

CENSORSHIP IN NEWS

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Waging War on History

Political activists coordinate an attack on the teaching of history, claiming left-wing bias and promotion of Islam

Remember Mel and Norma Gabler, famous for their long campaign to rid Texas schools of books they considered “anti-Christian” and “anti-family”? (See CN11, Oct. 1982) They are gone, but their spirit lives on in new textbook wars — and politicians in five states are already taking the cause to state legislatures.

One battle is over a revised framework for Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) released by the College Board in October 2013. As Education Week reported, “While the previous framework was essentially a list of topics broken into 28 time periods, the new framework describes key concepts within nine time periods, and is focused more on analysis than memorization.” While it establishes key concepts and objectives, the details are left to educators in local districts.

The most prominent early critic of APUSH is former history teacher Larry Krieger — who incidentally writes test prep materials geared to the previous version of the AP exam that would become obsolete. Krieger argued that the framework laid out a “negative view of American history” in pieces posted at the Heartland Institute’s website, an organization best known for promoting skepticism about climate change.

The issue found traction in conservative media. Stanley Kurtz at the National Review called the AP’s plan a “quiet but devastatingly effective effort to replace the teaching of traditional American history in our high schools with a new, centrally-controlled, and sharply left-leaning curriculum.” Conservative commentator and rumored Republican presidential contender Ben Carson declared that when students finished the new AP History course “they’d be ready to go sign up for ISIS.”

Kurtz made a leap to another hot button schools issue — the Common Core educational standards. The Common Core initiative began in 2009 as an effort by “state leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia” to produce “a set of high-quality

academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA).”

To be clear, there is precisely no connection between Common Core and AP History. Advanced placement courses are developed by the College Board, a private non-profit company, with a membership of 6,000 educational institutions. Nonetheless, many opponents of Common Core have also embraced the campaign against APUSH, under the banner of resisting a federal ‘takeover’ of local schools.

Reminiscent of the Gablers’ campaigns, the current textbooks wars have also attracted support from religiously-oriented groups. Prominent among them are the American Principles Project, which opposes same sex marriage and abortion rights, Concerned Women for America, which

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NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Speech Communication Association
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Office of Communication
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

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promotes “Biblical values,” and Act! For America, which opposes a widely-used world history textbook it claims is pro-Islam.

A message combining hostility to government, religious overtones, and appeals to patriotism is repeated in various iterations by local groups, such as South Carolina Parents Involved in Education, which claims that the failure to teach “patriotic lessons in school” is “almost a national-security risk,” and the Florida Citizens Alliance, which criticizes Common Core for “anti-Americanism.” Local Tea Party and Project 912 groups have also weighed in.

Of course, these organizations and individuals have every right to voice their opinions on what should be taught in the public schools. It’s a problem, however, when lawmakers try to impose their political or ideological viewpoint through public schools.

In July 2014, Texas State Board of Education member Ken Mercer slammed the new APUSH framework for an “overwhelmingly negative” approach that would “please America-haters,” and encouraged conservative activists to demand a Congressional investigation: “For today’s patriots, this is our Valley Forge and our D-Day — this is the Revolution of 2014!”

The following month, the Republican National Committee adopted a resolution calling the APUSH history framework “biased and inaccurate” and recommended that “Congress withhold any federal funding to the College Board” until the AP History materials have “been rewritten” to remove “political bias.”

The call has been taken up by lawmakers around the country:

• Oklahoma Rep. Dan Fisher drew up a list of “foundational documents” that should be taught instead — including the Ten Commandments and three speeches by Ronald Reagan.

• An anti-AP resolution in Georgia claims the framework “emphasizes negative aspects of our nation’s history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects,” and State Sen. Mike Crane claims the AP is “pushing forward an agenda...that is very dangerous to this republic.”

• In several districts in Florida, legislators seek removal of a widely-used world history textbook on the ground that the book downplays Islamic-linked violence and devotes more attention to Islam than Christianity. NCAC intervened in one case in Charlotte County, where the school board ultimately voted in favor of keeping the textbooks in the classroom. But the activists’ efforts are supported by political heavyweights like Republican presidential contender Sen. Rand Paul, who recently wrote, “I support all the patriots in Florida who are fighting against Common Core. I believe the State of Florida should decide what’s best for their children, not someone in Washington.”

There has been some push-back. An effort by newly elected school board members in Jefferson County, Colorado to revamp AP History met with outrage from parents and students and attracted national media scrutiny, leading the board to table the proposal.

Recently the arguments in opposition to APUSH have gotten more sophisticated. Stanley

Kurtz wrote in the Washington Post that this movement is merely about standing up for intellectual diversity, intended to “introduce students to a variety of opinions about the individuals, ideas and institutions that shaped American history.”

It’s a fair point, but not one that elected officials can or should try to resolve. Deciding how to teach history is a task best undertaken by trained historians and educators. While elected officials have an important role in insuring the availability of an adequate education to all students, they do not have the right to select course materials specifically to promote a political, religious, or ideological viewpoint.

More than 70 years ago, the Supreme Court held that students cannot be required to salute the flag and recite the pledge of allegiance, in an effort to promote patriotism: “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.” The best way to educate kids is to let educators do their job without political interference.



Credit: AP Photo/Brennan Linsley

VIEWS ON THE NEWS FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Expelling Oklahoma Frats

This year has seen plenty of campus speech controversies, but none made as much news as a leaked video showing members of a University of Oklahoma fraternity singing a racist song on a private party bus.

Many were horrified that college students would shout along to lyrics about lynching. But then University of Oklahoma president David Boren announced that two of the students had been expelled. That move, nearly everyone agreed, violated their constitutional rights.

Boren justified his actions by saying that the students had created a “hostile educational environment.” On closer analysis, however, it doesn’t fly. It is true, as Harvard University law professor Noah Feldman explained, that universities have “an affirmative duty to guarantee students an educational environment in which they are free of hostility based on race or sex.” However, universities can’t fulfill this obligation by trampling on students’ constitutional rights.

Reconciling speech and equality rights can be a complicated business. The courts have struggled to develop guidelines that promote equality without undermining constitutional rights. For many years, the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) offered institutions guidance in line with this approach, recognizing the need to protect expression of even controversial ideas and protect students from harassment when it “effectively bars the victim’s access to an educational opportunity or benefit.”

However, in October 2010 OCR expanded the idea of harassment to include “verbal acts and name-calling...that may be harmful or humiliating,” even though the Supreme Court has said that “mere utterance of an...epithet which engenders offensive feelings” is not harassment, but is protected speech.

The Court protects such speech — not to endorse it, but to preserve a right that is itself critical to the cause of equality. The civil rights movement and every social justice movement succeeded only because people were able to speak out and protest, even if they insulted and offended others in the process. To undermine this critical right is to put at risk the very equality goals anti-harassment regulations seek to enforce.

According to black students, the problems they face on campus — like poor retention and graduation rates and less financial aid — existed before the video surfaced. Perhaps there’s a problem at OU that goes beyond the reprehensible acts of some students on a party bus.

Which casts further doubt on Boren’s actions. By focusing on the students, he deflects attention from the university, and what it did or didn’t do to create a hostile educational environment, which will surely persist after the students and the fraternity involved in this situation are gone.

The Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment has been not just muddled but counterproductive, compromising First Amendment rights while failing to ensure equality. Silencing a few boorish students isn’t the answer.

SHORT TAKES

• Palestine Solidarity...Censored?

In mid-March the Missouri History Museum pulled the plug on a student-led panel discussion. The problem? Museum officials were fine with an event about social protests in Ferguson, Missouri and Mexico. But the inclusion of Palestine was too much. Internal museum emails revealed that the event was flagged by a local group, the Jewish Community Relations Council, which expressed its “dismay” to the museum’s president.

• Symphony Silence

In March, student composer Jonas Tarm was scheduled to make his debut at New York’s famed Carnegie Hall. He had won a prestigious New York Youth Symphony competition. But at the last minute, the Symphony canceled the performance — due to an anonymous complaint over Tarm’s quotation of a Nazi march in his piece critiquing war and militarism. NCAC stepped in and brought international media attention to the story.

• Child Porn?

A parent in Rio Rancho, New Mexico wanted to remove the critically acclaimed graphic novel *Palomar* from a high school library because it was, among other things, child pornography. It is most certainly not, and the district agreed with NCAC’s Kids’ Right to Read Project, voting to retain the book.

• The Perks of Being a Board Member

A Wallingford, Connecticut school superintendent overruled a review committee and removed Stephen Chbosky’s acclaimed *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* from the freshman English curriculum. NCAC and several allies protested the decision — and so did local parents and students, some of whom are working to reinstate the book. One interesting wrinkle about the parent who was offended by the book: A few weeks after the complaining parent filed his challenge, he was chosen to fill an open seat on the school board.



Credit: Getty Images

On February 19 NCAC co-sponsored a stimulating panel discussion on art and censorship after the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Our guests were cartoonists Art Spiegelman, Françoise Mouly, Emmanuel Letouzé and Molly Crabapple. The event was moderated by Leonard Lopate.

• Great News!

The Reva and David Logan Foundation awarded NCAC a three-year, \$300,000 grant to launch a new initiative on art censorship resulting from claims of offense and threats of violence, with a focus on suppression in the private sector and self-censorship at the institutional level.

The Censored Truth

Of A Guantanamo Prisoner

Published in January, *The Guantanamo Diary* is an intense account of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's excruciating experiences as a prisoner of the U.S. war on terror. Slahi was detained in his native Mauritania in 2001; a CIA rendition plane flew him to Jordan for brutal interrogation sessions, and from there he was taken to Afghanistan and then finally to the infamous Guantanamo prison camp. He has never been charged with any crimes.

Slahi's diary was edited by NCAC board member, writer and human rights activist Larry Siems. But he was actually the diary's second editor; the first was the U.S. government, which "added more than 2,500 black-bar redactions censoring Mohamedou's text."

We spoke with Siems about editing a censored text, and how the government's censorship failed to blunt the impact of Slahi's narrative.

The censorship of the text of the book is plainly clear, but what do we know about the process of writing and eventually disclosing the diaries that became this book?

Slahi wrote the book in 2005, during a period when he was finally allowed to meet with attorneys. He actually greeted his two original attorneys, Nancy Hollander and Sylvia Royce, at their first meeting in March 2005 with a notebook that had about 90 pages in it, and that grew into this 466 page hand-written manuscript.

Like everything in Guantanamo, those pages were taken to Washington and locked in a secure facility where they are accessible only to the attorneys who have top secret security clearance. They're considered classified, like every other utterance from every other Guantanamo prisoner is just presumed classified from the moment that it's created.

So it sat there, classified for almost seven years. During that time Nancy Hollander and her legal team conducted litigation and negotiation behind the scenes to get the book declassified and cleared for public release.

Finally in the summer of 2012, it had made that last hurdle of going through the last redaction process and they were able to hand the PDF of the document to me in its public, cleared form — which includes all redactions.

The process of editing the book at times seemed like an attempt to peek behind the 2,500 or so government redactions. What was that experience like?

It's an interesting psychological phenomenon. When you put a black bar over something, the person who sees that black bar is compelled to think about what's behind it, right? It's an automatic reaction — especially when we're talking about government secrets. Whenever we're confronted with black boxes that have been imposed by our government, as citizens part of our duty should be thinking about what's being withheld and why.

I made no effort to peer through the black bars or to uncover classified material or anything like that. I lined his account up against what was by 2012 a substantial trove of declassified government documents in the public realm that recounted his odyssey through this gulag of detention sites around the world. And it became clear immediately what an accurate historian of his own experience he is.

And then there are other redactions that aren't plot-based, but are based on trying to obscure some of the emotional content. There is a place where they seem to redact the word "tears" when he says he

cannot help breaking in [REDACTED]. And there are some attempts apparently to obscure the fact that some of the interrogators are women — they habitually try to redact the pronouns that refer to female interrogators — "her and she."

And even the full text of a poem that he wrote is redacted. It's impossible to try

to read the minds of censors in any case, but did you ever try to imagine what the motivation might have been for some of these decisions?

What's interesting is that censors are just human beings. This is a human being who's sitting there with a literal or metaphorical Sharpie and drawing black lines through text. And like all of us, you make mistakes, you're not consistent, you lose track of things, you might do some things impulsively. So in some sense it reflects the fact that even in the most bureaucratic of processes it really comes down to individuals who are assigned a task and have quirky individual responses to that task.

For me, the black boxes are kind of the fingerprints of a much larger censorship regime that's been imposed on Mohamedou and his story for many years. When the manuscript was released in 2012, I think it was released in large part because so many documents had been released by that point that told the story of his abuse and torture that the government could no longer say that his experience itself — and his expression of his experience — was a state secret.

"When you put a black bar over something, the person who sees that black bar is compelled to think about what's behind it, right?"

Credit: The Guardian