
... we favor curricula that emphasize the basic disciplines and that encourage respect and devotion for traditional American institutions and values. We are opposed to so-called progressive education. We also oppose attempts to indoctrinate our youth in moral relativism, welfarism, one-worldism, disrespect for Constitutional government and other tenets of the Liberal orthodoxy.

We, the people of the United States, shall actively oppose all attempts to substitute atheism, alien ideologies [sic] or anti-Christian traditions ...

Censorship: New Wrinkles in an Old Problem

Mary Anne Raywid
Hofstra University

Such sentiments might have been expressed last week, or last summer, or last year—in any one of a thousand communities across the country. Actually, however, these particular statements come from the school criticism literature of 25 years ago.¹ They were then, and they are now, the kind of statement that puts many of us on immediate alert. It conveys the general gestalt which often gives rise to censorship projects, and it presents a familiar picture. But it is no longer the clear and unchallenged paradigmatic case of censorship efforts. Present continuities with some past attempts are clear. But some new faces and discontinuities are similarly apparent—along with some complexities and complications which make today's censorship scene quite different from that of even the fairly recent past.

In the pages to follow, it is these new elements which I want to emphasize. I do not intend such emphasis to minimize the importance or the severity of the more familiar sorts of censorship—the sort suggested in the above quotations. But it is the less familiar dimensions and qualities which may prove more instructive in trying to understand and deal with the present. As a matter of fact, much of what I want to show is that the present—and perhaps a part of the past as well—is more complicated than we tend to suppose. My purpose is not to offer solutions, but rather to expose problems where we have assumed there were none. I hope to do so by showing such complexities as these: It is no longer just 'extremists,' but liberals whom we are recognizing as censors; even

the major organizational defenders of the First Amendment have, in the past year been internally wracked by dissension over what censorship is; there seem to be a good many censorship-like situations where we don't expect them and don't label them as such; and conversely, some of the situations to which the censorship charge has long been applied may not be most appropriately construed as censorship at all.

As one probes beyond the more celebrated cases, such as the Fundamentalists of Kanawha County, and the library purists of Island Trees, a number of shadowy cases are unearthed, involving censorship—or some of its nearest relations—on the part of “the good guys.” The introduction of such a term into this discussion immediately telegraphs what has been fairly standard practice on the part of the liberal majority: to associate censorship exclusively with “the bad guys” who typically turn out to be the political Right-winger, or the religious Fundamentalist, or a garden-variety ignoramus. But a part of what calls for re-thinking the censorship question is that a number of liberals are now turning p on the censors lists. Moreover, an assortment of largely unchallenged institutional policy and practice seems to represent censorship behavior or something quite similar. Let us explore a couple of such cases.

The sort coming most readily to mind today, of course, is the attempt on behalf of liberal minorities to bar offensive statements. The widely publicized issue of the Nazi right to march in Skokie is a case in point. So are the attempts on the part of Black and women's groups to control language offensive to these groups. Some such attempts have focused quite naturally on book selection for young readers, and have featured such works as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Black Sambo*, and *Little Women*. Other incidents have involved moves to invoke private as well as public sanctions in such diverse ways as barring operating licenses for restaurants in a chain named “Sambo's,” and successfully pressuring the A&P to stop selling cassettes of the old Amos and Andy radio show. The

Women's Caucus of one learned society recently debated a recommendation which would have limited papers that could be presented to the society, to those scholars agreeing to the editorial expunging of all sexist language and statements from their work.

There are two organizations in the United States which would probably be named as the nation's most vigorous and sustained defenders of the First Amendment: the American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Library Association. It is well known that the ACLU defense of the Nazis' right to march in Skokie has cost the Union thousands of its members—who were pleased to be counted as “censors” in separating themselves from the official ACLU position that First Amendment rights protected the Nazis' marching privileges.

It is less well-known, but the American Library Association was involved last year in a somewhat analogous internal struggle. The argument centered on an ALA-sponsored film whose theme makes the situation doubly ironic, a sort of ‘play-within-a-play.’ The film, titled “The Speaker,” was co-produced by ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee. It “aims to challenge indifference to the First Amendment by presenting a controversy in which it is not easy to take sides.”² The controversy chosen occurs in a high school whose Current Events Committee decides to invite a speaker who seems a thinly-veiled William Shockley. The ALA's Black Caucus—supported by other members—asked that the Association's endorsement be withdrawn from the film. The sponsorship was ultimately re-affirmed (and an explanatory statement about ALA intent added to each print of the film).³ But the pages given to the controversy in the Association's journal quite clearly show the fundamental nature of the struggle and the understandable concern about its divisive effects on the organization.

What are we to make of such events? Has the “centre failed to hold” in the terms of Yeats' famous image? Is it a “failure of nerve”

which has caused some of the advocates of intellectual freedom to abandon their commitments? Have liberals really backed away from liberalism in an insidious drift toward a new kind of conservatism? My intent is not just dramatic in putting the question in so many forms. These are the forms in which various interpreters have recently cast it—suggesting an assortment of hypotheses as to what is happening to a world in which such profound ideological changes seem underway.

One of the apparent changes lies in the bewildering array of practices and auspices which seem in one way or another to smack of censorship. Let us look at a collection of these, to the purpose of asking just where and how censorship occurs. Which of the following ought be construed as instances?

(1) The corporation executive who has recently urged in the *Harvard Business Review* that "corporate support . . . be channeled to" universities that teach views supportive of business, and conversely that such support be denied to institutions whose faculties seem hostile to private enterprise?⁴

(2) The National Congress of Parents and Teachers which, in its efforts to curb violence on television issued ratings on the best and worst prime-time shows—failing *Kojak* on all three of its criteria: offensive content, violence, and overall quality?⁵

(3) The school superintendents and other administrators who deny approximately half of the nation's teachers any voice in the selection of the curricular materials used in their classrooms?⁶

(4) The major educational journal which conditions its acceptance of a manuscript on the author's return of a blanket permission to revise, without the right to review of the changes made?

(5) The major university which could not decide to hire a Marxist political scientist whom the *New York Times* reported to be "a first-rate scholar" chosen by the university's search committee from among 100 candidates?⁷

(6) The school superintendent who explained this way why the board abolished the high school student newspaper: "We want news reporting, not editorializing. If you have any school pride you wouldn't allow the publication of a statement saying the [football] team 'stinks'—there are fifteen other ways to describe it." ⁸

(7) The Massachusetts librarian who responded to pressures to stock the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books in the town's eleven libraries by dubbing both "'soap opera narratives'" unworthy of city funds?⁹

(8) The Upstate New York town which ostracized a racist resident who was warning of a "'Jewish/Marxist/Zionist/Communist conspiracy'" and demanding "'a government dedicated to rights for white people.'" One by one, the 800-member community refused to deal with him. When he moved to a neighboring town, its city council passed a resolution telling him he was unwelcome.¹⁰

(9) The rightwing professor of foreign languages who was fired by his predominantly Black Virginia college, despite his tenure? The reason for the dismissal as given by the faculty committee voting the action was "'unprofessional conduct'"—conduct which was "almost wholly related to his defense" and which the committee thus acknowledged had been "'provoked.'" ¹¹

(10) The major textbook publishing house which dis-invited an English professor to participate in revising one of its textbook series immediately following a speech in which he cited the company's books to show what the book protestors are protesting?¹²

(11) The widespread and intense attempts to discredit a recent book by a professor of electrical engineering who set out to prove that the Nazi extermination of six million Jews never happened?¹³

(12) The library board which voted to keep almost a thousand non-fiction titles on "'restricted'" shelves accessible only when accompanied by a staff member? The books are largely reference books selected on the basis of the library's twenty years of experience

with the books most likely to be stolen, mutilated, or defaced.¹⁴

(13) The California school board which posted almost 60% of its teachers for "unprofessional conduct"? The teachers refused to administer a locally-developed test for grades 2-8—a test which NEA's Terry Herndon suggested they found burdensome, unproductive, and perhaps even harmful.¹⁵

(14) The State university freshman-sophomore "Integrated Humanities Program" which in various ways isolates its students from others on the campus? The academic administration of the program, its summer component at a French monastery, its association with a parochial school founded by the Humanities Program faculty—have caused some to view it as a cult and to worry about the radical personality changes it seems to induce in so many students.¹⁶

As the list is intended to show, censorship is far from the clear, simple matter we often make it. These fourteen situations are complicated by numerous factors making them very difficult to classify. I find it tempting to identify with the PTA's method and intent of curtailing TV violence, but isn't censorship the motive? A part of me wants to cheer the communities that ostracized a racist bigot, but isn't driving someone out of town a rather extreme form of censorship? I can well imagine how difficult that rightwing language professor must have been to live with—and I would surely be among those trying to close down the "Integrated Humanities Program" on my own campus. But aren't these moves somehow redolent of censorship? Yet if so, then the censors at least occasionally involve "the good guys."

When applied to schools and education, the censorship question becomes even more complex—due to the concerns which define education, and to the institutional arrangements by which we pursue it. Analysis of the cases cited suggests that censorship may be indentifiable as some sort of combination of motive, action, and effect; but the particular

combination is elusive and—despite the ready confidence with which we typically apply the term—it is very difficult to come up with a definition or a conceptualization avoiding the embarrassment of finding some of our friends "censors" and some of our enemies very little guiltier.

"In its broadest terms," as one interpreter has summarized it, censorship is "the attempt to prevent the movement and the sharing of information."¹⁷ It is generally understood to involve the limiting or prohibition of either the expression of or the access to ideas and beliefs, written or spoken. Thus, censorship is perceived as inimical to intellectual freedom and as violative of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

This would seem to suggest that all fourteen of our cases are, indeed, at least *attempted* censorship. Whether they would actually qualify as legal instances could only finally be determined by the courts. At present there are a number of interferences with free speech which the courts have found compatible with the First Amendment. Professor Victor Cline has listed eighteen such limitations on expression and access currently viewed consistent with the Bill of Rights. These include restrictions on false advertising, contempt of court, disturbing the peace, perjury, copyright violation, bribery, introducing a 'clear and present danger,' sedition, and several more.¹⁸

Such specifics are less important for our purposes, however, than the general criteria by which censorship is constituted. Although space will not permit the sort of conceptual analysis called for, two general points which such analysis would detail seem very much in order. One has to do with the attitudes which are built into our conception of censorship. The other has to do with the impossibility of accomplishing formal education's purposes without indulging in something resembling censorship.

Within our cultural heritage, few civic and political values can rival freedom. Thus, it is

extremely difficult to mount a persuasive case for anything interfering with freedom—and accordingly, censorship is an activity in which precious few will report themselves engaging! We aren't disposed to call ourselves or our friends "censors," only our adversaries. The connotations of the term are so negative as to largely bar inquiry about whether the censorship is justified or desirable: If that seems to be the case, we use another label and do not categorize the activity as censorship. The importance of this ascriptive/emotive dimension of the term suggests its power as a weapon in public debate and decision-making. One has advanced one's case considerably when able to make the "censorship" label stick to one's opponent. The point is well worth noting in connection with a number of the alleged "censorship" incidents involving schools. Under such circumstances, as Ken Strike has noted, "naming the game is the name of the game."¹⁹

But that leads us to the second general point that an analysis of censorship would have to make, in order to clarify the concept's applicability to schools and education. It doesn't seem to fit nearly as neatly as linguistic practice has presupposed. On the one hand, a number of the school battles where the censorship charge has been invoked might perhaps really be better understood as something else. And on the other hand, some of the practices which really define formal education seem very closely aligned with what we call censorship.

To better see the problem, let us look at the differences in a couple of situations where the censorship label has frequently been invoked. To my knowledge, little has been said about the desirable *differences* in criteria for selecting (1) library books, (2) school library books, and (3) textbooks. Yet it surely makes sense to ask whether there are any relevant differences—and the answer seems clearly to be yes. Few liberals will ever agree to suspending or setting aside the First Amendment. But clearly there are decisions in which it is other considerations which ap-

pear most important. I would be very concerned about the First Amendment as a criterion in the selection of books for purchase by the local public library. Here it makes sense to think in terms of providing for every 'taste and persuasion.' The force of The First would be somewhat diluted, however, by the need for additional considerations as we moved to selection decisions for a school library. And so many requirements must be met by a good textbook that First Amendment considerations can be only one set among a substantial number.

To see the reasonableness of this, assume a hypothetical volume presenting what is a somewhat obscure, seemingly 'crackpot' theory of disease. I would certainly want to be able to find such a book in a public library—and if it were not there, I would want to make very sure that the reasons had nothing to do with intent to exclude, or a judgment that the book was false or dangerous or potentially misleading.

I am a lot less certain about whether I would insist on Volume X for a school library though. I'm not sure that a school library need duplicate all that is available at the local public library—and that in itself suggests the appropriateness of some different selection criteria. Assuming that the school library budget is more limited than the public library's budget, perhaps criteria not immediately related to the First Amendment might be more pertinent—e.g., how likely is the volume to be of interest to the school's student age group? how likely are teachers to assign it, or to make assignments to which it might prove relevant? how many books in the same category (e.g., on disease, or of the same Dewey Decimal classification) does the school library already have? what is the relative urgency of other current demands on school library funds? The school's particular charge as an institution seems to lend such questions as much import as the First Amendment in selecting books for the school library—assuming, of course, a finite limit on available funds.

Finite limits must loom ever larger in the selection of textbooks, of course. And here, it is not only funds which are limited, but time and student interest, conceptual levels and reading ability and more. On the relatively safe assumption that not all students can and will read everything, the selection of texts is a crucially important choice. And the way we have characterized Volume X—to present a “somewhat obscure, seemingly ‘crackpot’ theory of disease”—suggests that it would not be an appropriate choice as a textbook. —Because for textbook use, criteria need to extend well beyond those applied to school library choices.

Moreover, while responding to ‘every taste and persuasion’ seems a plausible sort of criterion for stocking a public library, it is certainly not a desirable standard for choosing textbooks! The reason is that education must do more than display an array of possibilities. It is a consciously and deliberately normative process. We do not establish schools simply to announce the existence of, or to cater to, tastes and persuasions; we charge schools with shaping and fashioning them. That, after all, must be a central part of any education genuinely preparing the young to be in and of the world. Furthermore, while screening library books for their ‘correctness’ is a clear case of censorship, screening textbooks for their correctness seems the obligation of any institution that compels youngsters to read those books.

These differences in purpose and function are perhaps of greater import than we have assigned them. We don’t require such things as accuracy and balance and fair presentation of library books—and perhaps for good reason, not of all school library books. But we do have such expectations for a textbook. We want it to represent an accurate statement, selecting and organizing a collection of facts on intelligent and intelligible principles. But right there—right from the start—is the rub. Which facts? Selected on what view of truth and error? Organized according to what interpretation and general criteria for interpreting events? Many of those we have

called “censors” have objected to the criteria commonly invoked by schools in such decisions. But some we have not called “censors” have raised objections at comparably fundamental levels. A recent monograph, for example, commissioned by Georgetown University’s Ethics and Public Policy Center, raised very serious questions about the biases of a widely used high school text on government. The introduction points out that although the three critics and the book’s two authors all “come from the same general, liberal democratic background,” there are important differences among them. The text’s authors “are authentic voices for American liberalism as it was expressed in the 1940s and 1950s. In contrast, the three critics have been active participants in the self-critical reappraisal of liberal ideas and policies that has been going on in the intellectual community and among policy makers . . . since the early 1960s.”²⁰

It is getting harder to tell the players without a scorecard—and to identify the plays! Two general developments in particular have made it so: One is the dissolving of national consensus—of the extensively shared worldview which once yielded far more agreement on such matters as textbook criteria and choice. The second broad development complicating the censorship problem is our growing awareness of epistemological and psychological subtleties which expose forms of censorship not earlier recognized. Sociologists of knowledge, and others, have made increasingly apparent the diverse ways in which human beings constrain and coerce others. For some, these perceptions will probably lend credence to the old ‘argument of the beard’—the fallacy claiming that we all choose and screen to some extent, and who is to say just when this becomes censorship. Under the circumstances, we might even consider a moratorium on bringing the “censorship” charge into arguments over schools—on the grounds that to do so may foreclose the opportunities for accurate perception of real needs and difficulties, of genuine under-

standing of people and situations, and hence of any real solutions to serious problems. There seems good reason to believe that "censorship" is a more complicated matter than we have made it.

Georgetown University, 1978). The quotes come from pp. 4 and 5. The three appraisers are Michael Novak, Jeane Kilpatrick, and Anne Crutcher.



References

¹ The first quotation is from a 1958 "Declaration of Principles" of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Conservative Club. The second is from the platform adopted in 1955 by an organization named "We, The People!" Both are quoted from Mary Anne Raywid, *The Ax-Grinders* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 76 and 65, respectively.

² Quoted from an outline of the film in "The Speaker: Step or Misstep into Filmmaking?" *American Libraries*, July/August, 1977, p. 371.

³ See "High Drama, High Rise in Fall Board Meeting," *American Libraries*, December, 1977, p. 628.

⁴ "Executives Mull Cutting Off Gifts to 'Hostile' Schools," *Newsday*, July 18, 1978.

⁵ "PTA Rates TV shows," *Newsday*, August 11, 1978.

⁶ P. Kenneth Komoski, "Censorship," *Today's Education*, April-May, 1978, p. 96.

⁷ Quoted from the AAUP's *Academe*, XII:2 (June, 1978), p. 1.

⁸ Quoted in "They Said It," *Newsday*, October 3, 1976.

⁹ "The Battle of the Books," *Newsday*, September 14, 1978.

¹⁰ Fredric U. Dicker, "The Town That Said 'NO' to Hate," *ADL Bulletin* 35:7 (September, 1978), p. 3.

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¹³ See, e.g., Robert G. L. Waite, "Hitler and the Nazi Years," *ADL Bulletin* 34: 6 (June, 1977), pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ James Bernstein, "The Novels Are Back," *Newsday*, September 27, 1977.

¹⁵ "Newsfront" item, *Education U.S.A.*, 18: 7 (October 13, 1975), p. 38.

¹⁶ Vern Barnet, "Something to Be Concerned About," *Unitarian Universalist World*, IX: 13 (September 15, 1978).

¹⁷ Ervin J. Gaines, "The New Censorship—Social Responsibility and Moral Righteousness," in *Organized Censors Rarely Rest*, edited by Edward B. Jenkinson (Special issue of *Indiana English*, 1: 1, Fall, 1977), p. 24.

¹⁸ For the list, see Cline's introductory essay, "Where Do You Draw the Line?" to his anthology of the same name. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Kenneth Strike, "Liberality and Censorship: A Philosophy of Textbook Controversies," *Philosophy of Education* 1977, edited by Ira S. Steinberg (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1977), p. 280.

²⁰ Ernest W. Lefever, editor, *Values in An American Government Textbook: Three Appraisals* (Washington: