

The Boston Globe Magazine

October 30, 1983

Deep in the heart of TEXTBOOKS

Because of the state's enormous buying power,
decisions made in Texas greatly affect what
children in the rest of the country read.

BY ROD DAVIS

Sharon Dick of Bangs, Texas, was fed up with the version of the world presented in high school history textbooks long before she arrived in Austin for the annual state textbook committee hearings this past August. Texas law allows public comment on proposed books before they are approved for use by the 3 million pupils in the state's 1100 school districts, and Dick had already pointed out in writing to the committee what she felt were the books' distortions of history. In Prentice-Hall's *World History: Patterns of Civilization*, for instance, she criticized this passage about the deliberations of the thirteen colonies: "They soon decided to draft a new constitution. In 1788, after much debate and compromise, the individual states ratified the Constitution of the United States."

That was not quite the whole story, wrote Dick. "There is another ingredient that went into the framing of our Constitution — prayer. I think the students need to know that our forefathers asked God's blessing upon this undertaking." And that was not all. The text, she said, should have made clear that "John Stuart Mill did at the very least flirt with socialism." And, Dick observed, "It should be pointed out that just because Hitler attacked communism, this does not mean communism is beyond reproach."

Sharon Dick asked the textbook committee, made up of twenty-seven teachers and school administrators freshly appointed by the state board of education, to recommend to its overseeing body that Prentice-Hall be required to get its facts straight; otherwise, she suggested, the textbook should be struck from the list of eleven books vying for five world history spots statewide under the 1983-84 purchasing authorization by the board of education.

Nor was Dick alone. Patricia Moore came in from Houston to tell the committee the history texts were so unfair to Christianity that she would prefer them not to mention Christianity or religion at all. For example, she said, McGraw-Hill's *Chronicles of Time* states that "the Just would sit at the right hand of God." Moore asserted that only those who believe in Jesus Christ — that is, not Jews and other nonbelievers — would get the choice seat. And she took issue with a statement in Houghton Mifflin's *World History: An Unfinished Journey* that Jesus denounced the rich. "Jesus did not denounce the rich," she said. "He was a respecter of all persons."

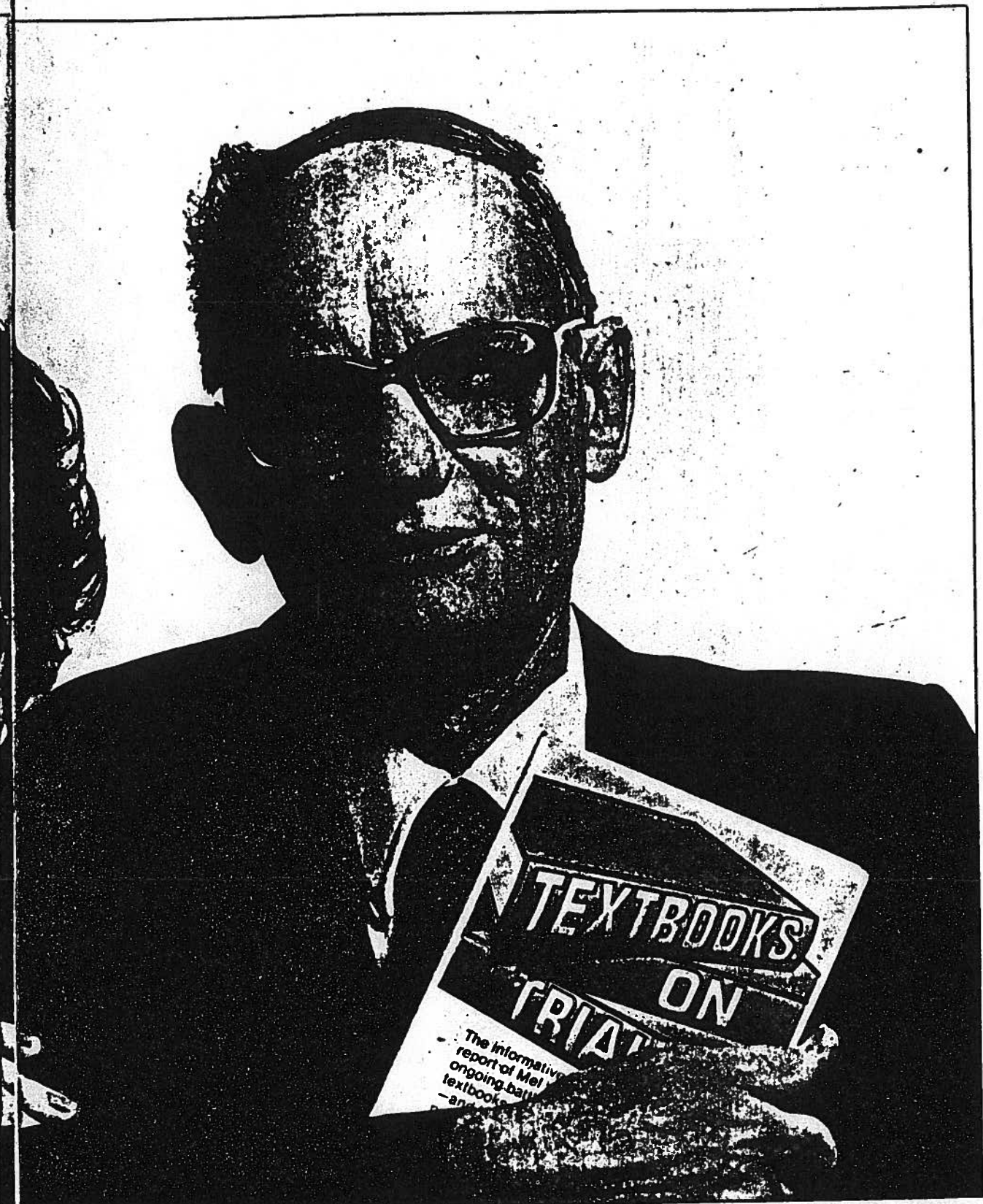
Mr. and Mrs. Larry Jordan of Paris, Texas, also wrote in to complain about McGraw-Hill's *Chronicles of Time*. "The reference to Samuel Adams as a radical leader

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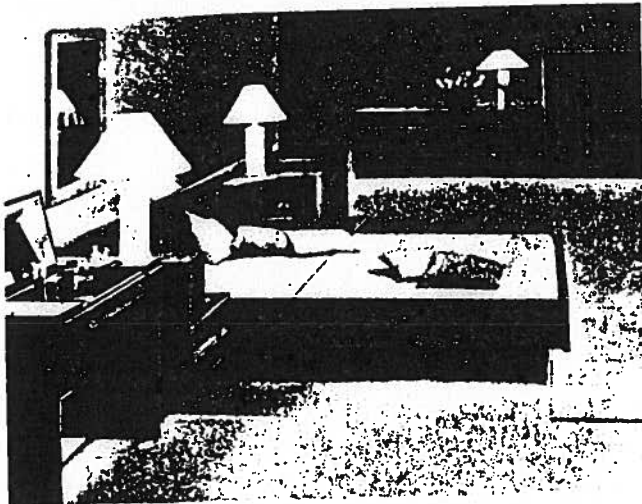
ROD DAVIS TEACHES ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS IN AUSTIN. HIS ARTICLES HAVE APPEARED IN TEXAS MONTHLY, THE PROGRESSIVE, PLAYBOY, AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS.

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Textbooks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

is an insult to the American people," their letter said. The Jordans said they didn't "understand why Samuel Adams could not be listed as a patriot."

Whether in person or in writing, the objections of dozens of individuals and sectarian groups to various textbooks proposed for statewide adoption were delivered to the committee on August 1 through 3. At the end of the hearings, the volumes of criticism could be measured in pounds; nearly all of it was predicated on a belief that children's schoolbooks should reflect the values and interests of the surrounding community.

Decisions about textbooks are the stuff of intense conflict; the Texas committee seeks to balance widely divergent personal, cultural, economic, and religious beliefs in making its recommendations. Similar struggles among competing views are under way in every state, but the fray remains most intense in Texas, the

state that is to textbook content what New Hampshire is to presidential primaries.

James Michener, who once put in time as a textbook editor, last year labeled Texas "the bellwether" in determining how a text is written for the national market. Humorist John Henry Faulk, of the television show *Hee Haw*, who was blacklisted in the 1950s, wrote in the *Nation*, "The standard set there [in Texas] can affect the kind of textbooks that are used in the entire country." Frances FitzGerald made much the same point in her 1979 study of American education, *America Revised*. It is echoed throughout the ranks of educators, social critics (of the right and the left), and even publishers, who troop to the Texas hearings to try to deflect state-mandated revisions — both before and after publication — that cost them not integrity but hard dollars in production costs, legal fees, and marketing strategies.

The same text that sells in Austin may — and often does — wind up in Los Angeles or Boston. Kim Marshall, a curriculum planner for the Boston public schools, says

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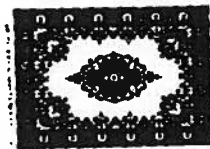


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twenty regional centers around the state. Interested citizens may look them over and file written comments; beginning in 1984, they may also request time for oral testimony at the committee's hearings, held each year in August, without previous written testimony.

Following the hearings, at which several dozen people testified this year, the textbook committee makes its selections, and in September it sends a list of recommended books to the state commissioner of education, currently Raymond Bynum. Bynum then prunes the list himself, sometimes vetoing committee-approved books. In 1981, for instance, he banned a Merriam-Webster dictionary for the twelfth grade because it contained seven words he considered obscene.

In 1982 Bynum tried to overturn the committee's approval of junior high school health books because of sections about venereal disease, then epidemic among Texas teenagers; the state health department and a number of influential legislators eventually forced him to back down. When Bynum is satisfied, he sends

the list of approved texts to the full board, twenty-seven elected officials, who okay the final purchasing authorization in November. Five texts are approved each year in each curriculum area, and the texts remain in use for eight years.

Although the Texas book selection process is theoretically neutral and open, it has long since been co-opted by conservative and ultraconservative forces. As presiding officer, Bynum permits no debate during the textbook hearings over what he deems philosophical points questioned by committee members. Since most of the points are raised by both religious and right-wing political activists, virtually all response from the political center and left-of-center is shut off. Bynum's boss, the strongly conservative board chairman, Joe Kelly Butler of Houston, is well known for his domination of board proceedings and the content of the yearly guidelines. Butler has boasted that the board "can knock a book off the list if we don't like the way a publisher parts his hair."

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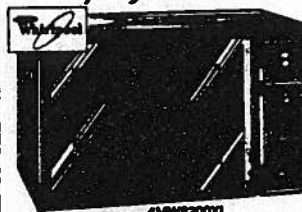
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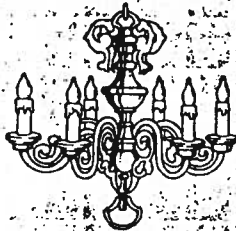
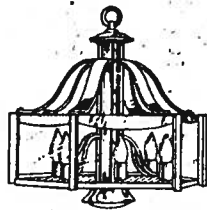
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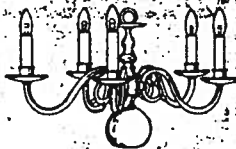
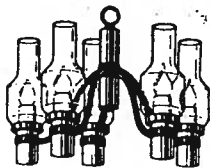
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skewed toward the conservative end of the political spectrum. "You have to remember," one publisher laments, "that a lot of people on the Texas board are to the right of the Gablers [ultraconservative critics Mel and Norma Gabler]." The 1982 elections brought four new ultraconservatives to the board, including Kent Grusendorf, a businessman from Arlington, a middle-class suburb of Dallas. Grusendorf has already used his position on the board of education to insert political views into official policy. On his motion, for instance, the board added a requirement to the 1983 proclamation for world history books demanding material "tracing the adverse effects that communism, socialism, and fascism have had on individual freedom and liberty . . . [and] explaining the positive aspects of American capitalism upon the world."

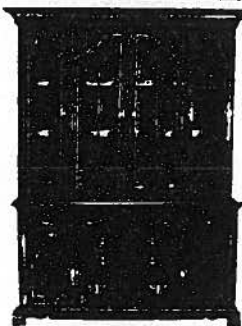
Considering this bias in the review board, it is not surprising that conservative ideology has become the dominant idiom of textbook criticism in Texas. Other critics have nonetheless exerted their own impact on textbook content in Texas over the years, having perhaps ob-

served from the successes of those lobbying the textbook publishers that the price of getting one's point of view into textbooks is eternal vigilance at the Texas hearings.

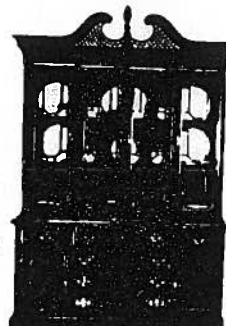
Among the most successful of those lobbying the textbook committee has been the National Organization for Women (NOW), which scrutinizes text for "fair and reasonable" ratios of male and female role models, pronouns, figures in illustrations, and so on. This year NOW objected to a vocational agriculture book with a ratio of male to female references 118 to 2. But the group also noted an improvement in so many history and language books where the ratios had dropped to 5 to 1 and 2 to 1. In eleven world history texts, however, only one black woman was named and illustrated, according to Elizabeth Judge, a member of NOW.

Another veteran participant in the selection process is Marilyn Murray O'Hair of the Austin-based organization Texas American Atheists. This year O'Hair objected to every world history book under consideration because, she said, they propagated "biblical nonsense"

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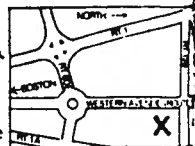
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Two words. Non sense." Contrary to the assertions of Moore and Dick, O'Hair said the texts include a "Christianization of world history and give religion a false and heroic role." Calling for a statement in every book that "religious fundamentalists are intruding in the nation's school system to make the public schools a forum for religious dogma," O'Hair said her organization would sue unless changes were incorporated — not an idle threat from a woman who was instrumental in the campaign to exclude prayer from public schools.

Another fledgling but important lobbyist is People for the American Way (PFAW), an "anticensorship" group founded in 1980 by television producer Norman Lear. In 1982 PFAW opened an office in Austin and hired a West Point graduate, Mike Hudson, and his wife, Marie Barnhardt, as a two-person team to try to loosen the "stranglehold" maintained by fundamentalist ultraconservatives on the Texas textbook approval process — part of what PFAW calls a "Far Right network overall strategy to undermine public education."

PFAW's first objective in Texas had already been achieved when this year's hearings opened. In previous years, the rules allowed only negative comment on textbooks. Originally intended to keep publishers from hyping their own books, the rule, which required meticulous, line-by-line written statements ("bills of particulars"), had made textbook criticism fair but prohibitively complicated. Hudson and Barnhardt managed to get the rule changed by forming an umbrella group, the Coalition for Textbook Selection Reform, consisting of the Texas Civil Liberties Union, the Texas Women's Political Caucus, the AFL-CIO, the Texas Federation of Teachers, and eight other organizations, which successfully lobbied the Texas Legislature in 1983 for a new textbook law. The new law does little more than permit positive as well as negative comment and encourage fairness. But it sent a strong warning to the recalcitrant board of education, which, wishing to preempt further legislative meddling, simplified its own administrative rules.

Among Hudson and Barnhardt's chief targets in changing the hearing rules were Mel Gabler, a retired Exxon office worker, and his wife, Norma. Until this year the Gablers, who are political ultraconservatives and religious fundamentalists, monopolized the Texas book-selection process, partly because they took on the drudgery entailed by the old procedures and partly because they were well protected by the board, the educational bureaucracy, and influential politicians. Although Norma Gabler now says she supports the new rules, she was sharply critical of them before they were adopted — with good reason. In 1982 the Gablers delivered three and a half hours of oral testimony at the hearings; this year, with podium time divided equally among all registrants, the Gablers got the same amount of time as everyone else — six minutes per subject area.

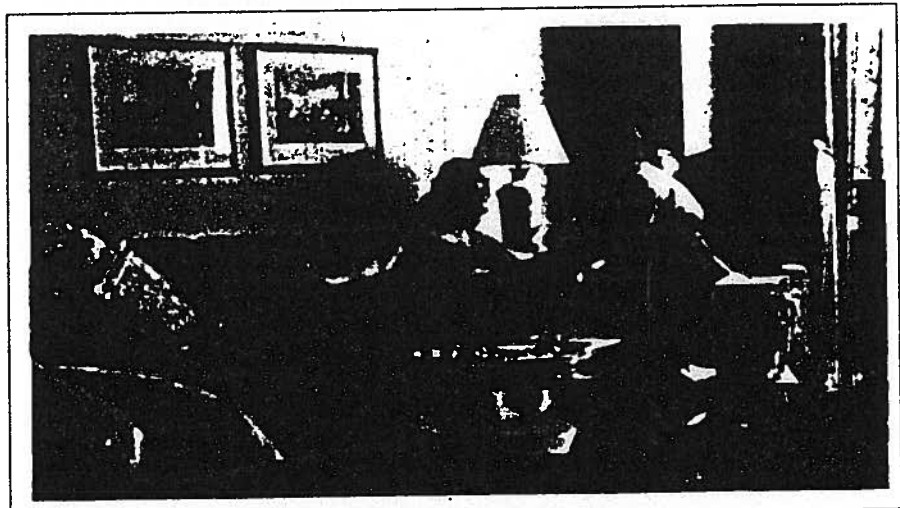
The impact of fundamentalist activists such as the Gablers on the content of textbooks in Texas and thus in the nation can be seen in numerous curriculum areas but most dramatically in the treatment of evolution in biology books. In 1974 the Gablers helped persuade the Texas board to put a statement in the general proclamation that all textbooks "that treat the theory of evolution should identify it as only one of sev-

eral explanations of the origin of humankind . . . in a manner which is not detrimental to other theories of evolution" — notably "creationism," or the doctrine that humans did not evolve through natural selection as described by Darwin but were created, along with the rest of the world, by God. Similar pressure was generated by religious fundamentalists in other states.

Gerald Skoog, a professor of education at

Texas Tech University and a PFAW supporter, became concerned about the impact of creationist pressure on the teaching of science and undertook to examine more than one hundred high school biology texts. Skoog found that the treatment of evolution, measured in terms of space allotted, had dropped from 13.5 percent of an average text in 1968 to 4.4 percent in 1977, with further reductions probable. *Modern Biol-*

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ogy (Holt, Rinehart & Winston), the most popular high school text, cut its discussion of evolution in the last two editions, Skoog says; moreover, in six biology texts published in the 1970s and revised in the 1980s, coverage of evolution declined in four and remained the same in two. "There is no doubt," he concludes, "that persistent attacks on evolution have intimidated all who edit, write, and use textbooks intended for this state."

Most publishers deny or underplay the role of the Gablers and other critics in determining the editorial content of textbooks. "We do not develop textbooks for one state," says Claudia Regan of Houghton Mifflin, whose *World History: An Unfinished Journey* has been attacked in Alabama, Texas, and other states by the evangelical right. "We try to create the best book we can for the subject matter rather than respond to special interest groups."

Barbara Parker, a director of PFAW in Washington, D.C., finds such statements misleading. "Publishers are in the business of making money," she

says. "They've said for years [that] the Gablers and the other groups have little impact. They just don't want to confront the [Texas] board."

Richard Carroll, president of Allyn & Bacon, a textbook publisher in Newton, candidly acknowledges the importance of the Texas process. "Most American-produced texts," he says, "attend to the Texas proclamation." Charles Compton of Ginn & Company in Lexington, who, like Carroll, was among dozens of publishers at the hearings this August, puts it more succinctly: "Compromises have to be made, and compromises are made."

The compromises to be made this year will probably be in world history, one of twenty-six curriculum areas in which textbook renewals are being considered. History is a common battleground for disputes about textbooks' content, with the potential for race, class, sex, national, and regional bias. No textbook treatment is likely to satisfy everyone. Conservatives want more stress on "tradition," NOW wants more inclusion of women, religious groups want more of their own

Continued on page 42

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Textbooks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

brand of belief, radicals want more criticism of the establishment, and liberals want something they call the truth. The truth, of course, is hard to find, and, if the process of textbook writing and selection is indicative of anything, it is that what is finally presented as "objective" is little

more than the sum of compromises made among contending ideological forces. In the depiction of world history, this process often yields a version of ideas and events so homogenized as to be useless, a judgment rendered all too frequently by classrooms of bored pupils.

Allyn & Bacon's "low reading level" *Pageant of World History*, for example, employs a kind of game-show question and response format that becomes comical in its oversimplification. A section of the book entitled "How the British

Gained Complete Control of India" summarizes the situation in this way: "They had done so because they had sent capable governors to India." The next section is entitled "How the British Hurt India." The section "How Israel Became an Independent Nation" is followed by "The Homeless Palestinians."

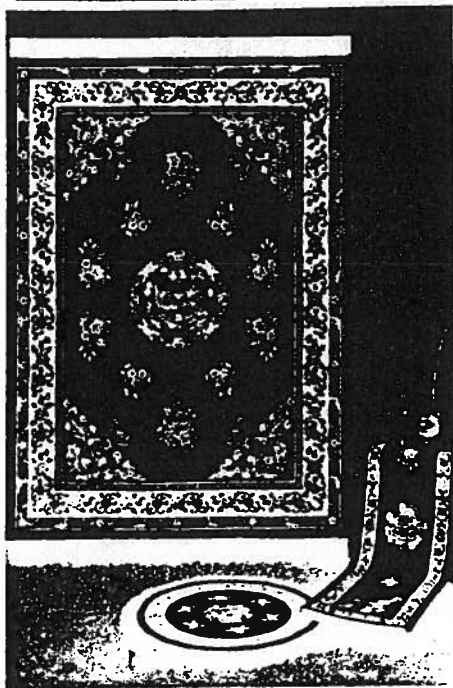
Texts by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich illustrate the ways in which ideological interpretations can drift in and out of fashion. In *Men and Nations*, written in the mid-1970s, a section on the Vietnam War includes a picture of Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, a negotiator for North Vietnam during the Paris peace talks; both men are smiling, and a half-page chart compares "What Marx Predicted" with "What Happened" — thus implanting the notion of a world Communist conspiracy (and the domino theory) in the minds of students. In its new edition, retitled *People and Nations*, Harcourt Brace deleted the Kissinger photo and the chart. In neither edition is the nature of Kissinger's influence on Southeast Asia addressed.

Lack of context, oversimplification, and decisions to emphasize one event and not another are presented by textbook editors and publishers as neutral objectivity not to be assailed by critics. Their protestations are rarely accepted by outsiders, however. According to right-wing critics like Paige Moore of Houston, Houghton Mifflin's text is soft on Communism and inclined toward "Maoist disinformation." But a liberal or leftist could easily interpret the Houghton Mifflin text as jingoistic. In *Unfinished Journey*, the account of the role of the United States in the overthrow of Salvador Allende's government in Chile in 1973 is reduced to this statement: "Military leaders toppled Allende's constitutional government in 1974." Even the date is wrong.

If no texts, especially those covering an inherently controversial area, can be objective, why is the genre not abandoned? "[Textbooks are] not the best instructional material," argues Kim Marshall of the Boston public schools. He prefers — and officially is allowed — to use a wide variety of supplemental literature to avoid the problems of bias that may arise from relying on a single text. But the pressure for the nation's schools to churn out graduates makes Marshall an exception. The rationale for the textbook historically has been its cost-effectiveness: Texts are tangible, examinable, mass-marketable instruments for providing a basic core of information to students. Indeed, texts are so financially efficient that they take less than 1 percent of the average national educational expenditure per pupil; the rest goes for salaries and administration.

In Boston, a recent study showed that teachers still prefer textbooks as the predominant medium of instruction in grades four and up. The same is certainly true in Texas, where, in some classrooms, there is another motive for relying on textbooks. In the furor over standardized portrayal of the truth, textbooks serve as legal warranties; teachers who stick with what the state has approved do not lose a job or a promotion and do not need tape recorders to document the content of their lectures.

Last month, Mel and Norma Gabler celebrated their forty-first wedding anniversary. More than half of their life together has been devoted to what they call book reviewing. These East Texans are the *vieux terribles* of US textbook publishing, and their first-name ac-



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quaintanceship with the heads of dozens of publishing houses is evidence not of friendship so much as of civil enmity.

Headquartered in a modest, book-filled home in Longview, 130 miles east of Dallas, the Gablers have parlayed their original, quixotic, fundamentalist crusade into a nonprofit corporation, Educational Research Analysts, with a \$120,000-plus annual budget and a staff of 8. Its national mailing list of 12,000 includes members of churches and other conservative watchdog groups, such as the Phyllis Schlafly Eagle Forum, the Fort Worth-based anti-abortion organization Pro-Family Forum, and the Moral

Majority, Inc. In 1980-81, according to data from PFAW, the Moral Majority gave the Gablers \$5000. Other benefactors have included the Adolph Coors Company (\$10,000 in 1981) and the right-wing Texas Education Association of Fort Worth (\$22,500 in 1980).

In two decades of activity, the Gablers have become experts in the intricacies of publishing, and their advice is frequently solicited. Norma Gabler has been to New Zealand and Australia on her textbook crusade at the invitation of like-minded critics, and she and Mel have made three visits to Boston, where they claim to have many supporters. In Octo-

ber 1982 the Gablers appeared with Mike Hudson on WBZ-TV's *People Are Talking*. The Gablers have appeared on all three national networks, including a segment of *60 Minutes*. Norma describes herself as being fond of Mike Wallace, who she says "sat on the cabinet in my kitchen"; she says Wallace was among the few journalists to give them a fair shake (the Gablers carry cassette recorders for all conversations with reporters).

As usual, the media turned out in force for the Gablers' testimony at the 1983 hearings. On the day Mel Gabler made his oral criticisms of world history texts, commis-

sioner Bynum had to scold camera crews several times to keep the path to the podium clear. Having already submitted hundreds of pages of written objections before the hearing, Mel Gabler chose to use his sliver of time to carp at PFAW, display charts comparing the merits of various world history books, and admonish the committee to look for "subtle, hidden content" in the textbooks under consideration.

The Gablers themselves have drawn a number of conclusions from the "subtle" content of textbooks. The most familiar — shared by other groups — is the prevalence of "secular humanism," some-

thing they believe was instigated by the educator and philosopher John Dewey. Secular humanism, as explained in a leaflet Mel Gabler passed out at this year's hearings, values "self-authority, situation ethics, evolution, distorted realism, sexual permissiveness, anti-biblical bias, one-world government, and anti-free enterprise." In the past the Gablers have been quoted as blaming the so-called new math for causing pupils to lose faith in absolute values and turn to "crime and drugs." They have objected to Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Cask of Amontillado" as too "morbid" and have challenged the inclusion of

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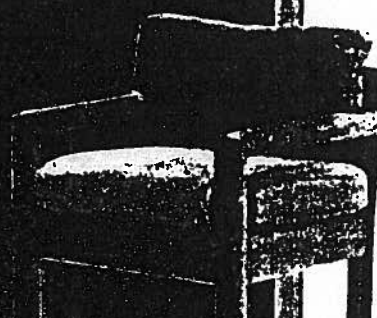
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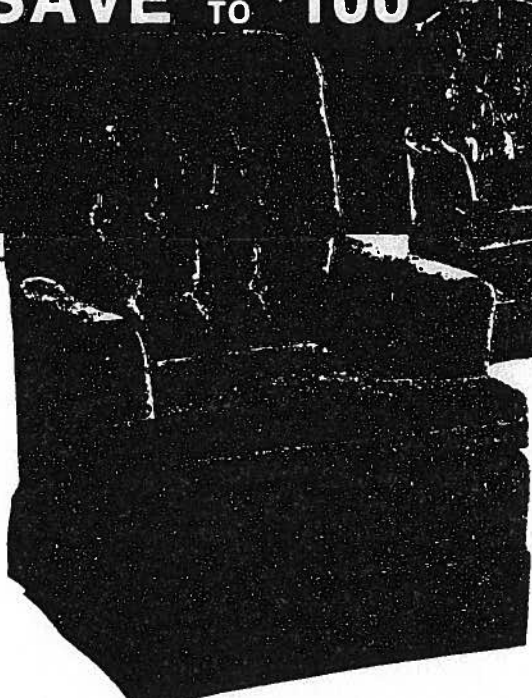


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Martin Luther King, Jr., with Martin Luther in discussions of reformers.

The Gablers do not like "negativism," nontraditional sex roles, or anything that could even remotely be considered favorable to Cuba or the Soviet Union, and they disapprove of books that cause students to make classroom analyses or reveal self-reflection. They do not like any talk about sex, drugs, or nonstandard English, and they are opposed to Darwin and his theory of natural selection. They like capitalism and what they consider traditional values. Conservative fund-raiser Richard Viguerie has praised them, as has the Reverend Jerry Falwell.

This year the Gablers asked for revisions in nine of the eleven world history books being considered by the committee and for the rejection of the other two, *World History: An Unfinished Journey*, published by Houghton Mifflin, and *The Western Experience*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. The Houghton Mifflin text, the Gablers wrote, went "out of its way to present Christ in a dam-

aging light." It also contained "anti-nuke" scare content" in a section on nuclear stockpiling, they wrote. In McGraw-Hill's *Chronicles of Time*, the Gablers complained about a chapter on women that, they said, "states as fact the opinion that 'depending on a male as the sole source of income' is disadvantageous." Of the text's discussion of the nineteenth-century British writer Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, the Gablers asked, "Was this page added to placate the women's lib movement?"

Many of the criticisms made by the Gablers are echoed, if not duplicated, by other right-wing or fundamentalist activists. Although the textbook hearing rules do not require individuals to list their organizational affiliations, numerous "independent" speakers at the 1983 hearings have in the past been identified with New Right groups. The Gablers deny that they are connected with other textbook critics, except to say that they enjoy "grass-roots

Continued on page 48

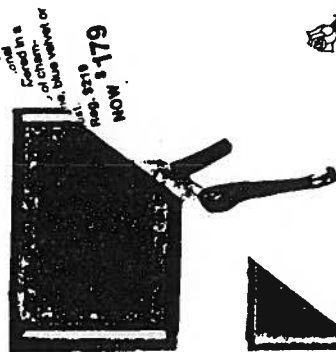
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W.H.

THE BOSTON GLOBE MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 30, 1983

1



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G1970

Textbooks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

support," but it was evident at the hearings that certain kinds of objections were being repeated by ideologically kindred spirits. Several speakers were concerned, for instance, that in the world history books the French Revolution got more space than did the American Revolution.

At least two speakers and several written statements advanced an idea currently popular on the far right — that the role of capitalism in the Industrial Revolution was more positive than we have been led to

believe. Hewing closely to the Grusendorf-sponsored world history guidelines, Mel Gabler insisted that workers were better off in the nineteenth-century factories and mills than they were out on the farms. Passages from *Chronicles of Time*, a McGraw-Hill textbook, he said, "misrepresent the contributions of early capitalism." The argument was taken further by Paige Moore, who called several textbooks' accounts of cruelty to child workers in factories "utterly without foundation." She cited as her source W. H. Hutt, one of a group of New Right theorists, journalists, and historians whose inventive reinterpretations of social and scientific his-

tory form the "scholarly" basis of recent right-wing ideology.

In twenty-two years of appearances at textbook hearings, the Gablers have themselves become scholarly. Armed with notebooks, good memories, and academic advisers, they exude country bootstrap wisdom, and even the most venomous of their attacks is couched in something like a lawyerly polemical style. Long gone is the 1950s-style hysteria of Eleanor Hutcheson, a member of the Texas Daughters of the American Revolution, who insisted that history books were "rosy on China" and "soft on the Soviet Union." In place of it are line counts, pedagogical jargon, and the

persistent, confident conviction on the part of critics that they are advancing the Lord's work.

This past summer, Molly Ivins, a liberal columnist for the *Dallas Times Herald*, fuming because the city of Dallas had proclaimed July 23 "Mel and Norma Gabler Day" to counterbalance an earlier "Norman Lear Day," dismissed the Gablers as "two ignorant, fear-mongering, right-wing fruit-loops." To the Gablers, it was the equivalent of Br'er Rabbit's being tossed into the briar patch. What could be sweeter than to have one's enemies demonstrate such arrogance?

The intrusion of the Gablers and other individuals and groups of the New Right

into the educational process may be disconcerting; it even may represent a threat to children and society. But it is anything but stupid. Insofar as the activists of the New Right have taken over contemporary educational reform — influencing decisions on issues from textbook selection to teacher recruitment to "back-to-basics" curriculum drives — they are at least perspicacious. And the manipulation of Texas' public textbook-approval process is evidence not of isolated exploitation by regional hicks but of a disciplined, tireless movement; its sphere of influence, given politicians' recent interest in public education, may encompass the White House itself. •

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