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
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 found 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 conservative Action Exchange 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 viewpoints upon public schools.

In July 2014, Texas State Board of Education member Ken Mercer slammed the new Advanced Placement World History curriculum as 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 AP History framework “biased and inaccurate” and recommended that “Congress withhold any federal funding to the College Board.”

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 Senator Randy Provine claims the AP is “pushing forward an agenda… that is very dangerous to this republic.”

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 a diverse set of course materials and teachers and students and attracted national media scrutiny, leading the board to table the proposal.

Recently, the arguments in opposition to APUSH have gotten more attention from lawmakers. 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 a diverse set of course materials and teachers and 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. A remarkable discovery in Georgia claims the framework “emphasizes negative aspects of our nation’s history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects,” and State Senator Randy Provine claims the AP is “pushing forward an agenda… that is very dangerous to this republic.”

EXPANDING OKLAHOMA FRATS

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

Many were horrified that college students would shout along to lyrics about lynching. But when University of Oklahoma president David Boren announced that two of the students had been expelled, that move, nicely 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 fit. It is true, as Harvard University law professor Susan Feiner and Connecticut attorney 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 revamped AP History with outrage from parents and students and attracted national media scrutiny, leading the board to table the proposal.

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**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.

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…epithets with...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 since has succeeded only because people were able to 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 protests 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 from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment from the Department of Education’s recent guidance on the issue of harassment.

Child Porn?

A parent in Rio Rancho, New Mexico was not able to speak out against a widely-used world history textbook it claims is pro-Islam. NCAC is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.
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.

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