

EDUCATION AND

Freedom

WHEN he was put in charge of the project of creating the first atomic submarine, Admiral H. G. Rickover ran into unforeseen difficulties with the problem of "lead time." For the type of military equipment needed in World War II, lead time—the time "which elapses between conception of a new idea, its development, and finally its fruition in the completed new article rolling from the production lines"—was two and one-half years. But for things like atomic power plants for underseas ships, lead time must begin in the high schools, with a type of education that is no longer in fashion.

The war-making machines of the modern age (and, inferentially, the peacetime machines of the day after tomorrow) are so complicated both to plan and to manufacture that it takes a long schooling in the understanding of abstract concepts to work on their production. Faced with the task of assembling a staff for the planning and building of the submarine *Nautilus*, Admiral Rickover found most of his supposedly

well-educated applicants to be deficient. They tended to be "know-how"-minded—meaning that they knew how to handle certain specific jobs but lacked the ability to apply general principles to things and situations that were still undiscovered. Admiral Rickover had, quite literally, to recruit young men and begin with them at a level of training that should have been a matter of course for them during sophomore year in high school.

His experience with the building of the *Nautilus* provoked Admiral Rickover into making an extended study of American high school education in general. What he encountered was quite horrifying—and the horror drips from almost every page of the Admiral's book, *Education and Freedom* (Dutton, 256 pp. \$3.50). Taken in conjunction with Dr. James B. Conant's far more temperately expressed but almost equally critical *The American High School Today* (McGraw-Hill, 140 pp. \$1.00), the Admiral's book represents a reaction to the

modern professional "educationist" control of our public schools that is impossible to dismiss with a remark that amateurs should know their place. The book is too formidably documented for that—and besides, there is Dr. Conant, a professional educator, standing right beside Admiral Rickover to back him up in matters of diagnosis.

Emphasis on "Know-How"

The two men are in profound agreement on the deterioration of the content of modern high school education. For thirty years now the trend has been away from the idea that a student goes to school to master certain basic principles and tools that will enable him to surmount any and all problems in later life. Instead of grounding the student in the art and science of proceeding from the general rule to the specific instance, the modern educator has tended to break things up into little pieces. For example, in place of a rigorous training in physics (which must give the student some understanding of machines in general), the modern high school boy or girl gets a course in how to drive an automobile, or how to repair an electrical switch. Thus "know-how," on an immediate practical level, replaces basic philosophic preparation for life as the

predominating substance of a secondary school education.

"Life Adjustment"

It all goes under the name of "life adjustment." "Life adjustment" consists of such things as learning how to work a lathe, how to plane a board, how to cook a simple meal, how to dress one's hair, how to converse with a boy on a date, and how to think about problems of "marriage and family" well in advance of taking a wife or a husband and having children. Indeed, all the things a child was once supposed to learn at home, or in Sunday school, or at the Y.M.C.A., or at summer camp, are now thought of as legitimate material for high school courses.

On the level of "social studies," "life adjustment" consists of learning how to "get along with others." The accent is on the group, not on the individual. "Democracy" thus becomes a matter of learning how to conform to a "norm" that is based on majority opinion. Competition is frowned upon, for the idea of competition involves measuring one's self *up* from the norm, not merely "adjusting" one's personality to it. Unwittingly, "life adjustment" becomes a seedbed for socialistic dependence on the State.