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Race War, Holy War

> I read all about the wars over religion—the hatred, bloodshed, and violence—but they did not come home to me until this controversy.
>
> —A Kanawha County high school student testifying before the inquiry panel of the National Education Association[1]

I talked with a staff member of the Kanawha County School District in a remodeled but still-spired white wooden church facing one side of the small public square upon which the School Board building itself is located. The old church houses the offices that have overflowed from there and forms part of what employees call "the complex." We talked in the one relatively unoccupied room available, a lounge next to which lay a larger room in which the textbooks had been displayed—first for preadoption perusal and later for examination after the controversy began in the fall. She preferred not to be named and is cited as STAFF.

STAFF: Textbooks weren't the issue. No one will ever convince me. The major issue was a political one and had to do with the black-and-white issue. Now, there are people right here in this complex who would deny that, vehemently.

MOFFETT: What else political?

STAFF: Part of it was the desire to set up a different *kind* of school system. The whole movement for a voucher system started in the Anaheim area. I think all those things are a part of it, along with the black-white thing. I think it's a marriage of the conservative forces and the fundamentalist Christians. . . . A lot of the fellows around here were drawn into it and loved the publicity they got because it was the first recognition they had ever had. Most of them uneducated semiliterate. . . . New sports jackets, new patent leather shoes. That may sound like a terrible thing to say, but that's the way I saw it. . . . The whole experience was so traumatic for me. I'm not over it yet and never will be. I thought I might lose my mind, it was so frustrating.

MOFFETT: What was the hardest part? You had all these people coming in. [To examine the books after school started.]

STAFF: As a general rule, they weren't too offensive. Most of them were very very nice, and most of them were simply frightened out of their wits. They thought that somebody really was going to corrupt their children. Many could hardly read, but then many—fairly educated people—would come in, read the books, and say, "I can't see a thing wrong. What are they talking about?" So many just didn't want to read the books at all. They just took at face value what they heard. . . . It was really traumatic. In early October of that year the books were all removed from the schools. The superintendent just gave the order, said, "Take up all the books. They're to be taken to the warehouse." We're talking about hundreds of thousands of books. In many schools, the teachers told me, they stood there and cried. The *kids* cried. The students at George Washington High School, one of the city schools, refused to give up their books. They kept them. The books were stacked to the ceiling in our storage facilities. Eventually they were put back into the schools, but many of them were really not used.

MOFFETT: When we were putting *Interaction* together we were trying to implement individualized reading, so we suggested that schools buy only a half dozen copies of each title so they could afford more titles.

STAFF: That's the way they were purchased.

MOFFETT: Of course it never had a chance to operate that way, and we weren't thinking specifically of censorship, but we figured that if it ever did happen that parents objected to some books, you could honestly say that their kid didn't have to read any particular book.

STAFF: That's not the way it worked. They didn't want *anyone*'s child to read—

MOFFETT: Did they *say* that?

STAFF: Oh yes. You know, we've always had a policy in this county that if you objected to something, your child didn't have to read it. An alternate selection would be—but that wasn't the way it worked.

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MOFFETT: Was Alice Moore sincere and in good faith?

STAFF: No.

MOFFETT: Or do you feel she was politically ambitious?

STAFF: Not to achieve an office but to achieve an issue.

MOFFETT: Was the issue other than what she said?

STAFF: I think the issue is black and white. There are many people here

do not believe that. But I think the greatest shock to me was realizing that the strong prejudice was right below the surface. And I'm not a crusader or anything.

MOFFETT: Because you felt the prejudice crossed lines?

STAFF: Every line, every line.

MOFFETT: You feel it's worse here than in other parts of the country?

STAFF: No, probably, but it's here. And yet when we integrated in '55, when we integrated our West Virginia State College, one of the best black colleges in the country, the integration went very very smoothly. We've never had any outward riots or anything of that kind.

MOFFETT: I didn't mean that as a leading question, but things were more intense here, and I wonder why *here.*

STAFF: I think that was the *major* issue. There were lots of subissues, like the consolidation of schools that had taken place. Many people hated to give up their community schools. It's going to happen again, because of loss of enrollment in our school district. So that has been an issue. Jealousy in some of the rural parts of the community, jealousy against the rich people, the town people, that kind of thing. There were a lot of issues.

MOFFETT: I'm trying to tie all the things together. [She laughs.] The platform seems to be made up of planks that don't necessarily go together in an obvious way.

STAFF: Well, it's difficult *to* connect it.

MOFFETT: Militarism and phonics—what connects them?

STAFF: This great stress on intensive phonics—I was rather amused: one of the elementary supervisors at the time of the controversy was a very very conservative stereotype of the schoolmarm, and one of the things objected to in one of the first-grade books in the *Communicating* series was "Three Billy Goats Gruff." Kids have grown up with "Three Billy Goats Gruff" forever. They supposedly objected to it because the troll was vicious and he looked fierce under the bridge and all that. And the program that Mrs. Moore was advocating is an intensive phonics approach. When it was adopted, this teacher came in the hallway there, and she said, "You wouldn't believe this book." She was leafing through it, and she said, "Here is the troll—and he is stark naked." And this is the book they were wanting. You see, there's no logic at all to their objections. Let me tell you one other thing—talking about those early books—that I thought was really interesting. The board members didn't come in to look at the books.

MOFFETT: Preadoption, you mean?

STAFF: Uh-huh. And during the process we set up the room next door and had it all ready, and only one member came in, one day, and he wasn't coming in to read the books. I think it was a second-level book in

the *Communicating* series had a version of "Jack and the Bean Stalk" that people objected to. We all leafed through it and couldn't figure out why they were having such a fit over "Jack and the Bean Stalk." Well, openly, they were saying, "You're teaching children to steal, and you're teaching them to kill." You know, didn't make sense. Anyway, when this board member came in, we asked him. We were in the room next door here. And I'll never forget. He took the book, and he put it down on the table. "It's not what's in the book—it's the *cover.*" Well, we hadn't even *thought* of that. It was a collage of several different figures, on the cover, and in the foreground there are two children, and the little girl is carrying a big bouquet of daisies, and the little boy is leaning over like this [Bending forward.] smelling them. And he took his finger and went like this, clockwise, and he said, "*That's* what they're objecting to, in my area," and he circled that little boy and girl. The little boy is black, and the little girl is white. That was so traumatic for me. . . .

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Even with the terrible drama of what happened there were some funny things. One of the funniest happened in the room next door here. A young couple came in and wanted to see the elementary books. One of the elementary consultants was helping them, and all at once she noticed that they just looked very angry, threw down the book, and started to leave. So she went back to see what was wrong. And they had found the adjective "onomatopoeic" and they thought it was a dirty word. . . . [Both laugh.]

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I remember there was a selection in the *Man* series from *Babi Yar,* and they [the minority members of the Textbook Review Committee] objected to that vehemently. Of course that's part of the approach they have, that the Jewish massacre really didn't occur.

MOFFETT: That's right. That's kind of the latest wrinkle, isn't it, that the Holocaust was made up?

STAFF: That it was made up. There are books out on that now. So they objected to that. There was little logic in the *way* they objected. It was almost impossible to *answer* the objections. We tried that. We wrote reams of answers to things that appeared in the daily paper, but who

wants to read those answers? They're calm and sensible, and the newspapers didn't even want to print them.

MOFFETT: There wasn't even any field of contest on which to grapple.

STAFF: And how do you reason with a person who has no background in literature? Trying to explain to him the symbolism of something? You can't do it.

MOFFETT: Uh-huh. Symbolism seems to be a problem anyway, doesn't it, because of the tendency toward literal interpretation?

STAFF: Oh yes. Just *literal*, right across.

MOFFETT: Do you have any feeling about that? You know, as an old English teacher I recognize literal interpretation as a problem that a lot of English teachers deal with. A good part of literature is symbolic. Is it an *inability* to think symbolically? Some kind of concrete-mindedness?

STAFF: Well, I think that's a big part of it. Also, I think poor teaching. Much of it is a result of poor teaching. You know, we put so much stress on naming the author and name the characters and describe the characters but not much on anything beyond that.

MOFFETT: In a way, that amounts to saying that the pigeons have come home to roost—that we get such problems from the public because we have *created* them by not teaching better.

STAFF: Well, in a way we have. And yet we have a *good* school system. Through the years it has been recognized as one of the leading ones in the country. But that doesn't mean that we have perfect teachers.

MOFFETT: Well, it's a national problem, isn't it? Getting students beyond being literal-minded, and they vary a lot among themselves.

STAFF: And then—you mentioned the fundamentalist ministers—many of them had quit school at junior high age. And teachers hadn't had a great deal of chance to give them literary experience. . . .

MOFFETT: Did you feel strongly a sense of conspiracy theory among the antibook people? That this was a conspiracy of some liberal establishment?

STAFF: I think that is what they *wanted* people to think.

MOFFETT: You mean you don't feel they necessarily believed that?

STAFF: No. No, I think they would like people to *believe* that, but I don't think they really did. I think they were simply *using* people. And the books were the vehicle for political gain.

MOFFETT: You say by "political" you don't necessarily mean seeking office.

STAFF: No, but to get across their *views*, their ultraconservative *view*.

MOFFETT: That would sort of help explain one thing, wouldn't it? That kind of conservatism doesn't seem to come from any particular kind of social group or social class. Some of the people are very well educated or very wealthy.

STAFF: The money supporting them *has* to be coming from wealthy people. There's too much of it.

By way of supplementing the interview, she gave me a copy of an article that a language arts consultant for the district had written for the *Journal of Research and Development in Education,* which devoted its spring issue of 1976 to "Censorship and the Schools." It is a moving and eloquent account. "And through it all—the frustration, disappointment, confusion—three times I cried."[2] The first time was when word reached her office that bewildered little school children were being harassed and told to go home. The second occasion came after a young teacher with a two-month-old baby told her that her mother-in-law, who had been listening to a neighbor woman denouncing the textbooks, said, "I hate to think that you'll be raising my grandchild!"[3]

She cried a third time on reading an objection written by the Citizens Textbook Review Committee to "The Cherry Tree Carol" from an *Interaction* book of ballads.

> The latter selection had been my own favorite ballad from years past. Traced to 14th-Century Scotland, "The Cherry Tree Carol" has been one of our most popular literary works handed down in the oral tradition in this Appalachian area. Its message of the power of God resounded again and again in the homes of our forefathers. I remembered some 30 years ago when my teaching career began in a rural high school in West Virginia. During our study of folk literature, one quiet, shy girl agreed to sing a simple little ballad she had learned from her grandmother, who in turn had learned it from her mother. That beautiful song was "The Cherry Tree Carol."
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> But now I read: "*Objection:* The lyrics of this song are subtly sacreligious [*sic*] and can be construed to cast aspersions on the scriptural account of the virginity of Mary the Mother of Jesus."
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> I left the office.[4]

During the second month of that stormy school year the author was asked to speak to a minister who kept returning to the Central Office to look at the texts and voice his strenuous disapproval to whomever he could buttonhole. Alarmed by his argument that the books should contain no references to religion at all, she responded that if you removed religious references from the classroom you would have to ban much of the world's great literature such as the works of Dante, Milton, and Tolstoy. Would he really want that? Yes, it would have to go. When she asked him if he would also eliminate history and social science too for the same reason, the reply was again, "Yes, I would." With mounting consternation she asked about art—the Sistine Chapel, the statue of Moses, all the music expressing religious feeling and faith. He had had a religious painting on the wall of his church. "I finally got rid of it!"

"If you remove literature, history, art, music, then what will we have left? As a citizen of this community, I don't feel as you do. I want my children and grandchildren not only to read well, but to be well read; to understand the role of history; to appreciate the vast richness of man through his art and music. Do you have a right to deprive children whose parents do not agree with you—to deprive them of an education?" I said.

"Their souls are more important!"

"But this approach is anarchy, and we live in a democratic society. Would you discard our form of government?"

"That too may have to go. Don't you people know that this is a religious war, that it will be greater than the Civil War?"[5]

After the interview I ate my lunch of peanuts and bananas on a bench in the little square, facing the School Board building. On this spot had occurred numerous demonstrations, eventually made illegal by injunction but continued despite arrests. I visualized the crowds of incensed parents that had milled here at first when the books were up for adoption and then again many times in the months to follow as they monitored the highly charged board meetings. I could see the staff glancing nervously down out of their office windows to check the action during the day, as some had described to me. I remembered photos in the newspapers of young mothers sobbing uncontrollably, like children themselves. All that passion.