

See No Child's Left Behind

(A Standards Satire)

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Many are familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." An emperor was duped by scoundrels who claimed they could weave the finest clothing in the world. The key to their scheme was convincing the Emperor that their magic cloth was visible only to those who were not fools or incompetents. They got rich by demanding gold and fine fabrics, which they kept for themselves, while weaving nothing.

The first of the double ironies at the end of the story was that the Emperor, not wanting to be considered a fool or an incompetent, and believing he was wearing fine clothes, paraded naked down Main Street -- proving himself to be an incompetent fool. The second irony was that the adults, hoping not to be seen as fools, denied the obvious, proving themselves to be fools, too. Only a small child had the sense to say, "He's got nothing on."

The following story tells what happened many years, later, in a federal republic of fifty empires, each with its own emperor. These emperors knew their ancestor had been tricked by the scoundrel weavers, so they were wary of weavers. They rarely associated with any, and didn't seek their advice about clothing. Nevertheless, the prime responsibility of each empire, was to provide citizens with an equal clothing opportunity.

For many years each empire shared this responsibility with regional and local officials. Working together, they organized and financed programs aimed at achieving this ideal. Clothing a citizenry was complicated. Each empire needed clothing that (1) protected from the elements, (2) satisfied human modesty needs, and (3) attracted the opposite sex. Until recently, clothing decisions were made locally because different empires and regions had different climates, social norms, and stylistic preferences. Rarely did emperors become involved. (Some thought this was a lingering effect of the trick played by the scoundrel weavers many years ago.)

No empire was completely successful at achieving the equal clothing opportunity ideal, but the struggles and successes of weavers were a source of inspiration and pride among citizens. They spoke often about their nice clothing, realizing that their fine clothes would not perform all three functions without the work of many dedicated weavers.

Unfortunately, this admiration waned 20 years ago, when emperors claimed that weaving had become inadequate. Emperors and powerful business people reviewed *National Geographic* magazines and concluded that a clothing crisis had been created because weavers failed to produce clothing that adequately attracted the opposite sex.

Several years later, the president of the republic met with all 50 emperors to confront the crisis. The first step to solving the crisis was to determine how it happened. Powerful citizens, who cared little for equal clothing opportunity; and politicians, who failed to provide equal clothing opportunity, proclaimed that the crisis had arisen because weavers lacked standards against which they could be held accountable. Blaming weavers for the crisis enabled emperors and politicians to shift the focus away from their own failure. (Some believe this was their revenge for the trick played on their ancestor.)

So, emperors imposed standards by which weavers could be held accountable for producing sexy clothes. Weavers were so befuddled by this development they did not know what to do.

Weavers did have standards—standards they held strongly, yet adjusted frequently, depending on the cloth, the person to be clothed, and the different climates. Weavers had standards for all three purposes, which they balanced as they wove clothing that performed all three functions. Regardless, powerful, well-clothed citizens and politicians found it easy to force their “no standards” conclusion on weavers, many of whom were modestly dressed women.

Still, weavers resisted making garments of silk that revealed much and provided little warmth. They saw their work as a complex art, involving many different fabrics and multiple purposes.

What happened next is the point of the story. Claiming that weaving was inadequate, emperors engaged their “pretend” weavers in an effort to improve clothing. “Pretend” weavers were like the scoundrels in *The Emperor's New Clothes* -- they wove no cloth. Instead, they taught weaving and made weaving rules and regulations. Now that equal clothing opportunity had become unimportant, “pretend” weavers joined politicians and powerful citizens in setting empire-wide standards for sexy clothes.

The first step in setting standards was to visit shopping malls, to see which stores had the most sexually appealing clothes. Emperors quickly decided that clothing should be made from *Victoria's Secret* patterns, and they offered prizes for the best designs. Quickly, weavers discarded old patterns and began making the silkiest, most revealing clothes possible.

These new standards for sexy clothing revived an interest in children's beauty pageants. All pageants had the same rules -- one hundred contestants were culled down to five finalists, and one winner. The pageants tapped into the human competitive drive and pleased the emperors because more pageants and contestants signaled that things were going in the right direction.

Unfortunately, other social indicators were going in the wrong direction. Citizens became ill wearing scanty clothing in the colder regions; unwanted pregnancies increased; and productivity declined in workplaces with vinyl upholstery.

But the increase in beauty pageant contestants pleased the president. He had frequented the pageants when he was an emperor, before being selected president. Soon after taking federal office he engaged his “pretend” weavers in drafting rules that required empires to use *Frederick's of Hollywood* patterns.

Some emperors resisted. They saw no need to change because the difference between the two lines was minimal. But the president's “pretend” weavers responded to their protests by saying, “There may be holes in our plan, but you will lose your silk farm subsidies if you do not shift to *Frederick's of Hollywood*.”

This story has no ironic ending, just a sad one. At this very moment citizens and weavers are flocking to the

president's fashion show, featuring the latest in children's asymmetrical fashions, entitled "See No Child's Left Behind."