about 10 or 11 years of age in accordance with their abilities, so that every child in every school is working as hard as he can. If you put the bright youngster in with the dullard, the bright one becomes lazy and becomes troublesome. If the dullard becomes dissatisfied because he reaches an inferiority complex. So I would separate him so that each one is doing the best he can.

2

Speaker 2

20:30

Well do you? Are you in favor of a strictly limited kind of education? The with you, you've criticized so called frills or trivia in education, you think we ought to get rid of all sports that we have in our school system, high school football and that sort of thing, and stick to the classroom. Is that what you're talking about, I

R

Rickover

20:52

would stick to the classroom with the exception of Physical Education. Physical education is essential, but many of the organized sports are done more for the entertainment of the parents than it is for the children themselves. It also is done to a great extent to make jobs for various people. The school is not the place for this. The school is tax supported there is a distinction between training and education. Education can be done best in the school training should be done by the home, by the church and by the community, and when we, when we try, in a 108 80 day school year, five hours a day to do everything in a school be accomplished nothing. Well, I would use the school to train the intellect.

R

Rickover

21:38

Mr. Lindley, Admiral,

3

Speaker 3

21:40

I wonder if we might turn to atomic development for a moment. You've seen it firsthand, at least parts of the Russian atomic program, and you know what we are doing. Are they ahead of us in any significant phase of atomic development, either peaceful or for military purposes?

R

Rickover

21:56

Mr. Lundley, I can only talk about the subject which I am familiar that is atomic submarines and the peaceful applications of atomic power. I do not believe they are ahead of us in atomic submarines. I do not know of any atomic submarine they have. I am sure, with the Russian tendency to boast about what they've done, if they did have an atomic submarine at the present time, we would know about it. As far as the Peaceful Uses of atomic energy is concerned, I do not think they are in advance of us. We haven't gotten very far either, but I don't think they've gotten as far as we have. Would

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Speaker 3

22:33

you make an estimate today as to when atomic power will become competitive economically with other sources of power. It's

R

Rickover

22:42

foolhardy to

R

Rickover

22:46

say what will happen the next year or so, but I confidently predict that it will not be economically, economically competitive for at least 10 years, perhaps 20

3

Speaker 3

22:59

you would agree. I suppose that the Russians are ahead of us in space, at least they've been able to put larger objects into space. Have you any recommendations to what we might do with our space program in order to overcome this handicap?

R

Rickover

23:19

I can only talk in generalities, I think the our governmental operations could be very much streamlined so that the people are trying to do a job are not interfered with as much as they are with reports, committees, memoranda and so on. For example, my own time has taken up about 75% with writing reports. The other day, I told one man who asked me to write a report. I could either give him this report or build a submarine. Which did he choose? I believe I'll probably have to write the report. Was he in the executive branch? Yes, Congress. The executive branch, not Congress.

R

Rickover

23:55

Mr. Spivak,

MS

Mr. Spivak

23:56

think we are in a life and death struggle with the Soviet Union.

R

Rickover

24:00

Why? Of course, we are Mr. Spivak, and what

MS

Mr. Spivak

24:03

do you think? Do you think education or military, defense is more important than that, life and death struggle at the present time, education

R

Rickover

24:09

is more important because military developments are transitory. They change every year or so, but education is permanent, and unless we have a thoroughly educated citizenry, we will not be able to solve either our military problems or the many other problems that are facing this country. This is why I consider education of far greater importance than anything there is in this country. Admiral,

MS

Mr. Spivak

24:34

if we did everything you wanted us to do, it would take years before we began getting results of your plans for education wouldn't well,

R

Rickover

24:42

but the sooner we start, the quicker we'll catch up.

R

Rickover

24:47

Mr. Restaurant,

R

Rickover

24:48

you're not suggesting,

R

Rickover

24:49

Admiral, are you that there

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Speaker 1

24:52

might be some waste in the Pentagon that might be applied to education? Are you, i. Well, I

R

Rickover

25:00

know that if we cut the people in the Pentagon by about 20 to 30% a lot of the work would run much quicker than it does now. You mean

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Speaker 1

25:08

if we cut them, we could both improve the Pentagon and education. Yes,

R

Rickover

25:14

sir Admiral Mr. Roberts, very short. What?

2

Speaker 2

25:17

What are you satisfied with the number of Polaris nuclear submarines the government is producing now.

R

Rickover

25:26

No, we should have more. That's about as short as you could make it, Admiral. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I see that our time is up.

4

Speaker 4

25:34

Monitors, thanks to Vice Admiral Hyman G Rickover and the members of the Meet the Press panel for stimulating an enlightening half hour. The panel today included Ernest Lindley of Newsweek, Thomas Roberts of The Washington Post, James Reston of The New York Times, and the producer of Meet The Press, Lawrence C Spivak