



Book banning in America: Censoring literature in US dates back centuries, but this time is different: experts

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Thomas Morton, an Englishman who traveled to Plymouth Colony in 1622, wasted no time in clashing with his strait-laced Pilgrim neighbors, leading a nearby village called Merrymount of fellow English miscreants and Algonquian Indians.

Dubbed the "Lord of Misrule" by Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford, Morton and his followers affixed antlers to the top of an 80-foot maypole, around which they hosted a festival with dancing and drinking that was no doubt sinful by Puritan standards.

After being banished from the colonies multiple times and traveling back to England, Morton wrote the "New English Canaan" around 1633 about his travails across the pond, a book that offered a scathing critique of the Pilgrims and is widely considered to be the first banned book in America.

Morton returned to the colonies 10 years later, but his reputation preceded him, and Massachusetts leaders exiled him to what would eventually become Maine due to the "mocking accusations Morton had hurled against them in print," University of Southern California history professor Peter Mancall writes in "The Trials of Thomas Morton."

While it's been nearly four centuries since Morton's magnum opus was banned, the urge to censor has not disappeared in America, and has erupted in K-12 schools during the 21st century.

The American Library Association reports that nearly 1,600 individual books were challenged or removed in libraries and schools in 2021, the highest number since the ALA started tracking bans three decades ago.

"There has been an unprecedented increase in the number of challenges reported," Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, told Fox News Digital. "We are receiving multiple challenge reports on a daily basis when we used to maybe get two or three reports a week."

Most of the challenges in recent years have come from conservative parents who object to LGBTQ content and topics that cover racial issues in a way that they see as divisive.

Book bans come from across the political spectrum though.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" – the 1960 Pulitzer-prize winning novel by Harper Lee that has been a staple in high school classrooms for decades – was #7 on ALA's list of the most banned books as recently as 2020.

The classic American novel was removed from the 9th-grade reading list by a Seattle-area school board earlier this year for its use of the N-word and what some community members see as an antiquated portrayal of racial issues.

In other instances, book bans cut both ways. A school district in Texas temporarily removed 41 books from library shelves last month that were challenged by community members. Among the challenged titles were books with LGBTQ themes like "All Boys Aren't Blue," but also "Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation" and even the Bible.

"Whether you're liberal or conservative, you need to understand that that that ax swings two ways," Will Creeley, the legal director at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, told Fox News Digital. "No matter what your values are, teaching a generation of students to call the proverbial speech police if they encounter ideas they don't agree with – that's setting ourselves up for problems down the line."

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Some view this new front of the culture war as a symptom of America's one-size-fits-all education system, which forces parents to send their kids to certain public schools for seemingly arbitrary reasons like the ZIP code where they reside, as opposed to the educational values they aspire to.

The implementation of school choice polices, which allows parents to decide how taxpayer funds for their children's education are spent, would allow families to pick and choose schools that are more closely aligned with their values, according to Neal McCluskey, the Director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"It fundamentally changes what the education money does or how it's allocated. Right now, what happens is people get taxed at the local, state, and federal level and that money goes to public schools, so that if you want to use that money, you have got to use those schools. But that means diverse people are all being pushed into one school, and that's what leads to conflicts," McCluskey told Fox News Digital.

"Choice says: Let's have the money follow kids. A corollary to that is let's give educators the autonomy to start different schools, run different schools."

School choice is an umbrella term that refers to the many vehicles for transferring power from state boards to parents. Vouchers allow parents to put public funding that was set aside for their

children's education toward private school tuition. Education savings accounts take things a step further, allowing families to use those funds for anything from tutoring to curriculum used at home.

"What that does is it ends the conflict, at least it ends the need for conflict. Instead of saying you all have to fight to grab the brass ring, it says go seek whatever ring you want, go find a school that is consistent with your values," McCluskey said.

"Everybody gets to do that, rather than everybody has to be put into an arena to battle for control of a single school."

While battles over book bans have mostly brewed at the local and state level, First Lady Jill Biden chimed in on the issue last week.

"All books should be in the library. All books," she told NBC News. "This is America. We don't ban books."

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Former First Lady Melania Trump had her own brush with challenges to books in 2017, when she sent a collection of 10 Dr. Seuss books to schools around the nation for "National Read a Book Day."

Liz Phipps Soeiro, a school librarian at Cambridgeport Elementary School in Massachusetts, rejected the books and sent them back to Trump, writing in the Horn Book Blog that her library didn't need them and that "Dr. Seuss's illustrations are steeped in racist propaganda, caricatures, and harmful stereotypes."

Battles over book bans exist along a sliding scale, from a librarian rejecting books, to a school district pulling books challenged by parents, to state legislatures implementing policies outright banning specific titles.

Caldwell-Stone, the head of ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, said that government-mandated censorship is the most concerning category.

"Any individual, any parent has the right and the ability to raise concerns about a school assignment or a book," she said.

"That's the First Amendment right to petition a government agency, but we are deeply concerned about efforts by elected officials, governing bodies that are governed by the First Amendment, that are censoring materials based on their viewpoint, or because they deal with a controversial topic in a way that they may not always agree with."