

The Power of Ideas



AI in His Own Words

A Collection

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He Believed in the Power of Ideas

AL SHANKER was a man of many ideas. And we were the beneficiaries of those ideas. From New York City to Corpus Christi, Texas; from Baltimore, Maryland, to Monterey, California; from Dade County, Florida, to Butte, Montana; from Pittsburgh and Chicago to Santiago and Prague; to small groups in out-of-the-way hotels and to large audiences in the corridors of power, Al was always there, talking to teachers and other school staff, to administrators, to parents, to businessmen, to academics, to legislators, to governors, to presidents. Brilliant, provocative, persuasive, funny, and never, ever afraid to tell the truth as he saw it, he stirred countless audiences, rallied the troops, won over many foes, and left a trail of debate opponents wishing they had accepted a different engagement for the evening.

In this collection, we have attempted to capture some of Al's most important ideas, the ones that inspired his public life, the ones he lived by, the ones that left the most enduring mark. This was not an easy task. We were hampered by one of the most endearing qualities of Al's speaking style: He rarely used prepared speeches. Rather, he spoke from a few notes that he had scribbled on the back of a conference program or a memo pad from the hotel room where he was staying. (We uncovered some of those old notes, still stuffed in one of his desk drawers, and they are reproduced on the inside covers.)

Many of Al's words were never captured; they will live only in the memories of those who were there to hear him. Time takes its toll, though, even on the sharpest of memories, and in searching for items for this collection, we talked to many people who said they wished they had kept some record of what Al said. They wished they could hear it—or at least read it—again. Fortunately, many of Al's speeches were taped or transcribed—including of course the entire proceedings from every AFT convention—and we were eventually able to gather enough material to put together a representative selection of his major ideas.

Of course, Al didn't only speak, he also wrote, as everyone knows whose Sunday morning ritual included discovering what Al was going to say in his weekly *New York Times* Where We Stand column. He wrote approx-

imately 1,300 columns, from the first one on December 13, 1970, to the last one on February 23 of this year. The columns brought Al's views to the wider world, and we have drawn many of our selections from them.

Some people will read this collection cover to cover; others will treat it as an anthology to be dipped into, to return to, perhaps to read an item or two to one's friends or children, to keep. Although Al had a long history before he assumed the AFT presidency, we have limited the material to the time of his presidency—that is, from 1974. Several of the items, however, are Al reminiscing about the early days of building the union. He talks, for example, about what it was like to try to turn the 106 teacher organizations that existed in New York City into one.

The material is arranged in four sections: building the union, building the profession, the struggle for civil and human rights, and strengthening and preserving public education. In the section on education, we focused on those themes that Al returned to again and again and again, the ones on which his voice was so often unique—and sometimes alone, the ones we think will endure. As we gathered and read through what we could find of Al's speeches and writings, three things were especially striking: His views over the years were remarkably consistent, he seemed to see what lay ahead long before others did, and he displayed incredible courage—the courage to take unpopular positions, to resist slogans and fads, to be the messenger of bad news when the circumstances warranted it, and to always hold firm to his principles.

A colleague commented while we were rummaging through his file drawers looking for Al stuff, "We didn't keep anything because we thought he would live forever." He didn't, of course, although we all wanted him to, but we hope that this permanent record of his words—limited as it is—will help preserve the extraordinary legacy he left to all who care about education, this country, and the future of democracy.

—The Editors