

NON/PARTISAN ANTI/CENSORSHIP

6 Feb 87

Dear Mr. Podesta:

This letter is to correct a misperception you have about me. No, you do not know me personally. Your misperception lies rather in the fact that you think I do not exist. At least this seems a fair conclusion from the fact that as far as my exposure to you goes--reading everything that hits my desk from PAW, catching quotes from you in other written sources, and seeing you on the tube--you are not aware of my existence. That is, you are unaware of us Americans who are nonpartisan in our opposition to censorship in our public schools. On the diagram, our position is "D."

You, however, are right in there with the fundamentalists, in box "A." Of course you and they differ in partisan censorship, in what's to be censored. But you are of the same narrow, dogmatic spirit and as such are enemies of American pluralism which, while it may not be the last best hope of earth, is our hope for living amicably in mutual enrichment and so modeling pluralism for this dangerously intolerant planet. Cocksurenness and paranoia drive all in box "A" to aggressive behavior. Your latest letter, received today, tries to scare me into sending you money to save our schools--the same ploy the fundamentalists use on me, and to the same end. But it's all so sad: frighteners on the left move me as much as frighteners on the right, which is not at all. But being of a liberal spirit, I am moved by rational argument, as I trust this letter will reveal.

Since you and I agree that the fundamentalists are for partisan censorship, I need provide you with no evidence thereof. But I must provide evidence of your support for partisan censorship, for you will not readily agree to this defect in your stance--a defect in violation of freedom and fairness both, as it is an instance of undemocratic special pleading for one sector of the populace over against other sectors. The sector the American right calls--you rightly say--"secular humanism."

But first, let's--for the purpose of this letter--dispose of the other two categories: "B" are those who, for reasons we need not exhibit here, are against censorship even though they are partisan. They really would like to see the schools tilt in their direction, but really wouldn't want to see censorship used to that end.

		CENSORSHIP?	
		YES	NO
PARTISAN		A	B
NON-PARTISAN		C	D

"C" are those who would like to see censorship used in the interest of improving the overall quality of public education in America, not in the interest of advantaging one way of seeing and living in the world over against another. Some of them, for example, would prefer more cultural substance and less sports. It may be stretching "censorship" to include this category, but not when you consider that the essence of censorship is elimination or reduction or prevention; it's being negative about something because one is positive about something else. (As for a "way of seeing and living in the world," that is my definition of a religion. And it's a reversible proposition: Anything functions as, is, a religion that offers a particular way of seeing and living in the world, in actual whether or not intentional competition with other ways of seeing and living in the world.)

Now it's time, you'll think it past time, for me to argue that you're a denizen of box "A." In the main, I'll adduce evidence from your current letter, referred to above; but, judiciously, I must use argumentum e silentio, the fact that you never, as far as I know, ^{over}

complain about the censorship that already exists vis-a-vis our public schools.

(1) Have you ever complained that the Bible, the most formative literature in the American civilization, gets almost no attention in our public schools? Great humanist Geo. Seldes, in his superb THE GREAT THOUGHTS (Ballantine/85), says that in a half century of noting list-making of the great books, "the majority place the Bible first" (p.xviii). By intention and/or default, the greatest book has virtually no place in our children's education! Where, if anywhere, have you decried that? Don't try to dodge by relegating the matter to "church": most American children have no significant exposure to church and are falling through the cracks of a stupid, impoverishing interpretation of "the separation of church and state," an overhallowed phrase that nowhere appears in our Founding Documents.

(2) Have you ever complained about the deliberate distortion of history in our public schools, parallel with though focusing on a different content from that of the USSR? Not, however, an entirely different content: both the USA and the USSR public schools minimize the influence of religion in the world process of humanization, of the maturing of our species. For example, not many months ago the Paul Vitz commission reported to its originating body, the U.S. Department of Education, that whereas the most extensively used history text in the 11th grade of our public schools gives 17 pages to Zimbabwe, it never mentions the movement that most influenced toward the creation of the American civilization, namely, the Protestant Reformation. In comparison with some of the minuscule matters you pick at, this is a whopper. Does not your bias, your partisanship, show here? You'd get regular contributions from me if you were truly "People for the American Way," but in fact you are only one more partisan group pushing your thing against the American Way, which is the way of freedom and tolerance and, to use the current buzz word, "pluralism."

(3) Have you ever complained about the elimination, from our public schools, of classics of our civilization? Under Catholic pressure, in the 1930s the public schools eliminated Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS, which is on most listings of the great books because of its place both in the history of our language and in the development of our civilization. Under Jewish pressure, "The Merchant of Venice" went down the drain. Now fundamentalists, in their turn, want the opportunity to knock some books in the head, a process you call "book-burning" in their case but not in the cases of former victims of censorship. Again, your bias is showing. Your case would be logical, and you'd get dollars from me, were you to fight for the re-inclusion of classics that have been prejudicially--why should I not use the term?--"burned."

(4) Have you ever complained about romantic revisionisms of texts the fundamentalists want excluded, or made optional, and you want continued? For example, no public school edition of Anne Frank includes the ugly quotes, such as "Every day I hated my mother more." I find it hard to believe that you are unaware of this dishonest practice; I find it easier to believe that you think it an immoral practice in a good cause.

(5) Have you ever complained about our public schools' almost total neglect of the two crucial dimensions of human life, namely, sexuality and spirituality, which are so intimately related that most academic disciplines now consider them dynamically inseparable? Maybe you've complained about there being too little of what is lamely called "sex education," yet rightly so in that the reality is so lame. But what of the censoring out of the study of spirituality, ignorance of which is opening the American populace to nostrums and nonsense and fanaticisms we'd be protected against through education?

The considerable resources of your organization could be better used in helping address "How shape an adequate public education?"

Here, on the side of positive action, what we can do together, let me pick up a few quotes from your letter:

(1) "'A nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.'"--JFK, in your "P.S." Well now sir, what would an "open market" public school look like? For one thing, it would expose our children to the real world they're going to be living in, including the clashing of cults, the varieties of religious options (the different ways of seeing and living in the world). Against your bias, the question here would be--just for starts--how can our children in the public schools be exposed to the fundamentalist witness (and of course also all the other witnesses)? The notion that such pluralistic exposure would confuse the children wrongly assumes the children are not already confused, and it shows a system that--to paraphrase JFK--is afraid of its children instead of trusting them to sort out what is most appropriate for them personally. And why are the children already confused? At least in part because what they're taught in school clashes with what they are taught elsewhere in the culture. Because of the public school taboo against spirituality--that is, exposure to "religion"--the children are shaped to sanctions and differentia ("values") inherently nontheistic and thus dynamically atheist, even though all of America's Founders (no matter their "church") were believers in God (that is, theists). Instead of an open market, what we have at present in our schools is a closed system under the control of a closed educationist bureaucracy lobbying for its particular philosophy and against alternatives.

(2) You say "We are fighting for something we believe in--the freedom to learn and to read in America," meaning in our public schools: obviously that freedom exists outside our schools, and just as obviously it does not exist inside our schools. Personally, I think so-called "creation science" is both bad science and bad religion; but it's bad education to exclude it, and the historic teaching on creation, as it would be to exclude the theory of evolution and the philosophy of evolutionism. Why are you narrowly, partisanly, fighting to exclude from our schools all but one view of human origins and the origin of the universe? How can you square that with "the freedom to learn and to read" in our schools? How, here, are you not guilty of illiberality, indeed dogmatism? Will you not join us in box "D" in positive action toward a public school system that is truly representative both of the American heritage and of the current pluralism of options vis-a-vis seeing and living in the world? Would this not be "the American way"--a phrase you're proud of in your title but distortive of in your pitch?

(3) Let's have another look at your phrase "the American way." You often describe this way as "tolerance" and opposition to "intolerance." And you adduce the Constitution in support of your attitude and commitment, as in your organization's subtitle "The non-partisan constitutional liberties organization." Unlike you, I am against using "the Constitution," that is, our founding documents, to buttress a principle of exclusion, of what is out of bounds vis-a-vis public-school curricula. Ironically, you practice the principle of exclusion in relation to religion, yet preach against it when those use it who want to exclude what you want to include. I'm against all you bookburners no matter which books you want to burn; you are, all of you, enemies of the public school system. Any positive action taken to preserve our philosophy of a single public school system will have to convert or bypass all bookburners. Our "constitutional liberties" are at risk if we fail to arrive at an adequate revision of the public school system; for without a single public school system, pluralism would be impossible and enclavism would replace it.

(4) You say that the far right is trying to "take control over the minds of our young people." The right is not entirely wrong, however, in its belief that the public-school establishment has already taken control of the minds of our young people. The right is theocentric, the establishment is (as the Vitz commission's study shows) radically anthropocentric; but our cultural heritage is elliptical, the two claims being in mutual focal tension. An honest, responsible, representative public school would promote neither theocentricity nor anthropocentricity but instead would teach the ellipse, which is the continuing cultural reality in America today as it was in the days of our nation's founding. If you were truly promotive of "the American way," you would be equally critical of the incumbent anthropocentricity and of the right's pressures to "take control" for theocentricity. But I'm not hopeful: You seem to me to be, on the left, as unenlightened of the situation and of the need as is the left at the other extreme. Neither left nor right understands "the American way," though each uses the expression as a weapon against the other.

(5) The American way is more accomodation than litigation, yet you object to the fact that in what you call "Scopes II" the latter was used successfully to achieve the former, "forcing the school board to acomodate...." Is not an increase of curricular options within the one public school system an expansion of liberty and diversity, deepening and broadening pluralism and thus protecting our culture against enclavism? For the alternatives, such as the voucher system, would indeed weigh on the side of breaking us up into tribes misunderstanding one another and sqabbling over the public till. You speak of pressures from the right "creating havoc in our public schools." Nothing like the havoc in our culture if the public school establishment succeeds in its present monolithic resistance to educational pluralism. To date, the inflexible response has been shallow: change the system and it would collapse (oddly like the defense fundamentalists make for their system!). On the contrary, we in box "D" say this: fail to change the system, and it will collapse.

(6) I agree that textbook publishers are caught in the middle and, to survive, are "watering down discussions of slavery, pollution and Vietnam." But as the U.S. Department of Education six-year study of America's public-school textbooks showed, the watering down on religion, which is the heart of culture, is so extensive that a better image would be washed out, producing (to use a figure of my own) a doughnut effect: everything is there but the center. "The American way" does have a center, the spiritual center we have had from the beginning; and the failure of the public-school system to teach and promote this center is a betrayal of our civilization and a misuse of public money. The fact that many have abandoned the spiritual center, including the ellipse (above), does not excuse our failure to try, through public education, to pass on this center--a goal which must be achieved, in this or any other culture, on pain of the dissolution of the culture. Help a plant to health and you'll not need poisons; it'll win its own battles. If your organization were to work toward a healthier public-school system, the threats you concentrate on resisting would lose their force; and you'd have many allies, including me, your present narrowness and negativity excludes your having.

Willie Elliott

Elliott
309 Lake Elizabeth Dr.
Craigville, MA 02636