



# Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy (Columbia Studies in Contemporary American History)

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

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In Woody Allen's 1973 film, *Sleeper*, a character wakes up in the future to learn that civilization was destroyed when "a man by the name of Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead." Shanker was condemned by many when he shut down the New York City school system in the bitter strikes of 1967 and 1968, and he was denounced for stirring up animosity between black parents and Jewish teachers. Later, however, he built alliances with blacks, and at the time of his death in 1997, such figures as Bill Clinton celebrated Shanker for being an educational reformer, a champion of equality, and a promoter of democracy abroad.

Shanker lived the lives of several men bound into one. In his early years, he was the "George Washington of the teaching profession," helping to found modern teacher unionism. During the 1980s, as head of the American Federation of Teachers, he became the nation's leading education reformer. Shanker supported initiatives for high education standards and accountability, teacher-led charter schools, and a system of "peer review" to weed out inadequate teachers. Throughout his life, Shanker also fought for "tough liberalism," an ideology favoring public education and trade unions but also colorblind policies and a robust anticommunism—all of which, Shanker believed, were vital to a commitment to democracy.

Although he had a coherent worldview, Shanker was a complex individual. He began his career as a pacifist but evolved into a leading defense and foreign policy hawk. He was an intellectual and a populist; a gifted speaker who failed at small talk; a liberal whose biggest enemies were often on the left; a talented writer who had to pay to have his ideas published; and a gruff unionist who enjoyed shopping and detested sports. Richard D. Kahlenberg's biography is the first to offer a complete narrative of one of the most important voices in public

education and American politics in the last half century. At a time when liberals are accused of not knowing what they stand for, *Tough Liberal* illuminates an engaging figure who suggested an alternative liberal path.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Century Foundation senior fellow Kahlenberg, who has written previously about the public school wars (*All Together Now*), paints a gripping portrait of the iconoclastic and often contradictory teacher's union leader Albert Shanker (1928–1997). Born to working-class Russian-Jewish parents on New York's Lower East Side, Shanker worked on a doctorate in philosophy at Columbia by night while teaching by day in East Harlem. During the late '50s he was involved in organizing New York City's United Federation of Teachers, becoming its president in 1964. In 1974 he also became president of the national American Federation of Teachers. In this perceptive biography, Kahlenberg shows that the firebrand union militant who led illegal strikes that closed New York City's public schools in 1967 and 1968 was at the same time a forward-looking educational reformer who, despite pronounced liberal credentials, pushed initiatives that are today associated mostly with conservative educational agendas. Among Shanker's passions were lofty standards, teacher accountability and charter schools. Kahlenberg applauds all this, along with Shanker's fervent anticommunism and his many efforts—regardless of the black-Jewish antagonism the school strikes engendered—to reach out to people of color. The reader comes away admiring a man who navigated troubled times deftly and left behind a record of great accomplishment. (Sept.)

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Review

This book is a must-read for those interested in educational or labor history. (*Historian*)

A thoroughly researched and engaging biography. (Arch Puddington *The Wall Street Journal*)

[A] fascinating biography. (Sol Stern *City Journal*)

At once exquisitely complex and grandly contextual. (Martin Peretz *The New Republic*)

A well-drawn portrait. (Scott McLemee *Newsday*)

Judicious and engaging. (Fred Siegel *Weekly Standard*)

[A] timely new biography. (Sara Mosle *Slate*)

An engaging book, and essential reading for anyone interested in the history of Cold War liberalism and its complicated legacy. (Scott McLemee *Inside Higher Ed*)

An excellent new biography. (Jal Mehta *American Prospect*)

A must read for unionists, educators, politicians and democracy internationalists trying to make sense of the persistent failings of U.S. education. (Eugenia Kemble *Democratiya*)

A spirited and readable biography. (Adam Fairclough *Washington Post*)

Named one of the American School Board Journal's must-reads of the year. (*American School Board*

*Journal)*

[This book] is an important contribution to the history of American education reform. (Nathan Glazer *Education Next*)

An important new biography. (*The Politico*)

A must-read for those interested in educational or labor history. (*Historian*)

#### About the Author

Richard D. Kahlenberg is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation and the author of *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice; The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action*; and *Broken Contract: A Memoir of Harvard Law School*.

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