

FOR THE RECORD

Political Censorship: A Different View

Robert Weissberg

The Winter 1988 issue of *PS* contained five essays on textbook censorship.¹ Though they covered a wide variety of topics, they shared a common and very familiar theme. Basically, in one form or another, they depicted and deplored right-wing attempts to shape textbook content and school adoption. Karen O'Connor and Greg Ivers, for example, described the fundamentalist attack on evolution and its advocacy of creationism. Marsha Nye Adler discussed how the liberal People For the American Way had led the "counter-attack" against organizations such as Educational Research Analysts, a Texas-based group worried about the lack of moral absolutes in sociology textbooks.

To anyone acquainted with intellectual censorship, these tales are yet additional items to be added to thousands just like them. Indeed, there is such regularity to these stories that one might even formulate a near-universal generic school textbook censorship story: truth-seeking textbook author rejected by established publishers as too "controversial" eventually gets book into print but fails anyway due to pressure from intimidating right-wingers cloaked in the mantle of traditional American values. Intolerant jingoism again defeats truth.

These *PS* articles no doubt paint an accurate picture of political pressure on textbooks. But they present only a part of the story. They tell us nothing about other pressures on the textbook writer, pressures quite different from the familiar right-wing "truth squads" hounding moral relativism from subversive tracts. As one who has written a text—*Understanding American Government* (Random House, 1986)—with separate college and high school editions, I have some experience in this matter. I make no claim that my personal experience is typical; I have no idea whether my exasperations and frustrations are shared by others or are unique. All I can do is present a side of textbook censorship that is rarely part of the generic account and is certainly omitted in the five *PS* stories.

As Diane Paul made clear, the contemporary textbook market demands handsome packaging—lots of pictures, four-color graphics, and expensive designs. In my experience this was one area that somehow had become designated as the place to portray the role of women and racial and ethnic groups in American politics. For the college edition this involved sitting around a table with various

Robert Weissberg is professor of political science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL 61801. This article originally appeared in the March 1989 issue of *PS*.

editors and stacks of photographs racking our collective minds trying to figure out how, say, to get a Hispanic woman or a disabled person into the text. It was a parlor game motivated by some vague, rarely articulated leftist fear of omitting the contributions of women and minorities.

This effort at heterogeneity could yield bizarre results. Consider, for example, the suggestions for brief biographical sketches made by a free-lancer hired by Random House for the high school edition. Biographies that were suggested included Patricia Roberts Harris (federalism), Alice Paul (electoral system), Fannie Lou Hamer (voting), A. Philip Randolph (interest groups), Frances Perkins (bureaucracy), Chief Joseph or Sitting Bull and Mary McLeod Bethune (civil rights), and Cesar Chávez (economic policy). The editor noted that this list was a compromise between the need to have people who mattered politically and gender/ethnic balance.

I counter-suggested the likes of J. Edgar Hoover (instead of Frances Perkins), William O. Douglas (instead of Mary McLeod Bethune), and John D. Rockefeller (instead of Cesar Chávez). Since I have a way with words, my wishes were accommodated. Nevertheless, I also knew that it would be pointless to argue that historical and political importance—not sex and race—were the appropriate standards for inclusion. Everybody seemed to assume that if we lacked the proper balance, the book would lose adoptions. Stretching historical importance in this one particular direction was an easy and cheap price to pay for greater sales.

Citations and Authorities

There has never been a sign above my desk saying, “Rely on Politically Correct Authorities,” but the message was never in doubt. The sources and names cited are not just for informational purposes in a text. When “properly” used they can convey the aura of scholarly respectability, a critical attribute for adoption. Footnotes from a recent *American Political Science Review* help reassure the reader that herein lies the latest, most sophisticated truth. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* references reveal an up-to-date concern for “real world” politics. Citations also emit ideological signals.

In particular, to give conservative writers, journals, and research reports much beyond the most minimal recognition is to ask for trouble. Perhaps Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* might be mentioned in a “Further Reading” section, but relying on it in the main body of the text will surely get one branded as unsympathetic to the cause of good. On occasion, reliance on a report by the Heritage Foundation, plus a reference to the *National Review* or even the *Public Interest* can easily add up to an unacceptable conservative or right-wing “approach.” Once branded on the basis of these references, the

damage is enormous: the huge “mainstream market” is lost and sales must be sought in the much smaller “book with a political view” market. Please appreciate the fact that this labeling process has nothing to do with the quality or insight of the text’s analysis.

This avoidance of “controversial” conservative materials is largely self-imposed. Before a text sees the light of day it must pass through multiple reviews—first as a proposal, then by one or more editors, then by three or four in-depth reviewers in one’s profession, and finally, by a dozen or more potential adoptees. By a very quick trial and error process one learns to avoid any hint of “conservative bias.” The ever-watchful editor can almost always be counted on to say: “Take it out or tone it down—such controversy will cost sales.” After a point, especially with powerful deadline pressures, it is easier to avoid such problems by imposing ideological self-censorship.

But, the thoughtful reader will surely say, this process applies equally to both Right and Left. My experiences with several publishers and several books and multiple editions suggest not. First, I have yet to meet *any* editor who was acquainted with, let alone sympathetic to, conservative political arguments. Being a liberal Democrat seems to be part of the job description of college textbook editor. Second, among both editors and academic reviewers there seems to be a much greater tolerance of weakly supported Left arguments. Such arguments seem self-evident. For example, asserting that our economic system has failed millions of poor Americans is very likely to pass unchallenged into print. Imagine reaction to a manuscript that argues that laziness and immorality significantly contributed to poverty. The call for conclusive documentation would be loud and (probably) unsatisfiable. Not surprisingly, given such rules of evidence, left-wing texts far outnumber books with an acknowledged conservative bias.

The Forces of Good and the Forces of Evil

Officially, textbooks are not supposed to be advocates. If a “point of view” is to be conveyed, it must be clearly labeled. But, in writing *Understanding American Government* I was very much aware of the official good guys and bad guys of American politics. Again, there is no written, formal list. Nevertheless, professional socialization and casual conversations with editors and reviewers make it pretty clear who is to be celebrated and who can be bashed without fear.

Consider, for example, how the Supreme Court is to be handled. The overwhelming prevailing orthodoxy is that the Warren Court’s flood of pro-individual rights decisions improved the quality of our political and social life. Typically, decision after decision is marched by, each being depicted as one more case of past injustices being rectified. There is little need to dwell on, say,

the right to personal safety, property rights, individual liberty, the need for social order, and so on, since such arguments are mere covers for the forces of evil. If there are "bad" decisions made by the Court, the late nineteenth century provides plenty of politically correct examples.

When discussing the rights of citizens the prevailing ideological winds strongly encourage a chapter organized around the victories of groups such as blacks, women, and Hispanics. And, even the very consideration of the possibility that this rights struggle may have been counterproductive is to provoke outrage. It is impolite to discuss seriously Thomas Sowell's contention that the black focus on politics to redress poverty is a failure. A half-page description of how high school students were made freer by a Supreme Court ruling will hardly attract attention. Rewrite the same material as a defeat for those upholding the authority of educational institutions and the likely reaction would be, "Are you some sort of right-wing nut?"

Examples could be multiplied, but the point should be clear. The pressures I felt were pretty much in the same direction. Writing a respectable, authoritative, and sound American government text meant accepting a largely "soft Left" interpretation of politics. The conventional wisdom insisted upon by my immediate audiences was not politically neutral, conclusively documented truth. After a point, it was much easier to accept conformity than fight. The psychic gratification of being true to one's views hardly makes up for endless disputes with editors and reviewers, publication delays, and the prospect of reduced income. Silent conformity is virtually painless.

The Outside Looking In

To members of the publishing and academic communities the final product appears to be the politically neutral truth. For a reasonable person to take issue with it would be as sensible as arguing with the laws of science. No wonder, then, that opponents are easily portrayed as "fringe" members of the intellectual community, kitchen table scholars, evangelical preachers, Bible college professors, and misguided housewives. Their views are equally dismissed as simplistic, ill-informed, unenlightened, or even fascistic.

But, look at it from the other side. When reading the textbook the would-be censor sees an interpretation of politics very much at odds with what he knows to be true. Religion is nowhere to be found except as part of a discussion of court rulings on school prayer, flag salute cases, and the like. Problems of crime and immorality, serious problems to many citizens, are hardly treated as real problems. Indeed, government actions to help criminals and homosexuals are treated favorably. Values such as hard work, honesty, loyalty, family life, and respectability receive no mention, let alone praise. The rights of poor people and various minorities are "important"; the rights of plain white folk to live in

a clean, peaceful town while their children receive a dull traditional education are “unimportant.”

Beating a Dead Horse

Why do normally apathetic citizens get so worked up over school texts? It is too convenient to dismiss this hostility as uninformed opposition to THE TRUTH. They are reacting to a leftish political vision, a vision so pervasive in publishing and leading departments that it is judged as politically neutral. And since this vision is so driven by honorable intentions, people who object to it can only be right-wing kooks.

Note

1. The essays on textbook censorship appearing in the Winter 1988 issue of *PS* include: Marsha Nye Adler, “The Politics of Censorship,” 18-24; James A. Caporaso and James H. Mittleman, “The Assault on Global Education,” 36-47; Virginia Currey, “The Politics of Textbook Adoption,” 25-30; Karen O’Connor and Greg Ivers, “Creationism, Evolution and the Courts,” 10-17; and Diane B. Paul, “The Market as Censor,” 31-35.