

NEWSHIP

THE NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP NEWSLETTER

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“That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach.” — Aldous Huxley

Huxley would not be surprised then, that as we go to print, his 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, has been challenged in Delaware by a school board member who declared, “because my student is in a public school I should have some kind of assurance that they’re not going to be exposed to certain things.” The “things” that trigger the urge to censor are timeless: sexuality, religion, race, politics, violence, non-conforming science – “things” that inspire disagreement but are central to who we are, how we live, and what we think.

What began in 1974 as an “ad-hoc committee” of 23 national groups that shared a concern about the Supreme Court’s newly revised definition of obscenity, and its implications for First Amendment rights, grew into NCAC, a robust coalition of 50 organizations committed to preserving freedom of expression as a vital element of democratic society and an essential human right.

Four decades of national advocacy and local activism have taught us that the impulse to censor persists, and that there are – and will probably always be – people ready to act on that impulse. They vocally insist that their local school, library or art center should cater to their personal idea of what is “appropriate,” as government officials they misuse their position to enforce their personal views. This year, as we celebrate our 40th anniversary, we mine our own history to learn how censorship patterns have and have not changed since NCAC’s founding.

In the 1970s, the Coalition protested when an issue of *Newsweek* was pulled from newsstands because

its cover depicted a semi-nude child, a Vietnam war victim, and when school officials removed Kurt Vonnegut’s novels from high school libraries. In the ‘80s, we opposed Reagan’s increased government secrecy and the Meese Commission’s war on sexual expression, and continued our ongoing defense of books, like *The Catcher in the Rye*. The culture wars heated up in the ‘90s, as legislators targeted the National Endowment for the Arts and works like *Angels in America* and *Piss*

Christ. In the new century, we joined the national debate about social media and video games, campaigned for the privacy of personal communications, and countered the chilling of political dissent.

Why do you support classic literature or controversial art? Are you more concerned about an open Internet, a transparent government, or your right to

protest? The following pages highlight our headline history and, we hope, help you remember a moment when your speech was chilled, or your effort to obtain information stymied, or art you valued was attacked. As a parent involved in the *Brave New World* challenge lamented when she thanked us for providing counsel, “Tonight I have to go back to the school board and once again defend a book that I read as a high school student in the 1970s and my mother read as a high school student in the 1950s.”

Our history teaches us that censorship endures and adapts, but so do we. The parent in Delaware proves that our individual freedoms are cherished through generations, and that free speech is forever.



NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers Foundation 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
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40 Years on the Frontlines:

1975: "Burning Books in North Dakota"

Bruce Severy was fired after having assigned James Dickey's *Deliverance* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to his high school English students. When the school's burning of the books created nationwide publicity, residents of Drake, N.D. were "dumbfounded and vaguely upset by the notoriety."

1979: "Classified at Birth: The Progressive Case"

The controversy around the Progressive's intended article on the hydrogen bomb forced us to think about the nature of secrecy, knowledge, and democracy, posing the time-honored questions of whether government secrecy is really just secret government.

1982: "Creationism: Arkansas Law Overturned"

The Arkansas law requiring equal-time for teaching "creation science" in public schools was rejected because it was not about enhancing education but about promoting one specific religious viewpoint in public school classes.

1985: "Indianapolis Porn Law: It's Unconstitutional"

The court rejected a law supported by religious groups and feminist anti-pornography activists to criminalize pornography if it "objectifies" or "degrades" women. Among the problems: figuring out what would be illegal.

1987: "Another Muzzle for AIDS Education"

Congress attacked a comic book that chronicled the adventures of Ed the Jock and Julio the Pump Boy as "hard-core, pornographic, lustful, [and] ugly." Despite the naughty doodles being produced with private funds by the Gay Men's Health Crisis as part of a series of AIDS education materials, some members were steamed that GMHC received \$674,679 for AIDS research from the Centers for Disease Control.

1989: "Senate Score: Old Glory 97, First Amendment 0"

The Senate voted 97-0 to make it a crime to display the American flag on the floor, after the Art Institute of Chicago displayed "What is the Proper Way to Display an

American Flag?" by a student, Dread Scott Tyler. "I don't know too much about art, but I know desecration when I see it," said Senator Bob Dole.

1990: "National Endowment: For Politicking or for the Arts?"

Members of Congress and religiously-affiliated groups orchestrated a major campaign against the NEA over what they called "anti-Christian bigotry." The action came in the aftermath of controversies over NEA funding for controversial artists, Andres Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* shows a photo of a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine, and Robert Mapplethorpe, over his homoerotic photo exhibit, *The Perfect Moment*. Congress directed the NEA to take account of "general standards of decency" in making future grants.

1993: "Can the Movie Make Them Do It?"

A Midwest educator contacted NCAC about a complaint against a school's showing of Zeffirelli's film, *Romeo and Juliet*. The ostensible problem? Not sex, but "teaching children about suicide."

1994: "Pow!! Zap!! Censors Continue to Attack Comics 40 Years After the Panic"

The comic strips *Doonesbury* and *For Better or Worse* were pulled from newspapers for featuring too much sex, the wrong politics, or gay characters; and in Arizona a student was prohibited from wearing a T-shirt featuring the "satanic" comic villain, the Penguin.

1995: "Federal Funding Sweeps: A Battle Over Expression"

Sen. Jesse Helms tried to cut federal funding for schools with programs that have "the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle." As it turns out, Congress wasn't content with eliminating information about same-sex relationships and decided to provide funding only for sex "education" programs that promote both traditional marriage and abstinence until marriage.

1995: "The Continuing Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"

A school superintendent in New Haven responded to parents' complaints about the use of the word "nigger" in Mark Twain's novel by pulling the book from

Headlines from Censorship News

an eighth-grade reading list. He joined a long list of educators before and since who have censored Twain's iconic novel. (In 2011, a Montgomery, Alabama based publisher, perhaps seeing an opportunity to boost sales, issued a version of the book in which "slave" is substituted for "nigger" throughout.)

1996: "Library Displays Art It Had Banned"

The Manhasset NY public library rescheduled an exhibit of Robin Dellospirito's highly stylized artwork, following a federal court case striking down the library's "no nudes" policy.

1999: "Culture Wars Come to New York (Along With Mosquitos)"

It was the summer of anxiety over mosquito-borne West Nile virus when New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani got enraged over a work of art in an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and threatened to evict the Museum. The Mayor called Chris Ofili's work, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, "sick" and "offensive to Catholics"; it depicts a black Madonna and incorporates elephant dung, an African fertility symbol.

2001: "The First Amendment in the Shadow of Terrorism"

In the weeks after September 11, civil libertarians and others began to ask not only what harm terrorists may yet inflict, but also what damage will be self-inflicted in response to this threat. The Texas City Sun dismissed a columnist for an article headlined "Bush has failed to lead U.S.," and the cartoon *The Boondocks* was pulled from papers around the country for saying that the C.I.A. helped train Afghan rebels like bin Laden.

2002: "New York Regents Fail Test on First Amendment"

The revelation that literary selections on the New York English Language Arts Regents exams had been routinely censored – without permission or acknowledgement – outraged authors, educators, publishers, parents, and many others. Passages by Annie Dillard were stripped of references to race, when that was the point of the story. References to Jews and Poles were deleted from Isaac Bashevis Singer's works about Jews and Poland. If tests can exclude anything arguably "offensive," what about the curriculum?

2003: "Big Brother Meets Catch-22"

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requires libraries receiving federal funds (e.g., almost all libraries) to install filters to block sexual content that *might* be harmful to minors. The Supreme Court upheld the law even though it restricts access to protected speech for adults as well as minors.

2004: "Abstinence-Only: Short on Facts, Long on Fancy"

Students enrolled in federally-funded abstinence-only sex education programs are misinformed about science, deprived of vital health information, and exposed to gender stereotypes and religious dogma. Funding grew exponentially as the Bush administration promoted programs teaching that abstinence until marriage is the expected standard of behavior and the only sure way to avoid pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, and psychological harm.

2005: "NCAC Initiates The Knowledge Project: Censorship & Science"

Calling attention to the erosion of our country's knowledge base

and the rise of anti-intellectualism as a national credo, the project develops analyses and arguments about how the First Amendment applies to government actions that suppress research findings and scientific collaboration. During the Bush years, the project addressed attempts to delete scientific information from official reports on global warming, environmental risks of hydraulic fracking, health risks of escalating lead in the environment, and efficacy of condoms in protecting against AIDS.

2007: "Free Speech 4 Students?"

The Supreme Court's decision in *Morse v. Frederick* concluded that student speech – displaying a banner that read "Bong Hits 4 Jesus" – is not protected if it "can reasonably be regarded as encouraging illegal drug use." In a separate opinion, Justices Alito and Kennedy said the decision "provides no support for any restriction that can plausibly be interpreted as commenting on any political or social issue..." , suggesting that Frederick would have won had his banner read "*Legalize Bong Hits 4 Jesus.*"

2009: "Reflections on Book Censorship, circa 2009"

Censorship is creeping up the age ladder and affecting students who are or will soon be adults. In the recent past, challenged books have included Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*. At a recent NCAC event, Toni Morrison conversed with author Fran Lebowitz about the history of censorship, its motivations, and its consequences. She observed, knowledge is "the route out of any oppression, any limitation. You have to read, you have to know, you have to have access to knowledge."

2010: "Free Expression at Risk, at Yale and Elsewhere"

Yale University Press decided to strip all images of Mohammed from *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, by Jytte Klausen, a scholarly review of the events surrounding the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy. Officials said the book might stimulate violence "somewhere in the world." NCAC criticized the University for abandoning principles of academic freedom in the face of hypothetical threats and warned that acceding to threats of violence is only likely to encourage others to adopt the same tactics.

2011: "Culture Wars Returning: Or Did They Ever Go Away?"

In the fall of 2010, culture wars rhetoric seemed like a thing of the past, and then the firestorm hit. Smithsonian Secretary W.G. Clough removed David Wojnarowicz's 1987 video, "Fire in My Belly," from the exhibit *Hide/Seek* – a sacrificial victim to save the show from further attacks and soften the hearts of Republicans in their next discussion of the Institution's funding.

2013: "Video Games Back in the Crosshairs"

The simple - and wrong - response to mass violence, regularly offered up by pundits and talking heads, is to blame it on media violence, especially video games. The reaction to the December 2012 nightmarish shootings in Newtown, CT, is no different. Scapegoating video games, which are played by millions of law-abiding people, is not likely to prevent the next tragedy, but it may well deflect attention from efforts to understand the why and how of such violent episodes.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

- NCAC screened our 2013 Youth Free Expression Film Contest Winners at the New York Film Academy on March 29. Top prize went to Ani Akpan of the Bronx for his visually dazzling *Future Warfare III*, followed by Peter Ackerman of Augusta, Maine and Austin Guerrero of Gresham, Oregon; Daniella Sanchez won the People's Choice Award with the greatest number of "likes" on YouTube. You can view the work of these budding filmmakers at ncac.org/project/film-contest and learn about this year's contest theme: Free Speech Forever! Censorship Past, Present and Future.
- Gay book bashing is underway in South Carolina after a state legislator proposed funding cuts to two SC colleges for assigning to incoming freshman *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel's account of growing up with a closeted gay dad, and *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, a collection of stories from South Carolina's first gay and lesbian radio show. Rep. Garry Smith proclaimed, "I understand diversity and academic freedom... This is purely promotion of a lifestyle with no academic debate." NCAC's letter to the legislature: "The Supreme Court has sent a clear message over decades: lawmakers may not prohibit the expression of ideas simply because they find them to be offensive."
- NCAC partnered with the Electronic Frontier Foundation and MIT's Center for Civic Media on April 4th, otherwise known as 404 Day, to call attention to Internet censorship in public schools and libraries. "Page Not Found" messages appear on student screens because of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which requires schools receiving federal funding to install filters to screen out references to sex. NCAC Board Member Chris Peterson joined a digital teach-in that ad-



dressed the cost and efficacy of filters, over-aggressive implementation, how easy it is to ask librarians to turn filters off, and the disproportionate effect on low-income communities that rely on public computer access.

- Kennesaw State University reinstated artist Ruth Stanford's "A Walk in the Valley" to the opening exhibition at the new Bernard A. Zuckerman Museum of Art after its initial takedown because of concerns about a reference in the exhibit to an 1899 article about lynching. NCAC argued to the University "if an open conversation about race and history is to be banned from a college campus, what claim to academic freedom can that campus ever have?" Demands for "trigger warnings," to alert students to material that may be upsetting, are trending on many campuses. They draw a blurry line between actual post-traumatic stress disorder and general discomfort with certain topics. Just ask those Wellesley students, who petitioned to have a sculpture of a man in his underwear removed for fear of triggering "thoughts regarding sexual assault."
- Artist Kara Walker, Newark Public Library Director Wilma Grey, the late publisher Peter Workman, and author Sherman Alexie were feted at NCAC's annual Free Speech Matters Celebration in November for their commitment to free thought, inquiry and expression. (The battle continues on behalf of Sherman's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, recently censored in Meridian, Idaho.)
- "NCAC Joins the World Wide Web!" That was a headline announcing NCAC's new website in our Spring 1996 issue of *Censorship News*. Several incarnations and 18 years later, we've launched a new and improved ncac.org. Go there now!

A Message to Our Readers

Do you like staying on top of the latest censorship news but have never donated to NCAC? If the answer is yes, then we have an important message for you: your support is critical to our fight for free speech. As we divert printing and postage costs to urgent program needs, please consider a donation to NCAC. Beginning with our Fall 2014 issue, only official Free Speech Defenders - those who have made some financial contribution in our 40-year history - will continue to receive a hardcopy newsletter.

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