



Neal McCluskey: Book banning is about freedom, but not like you think

The very act of government selecting books is the true, fundamental threat.

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This week is Banned Books Week. Indeed, it's the 30th annual week of tooth-gnashing and garment-rending over efforts to have books removed from schools or public libraries. Freedom is certainly at stake in all this, but not the way most foes of book banning would have you think.

The American Library Association is the primary champion of Banned Books Week, and the group's website spells out why we are supposed to be outraged. "Banned Books Week is the national book community's annual celebration of the freedom to read," it says. The week's goal is to "draw attention to the problem of censorship by mounting displays of challenged books and hosting a variety of events."

Basically, we're supposed to be incensed over people who say "I don't think anyone should read that," and then try to destroy the offending books, "Fahrenheit 451"-style. The thing is, for the most part such outright censorship efforts don't exist. No, most challenges are from parents or taxpayers who don't want their kids reading or accessing material in public schools that they find offensive, or don't want objectionable books in the libraries for which they must pay.

The real issue isn't protecting books from those who would banish them for eternity. It is that public institutions select books in the first place. The instant such a selection is made freedom is already compromised.

Consider the very common cases where a parent objects to a book on school shelves, or that's assigned as reading. The ALA and company would have you believe that the threat to freedom is exclusively the school removing the book from the shelves or reading list. And it is, indeed, a fundamental threat to liberty when a government entity – either a school district or public library – decides what is or is not "acceptable" content. The problem is, the school or library makes just such a discriminatory determination when it decides which books to buy, or to make required reading, in the first place. It necessarily decides that some books are more worthy than others.

Government selection and purchasing of books is also a violation of basic liberty because, in addition to government favoring some speech, it compels taxpayers to support speech that, often, they find abhorrent. There is lots of speech, whether it's disturbing sexual

content, drug use, offensive racial slurs, among myriad other concerns, many people simply do not want to be forced to support. But once the books are bought, too bad for them.

Ironically, one of the main reasons public schools and libraries exist – at least to hear their advocates explain it – is to advance "democracy," a rhetorically powerful term generally used to imply some sort of egalitarian, unified society. But the effect of having government buy books – much less require children to read and report on them – is to divide diverse people, not bring them together. It forces them into war with each other, to see who can gather the most political clout and have their values advanced by the government for which they all must pay.

Such inescapable conflict when government chooses speech is precisely why the ALA reports that there are hundreds of challenges launched against books each year, and no doubt many more beyond their official tally. It's not that people hate freedom. Quite the opposite – they object to books being imposed on them.

What's the solution? In education, it is school choice. Let people freely choose schools, and give educators the freedom to establish and run schools – and choose readings – as they see fit. Then neither parent nor educator is forced to add or subtract from what is read.

For libraries, the answer is to move away from public control and toward civil society: people freely choosing to support libraries that lend at no cost to patrons and are open to the public.

Banned Books Week should open our eyes to the great threat posed to freedom by government decisions about what we read. It's a threat that goes far deeper than people demanding that schools and libraries eject book they find objectionable. The very act of government selecting books is the true, fundamental threat.