

The real school indoctrination scandal

Conservatives recoiled in horror from Obama's bland speech to students last week. But for anyone truly interested in indoctrinating the next generation of voters, the nation's mass-market textbooks are the preferred battleground.

Wednesday, September 16, 2009



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While opposition to Barack Obama's recent "study hard and stay in school" speech perhaps was not grounded in sober assessments of the facts, it did have roots in a much more plausible suspicion: that public schools are rigging tomorrow's politics by indoctrinating kids today. Such fears formed the basis of a special Fox News report—"Do You Know What Textbooks Your Children Are Really Reading"—hosted by the journalist and pundit Tucker Carlson. According to Carlson, the efforts of textbook writers to avoid language that might reinforce ethnic and gender stereotypes suggest an insidious plot. "Entire chunks of the English language have been banned from the classroom, liquidated in a PC purge," Carlson writes in [a companion article at FoxNews.com](#).

What's worse, according to Carlson, is the "hard-edged propaganda that now suffuses history textbooks. A thorough cover-to-cover reading of almost any high school history text leaves you with the impression that the United States is at best embarrassing, and at worst a menace to world peace."

If you ask me, the United States' unjustified invasion and occupation of Iraq makes it a menace to world peace almost by definition. And the history of the United States is at least embarrassing. That European colonists and the U.S. government savagely murdered indigenous Americans, stole their land, and

pushed them onto reservations is not a fiction ginned up to confuse American kids. Nor was this country's brutal history of slavery and racial apartheid some kind of lie designed to shame junior Americans. These horrors of history are real and they really are shameful.

Carlson's rhetoric suggests that an unsullied pride in one's country is a birthright not to be denied by downer liberal textbooks. He conveys the impression that avoiding injury to patriotic feeling should take precedence over tough truths—a typical form of conservative political correctness. Yet nationalism untempered by the bloody truth leaves citizens all too willing to cede to the state the unchecked discretion to torture and kill—a problem that is by no means theoretical these days.

My point is not to prove Carlson wrong. Nor do I aim to defend the textbooks Carlson maligns. (I would probably hate them for other reasons.) The point is that Tucker Carlson and I disagree very, very sharply about the kinds of things we think kids should find in a textbook on American history, and that's significant. You might think Carlson and I hail from different ideological planets. But as a matter of fact, we are both fellows of the libertarian Cato Institute. If our division over an ideal curriculum runs this deep, just imagine how vast the rift must be between the conservatives to Carlson's right and the liberals to my left. There is no way we're all going to agree.

Yet in 30 states, local school boards choose textbooks for their entire school districts. In the remaining 20, state-level boards choose textbooks for an entire state. Because statewide markets in California and Texas are so huge, the best bet for the big textbook publishing companies is to tailor their products to the tastes of textbook adoption committees in one or both states, leaving small-state committees with little influence.

We are a spectacularly diverse society, yet we have somehow settled on a system in which enormous captive populations of students are made to learn the same exact thing from the same boring book. When policy requires that every impressionable young mind in a town, city, or state be exposed to one set of assumptions about ethnicity and gender, one approach to religion, one version of American history, one account of Christopher Columbus, one interpretation of the Civil War or the New Deal, you can bet there will be wrenching conflict. And you can bet that the one-size-fits-all textbooks that emerge from this politicized selection process will fit no one. Mind-numbing blandness is the key to their success.

Despite a textbook market devoted to controversy avoidance, some parents (and pundits) nevertheless see a vast conspiracy to indoctrinate. This results not from incendiary books but from the incompatible ideologies of the adults who scrutinize them. Here's something I bet Carlson and I could agree on. The ideological differences that fuel the textbook wars wouldn't be such a big deal if we had an education system in which parents, armed with school vouchers or education tax credits, had the power to choose their kids' curricula by choosing their school. With greater school choice, the K–12 textbook market would come to more closely resemble the college textbook market—a lively, competitive scrum where individual instructors select from a wide array of texts embodying different perspectives and pedagogical assumptions.

Through trial and error and the test of time, certain texts are recognized for excellence and gain market share, but instructors are never at a loss for alternatives. One might worry that greater school choice could lead to a cacophonous Babel of incompatible, ideological educations. Yet, despite dizzying curricular variety, college-level school choice has not kept graduates of Brigham Young and Brown from working amicably side by side in the same companies.

Perhaps the planet will burn to a cinder if third-graders aren't uniformly convinced they are killing Gaia, the Earth organism, one carbon-emitting breath at a time. Perhaps America will lose the will to defend itself if its teens challenge the notion that American soil is uniquely sweet. If so, there may be reason to

deny parents the power to choose the books their children learn from by choosing the schools in which they learn. If not, we're making a terrible mistake.

Either way, we've settled on an educational system so fraught with ideological tension that an anodyne "Do your best!" speech from the government's chief executive sparks fears that public schools have become taxpayer-funded indoctrination camps. At the conclusion of his Fox News special, Tucker Carlson exhorts parents who find "bias and distortion" in their kids' textbooks to "raise holy hell." And there you have it. There's the pathetic principle that governs the content of American public education today: May the most aggrieved hell-raisers win.

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