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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the factors which precipitated a violent conflict over the introduction of certain textbooks and supplementary reading materials in Kanawha County, West Virginia, in 1974. The paper analyzes and reviews the developments that occurred from April 1974 to February 1975 and examines the issues that were raised. A description of the people and the social and economic environment of this Appalachian county provides background information to the chain of events which surrounded the textbook controversy. It is observed that the protest movement resulted from a conflict between dominant and suppressed cultures as well as from differences in perceptions. (16 references) (MAB)

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Book Censorship, Social Dynamics, and the Education-Library Establishment's Response to The Kanawha County Textbook Controversy

by

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The strident, violent conflict that resulted over the introduction of certain reading materials in Kanawha County, West Virginia in 1974 exposed cultural antagonisms simmering beneath the surface presents a most challenging opportunity for study by social experts and those concerned with the maintenance of constitutional rights in our society. But in analyzing and reviewing background developments that took place from April 1974 to February 1975, it was decided that the focus of this paper should be on those factors which precipitated confrontation and the important issues that were raised as opposed to that which limits or engages the matter solely from the point of view of intellectual freedom and censorship. Also included is significant research produced since the controversy disappeared from the headlines that brings clarity and helps to explain an intriguing American phenomenon.

Briefly, it was on April 11, 1974 that the Kanawha County Board of Education in a unanimous motion approved 325 texts and supplementary books based on the recommendation of a special selection committee. On May 16, the committee, while in the process of outlining its program goals with the introduction of these new books, was interrupted by school board member Alice Moore who attacked both the committee and the proposed books thus

launching the protracted "textbook controversy" which garnered considerable media attention. In order to arrive at a balanced perspective on subsequent events it is necessary to attempt a portrayal of the people and the environment of that region of the country to put them in some kind of credible context.

Kanawha County is located in central West Virginia. Charleston, the county seat and the state's capitol, is situated in one of the countless valleys that dot this once isolated region of the United States. The familiar hillbilly stereotype of the mountaineers of Appalachia depicts them as stoic, simple folk who are poor but proud, and pathetic illiterates often given to "feuding." Closer examination reveals a people of broader dimensions. Virtually cut off from the outside world, they survived the hardships of a cruel land with deeply held religious beliefs and through the strength of the nuclear family. The landscape was not hospitable to farming or herding. Until recently, the majority of the population existed at the subsistence level. It was not until the late nineteenth century when the Industrial Revolution made it possible to exploit abundant coal deposits that vitality was brought to the area, upgrading the material life of most of the inhabitants.

In 1974, a more diversified economy sustained growing prosperity of the county. The coal mines still employed a disproportionately large segment of the labor force in addition to petrochemical plants, industrial equipment plants, glassworks,

potteryworks, furniture and assorted light industries and related tertiary operations. Although the median family income was below average for that of the nation, those who might have been described as impoverished was less that 15%. Slightly more than half of those over a age 25 had at least a high school education. More than 95% of all homes had television sets and more than 80% had telephones.

However, the above statistics camouflage the problem of race, class, and morality. Most obvious was the problem of class, i.e., the socio-cultural division of the rural and urban population in the county. The advent of the Industrial Revolution made real this kind of social distinction. The county's rural population was, in the main, less educated, less affluent, held stronger religious convictions, and were less involved with the running of local government or other policymaking bodies that affected the lives of all citizens. This fact added to the frustration of those mountain people who saw themselves as being powerless to influence those institutions (e.g., the school board and libraries) and lacked the means to effectively articulate their complaints. It was the urban middle and upper classes that dominated the political hierarchy, owned the industrial plants and communications media, controlled law enforcement, and had the commanding voice in determining future developments. The class division of the powerful and the supposed powerless, the culturally advanced and the culturally deprived set the stage for a major protest over a decision that would have gone virtually unnoticed in most American communities of comparable

size.

A problematic situation had been compounded by the refusal, or inability, of the rural inhabitants to assimilate into the dominant class which disdained their "clannishness." On the other hand, the dominant class displayed a want of sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of their deprived co-citizens. Attempting to explain the moral outrage evident during the textbook protest, an eight-man investigative team organized by the National Education Association (NEA) contended fundamental religious beliefs and cultural morays actually "sparked the controversy," giving it the character of a "religious war."[1] The NEA report further observed that "the religion that once served as a buffer against physical hardships...now serves, just as essentially, as a bulwark against the psychological and social stresses of integration into a larger society."[2] In truth, the mountain culture faced extinction as the forces of modernity steadily eroded its substance.

> For most, the hardships have been considerably lightened. But the improved living standards, the vastly increased communications and transportation systems now available to these people have brought an end to independence and seclusion of their rural communities. Their once insular world has been invaded by the pressures, the frustrations, and the moral question marks of the contemporary outside world. Daily they have been informed of the revolutionary movements of black people and other minority groups; the alienation of youth ; the women's liberation movement; the anti-war movements; and the threatened moral breakdown of our nation as evidenced by the drug culture, the sexual permissiveness, and the pervasiveness of crime, not only in the streets but in the seats of government.[3]

Following the Kanawha County Board of Education's adoption of those 325 textbooks and supplemental readings on May 16, 1974, lone dissenting school board member Alice Moore set out on a one-woman campaign to discredit the board and to pressure it into reconsidering its action by inciting public furor. Ms. Moore, the wife of a local fundamentalist minister who had been elected to the board on an anti-sex education platform, publicized her colleague's mischief at various forums, particularly churches, with speeches, flyers quoting some "offensive" book passages and, enterprisingly, narrated cassette tapes. Eventually, a petition was circulated which collected 12,000 signatures opposing the books was presented to the board which, undaunted, voted on June 27 to proceed according to plan. By the time school opened on September 3, there were more than a score of ministers and a number of inchoate group denouncing the new books.

What is unique about Kanawha County textbook imbroglio was the level of serious violence attendant to the protest which distinguishes it in the history of the nation.. The first two weeks of school were complete chaos. Demonstrators besieged the schools, factory worker and coal miners decried the "rotten filthy" books which they claimed promoted marijuana use, rabble rousing, sexual licence, interracial marriage, and a host of other things which "defamed religion and morality."[4] From picketing and boycotts the protest escalated to acts of violence. With the blessing of local cleric, extremists dynamited schools, businesses and homes. Parents confined their children to the home not only

as an act of civil disobedience, but for their safety. Those who dared to cross the picket line were likely to be threatened or physically assaulted. Two school bus drivers were wounded by sniper fire and a number of buses were vandalized. More than 10,000 miners stayed off the job as a gesture of solidarity with the protesters during the first month of disturbances. Even the police were reluctant to take action against the protester to maintain law and order. CBS news reporter Jed Duvall and his crew were set upon by a mob while shooting a story for national broadcast. The protesters felt they had scored a victory when one school board member resigned. By late October the situation the county had gotten such attention that the White House dispatched an aide, Roger Semerad, to seek out a "constructive compromise."[5]

Events might not have taken such an ugly turn had it not been for the agitation of several outside groups. These politically conservative and extremist intruders included the Heritage Foundation of Washington, D.C., the American Opinion Book Store of Reedy, West Virginia (a John Birch Society affiliate), the Los Angeles-based Citizens for Decency Through Law, the Ku Klux Klan, Morality in Media, and the Oregon-based National Parents League. Judith Krug, then head of the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, explained in Newsweek magazine that such groups were "ever ready to manipulate the fears and frustrations...to effect more permanent political ends."[6] In a 1983 treatise titled Understanding the New Right and Its Impact on Education, Louisiana State University professor Joe L. Kincheloe

viewed the textbook protest as a decisive event that emboldened conservative parents across the nation, joined with opportunistic right-wing politicians, to challenge what they felt was decadence and immorality in the public schools,[7] something which was made clear by the American Library Association (ALA) which noted a dramatic rise in textbook controversies across the United States overs sevearl years immediately following the Kanawha County ordeal.[8]

In striking contrast to those groups supporting the protesters was the NEA and the ALA which represented not merely established institutions charged to examine and recommend solutions to such controversies but also they articulated liberal, progressive thinking on the issue of censorship that was both foreign and abhorrent to the violence prone east county defenders of traditional values. Just as the NEA and the ALA partially blamed the outbreak of violence on the the agitation of "outside" groups like the the Ku Klux Klan, many like those protest leaders who "boycotted the NEA hearings because of objections to (their) 'outside interference,' viewed representatives of the NEA and the ALA as insensitive, left-leaning outsiders."[9]

It should be pointed out that Kanawha County's population was not typical of that of an Appalachian area as its workers were largely employed in industry and government and because many of its inhabitants dwelled in urban and suburban communities. But, as one native observer noted: "The movement to remove the textbooks has

support throughout this Protestant, working class community...the dedicated shock troops come from the rural area of the county's eastern coal-mining half. This area believes itself ignored and forgotten, a poor cousin. Suffering from lower education, lower incomes, and fewer governmental services, this is the area in which the protest movement has found its heart."[10]

It was significant that the element of racism was so prominent a part of the textbook controversy. The NEA reported that teachers "received complaints from parents about illustrations in textbooks depicting a white female and a black male student together (and)...members of the Textbook Review Committee who recommended retention of the books received numerous telephone calls that described as obscene and, in most all instances, dealing with race."[11] A slogan painted on the side of a building demanded: "Get the nigger books out."[12] These "nigger books" included widely read classroom standards like Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver, Autobiography of Malcolm X and the works of other African-American writers like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, George Jackson, et al. Interestingly, in a poll of 13 students on the street conducted by the Charleston Daily Mail most of the students "felt the issue was whether they could read black authors."[13]

By mid-November, the protest movement was losing steam. On November 16, five arrest warrants were served on school board members at the instigation of some town mayors charging them with

contributing to the delinquency of minors by fostering books that were anti-God and un-American. Sporadic violence and resistance continued through December, but by the new year the troubles had practically ceased. All that remained was criminal proceedings against some of the protesters. On December 3, 1974, a federal appeals courts denied a suit by two individuals who asked that books approved by the Kanawha County School Board be banned because they offended their religious beliefs. The protester's legal challenge had failed.

In February 1975, after hearing testimony from all parties involved in the dispute, the NEA team accused the Kanawha County Board of Education of being negligent on three counts. First, it charged the board did not adequately prepare the community for the introduction of the new books. Leaders of the opposition had quoted passages from the books that were out of context, thereby distorting the intended meaning. Some of this might have been avoided had the public been allowed easy access to the books for the purpose of review. Second, the board should have retained the parent's Curriculum Advisory Council after it had voted to use the textbooks since it later appeared from the outside that the board had acted in a clandestine and arbitrary manner. Finally, it was pointed out that the board did not have a mechanism for handling complaints from the public regarding policies and conditions of the school system. Despite these criticisms of the school board, the NEA and the ALA, consistent with their past history, defended the principles of intellectual freedom and warned against the pitfalls

of censorship.

By mid-April 1975, a spirit of compromise was much in evidence when, faced with a disturbing proliferation of private unaccredited fundamentalist Christian schools in the county, protesters and school board members agreed to initiate an alternative school system which required both students and teachers to comply with a rigid dress code, promote "high patriotic ideas," and "stress the 3R's."[14] Such a scheme could have been benefited by James Moffett's suggestion in 1989 that book censorship be preempted by the offering of "spiritual education" which exposes students to a variety of religious and/or spiritual experiences and viewpoints in a non-threatening manner. Moffett, a actual veteran in the Kanawha County dispute, contends that: "...a spiritual education could accomplish moral and religious education without moralizing or indoctrinating."[15] By 1975, the private Chiristian schools had increased enrollment to 18,729 elementary and secondary school students: further proof of a profound disenchantment with what was being taught in the public schools.[16]

The following school year, 1975-76, was a peaceful one, save the perennial busing issue. The disputed books were deposited in public school libraries but were not assigned as required readings for any course. What happened in Kanawha County hardly typified past textbook controversies, rather it was probably the best example of all possible negative elements combining to produce an explosive situation. It was as much a predicament of conflicting

values held by dominant and suppressed cultures as it was the difference in perception of the criticalness of the printed word (mountain folk hold an almost sacred reverence for the power of the printed word--a common tendency among the marginally literate).

The desire to ban certain books stemmed from a lack of faith in the judgement of professional educators and others in leadership positions. In effect, those of the economically and culturally disadvantaged class in the county had attempted to usurp the authority of what they perceived to be an arrogant, liberal establishment who neither respected or shared their values. The textbook controversy not only gave them the rare opportunity to assemble and collectively express what they felt was righteous indignation against the purveyors of "trashy" books, but it also provided the vehicle for an emotional assault on their presumed oppressors, i.e., those who manipulated social and economic forces which they did not fully understand or approve of and felt beyond their means to control.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kanawha County, West Virginia: A Textbook Study In Cultural Conflict. Washington, DC: National Education Association, February 5, 1975. p. 9.

2. Ibid., p. 14.

3. Ibid.

4. "Drivers Shot in Violence Over Textbooks," New York Times, 14 September 1974, 27.

5. Ben A. Franklin, "Bomber Testifies That Minister Blessed Dynamiting of Schools in Textbook Dispute," New York Times, 15 April 1975, 21.

6. "The Book Banners," Newsweek, 9 June 1975, 47.

7. Joe L. Kincheloe, Understanding the New Right and Its Impact on Education (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Foundation, 1983), 7.

8. See Limiting What Students Shall Read (Washington, DC: American Library Association and the Association of American Publishers, 1981).

9. "NEA Panel Pegs Issues in Kanawha Book Dispute," Library Journal, 15 March 1975, 542.

10. James Humphreys, "Textbook War in West Virginia," Dissent 23 (Spring 1976): 164.

11. NEA, 41.

12. Ibid.

13. James Moffett, Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 15.

14. Ben A. Franklin, "Court Trial and Action by Board Tempering Dispute Over Textbooks," New York Times, 13 April 1975, 28.

15. James Moffett, "Censorship and Spiritual Education," 21 (May 1989), 71.

16. Otis K. Rice, West Virginia: A History (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1985), 251.