

## Review

# Another chapter in the textbook controversy

James C. Hefley. *Textbooks on Trial*. Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1976, pp. 212. \$6.95

Conflicts over the content of school textbooks have been and continue to be part and parcel of American educational history. Examples abound. Roman Catholics objected to the Protestant tinge of many nineteenth century textbooks, in the late 1930s and early 1940s several business organizations claimed that Harold Rugg's social studies books listed to port, and today the struggle continues over the place of "creationism" in science texts dominated by evolutionary assumptions. Since textbooks serve not only as "tools of the trade" but also as powerful cultural symbols, it is not surprising that such controversies arise, particularly when the social and cultural consensus is strained severely.

In *Textbooks on Trial*, James C. Hefley, a free-lance writer and frequent contributor to *Christianity Today* and other religious periodicals, chronicles another episode in the history of textbook controversies. He describes sympathetically, and in a distractingly melodramatic fashion, the "campaign" of a Texas couple, Mel and Norma Gabler, to "oust objectionable textbooks from public schools—and to urge publishers to produce better ones."

The bulk of the book is devoted to reporting the almost yearly confrontations between the Gablers and representatives of publishing houses before the Texas State Textbook Committee. This committee, which is appointed annually by the State Board of Education on recommendation of the Texas Education Agency, reviews publishers' offerings, holds public hearings and recommends for Board adoption from two to five titles for each grade subject. Local textbook committees then choose from the state approved list.

According to Hefley, since their first appearance before the Committee in 1962 until the present, the Gablers have demanded, with some success, that school texts adopted by the state "not indoctrinate children in irreligion, lawbreaking, sexual perversion, doctored history and the benevolence of Big Brother government." Although their charges of "doctored history" are dubious and reflect the failure of many conservative Protestants to realize that history cannot be consistently laudatory, the

Gabler's complaints concerning the relativist bias of many sociology and psychology texts, the prying questions contained in several social studies textbooks, and the disparagement of Christian beliefs in several texts have some merit. In many cases the Committee agreed with them and either required changes in the disputed texts or voted against adoption, much to the chagrin of several major publishing houses.

While Hefley's primary purpose in writing this book was to describe the "heroic" efforts of a conservative, Protestant middle-class couple to check what they perceive to be a gradual undermining of their values and beliefs in school textbooks, his commentary affords an insight into the problem of providing textbooks which are acceptable to all constituents of the public schools, including blacks, orientals, fundamentalists and other increasingly self-conscious groups. The difficulty involved in producing texts which are palatable to all reflects the dissolution of consensus in this country. In a very real sense the textbook controversy described by the author is symbolic of the problems inherent in the "common school ideology" which still influences the public school enterprise. How can the public schools teach common values and a common curriculum when there is no agreement on what constitutes either? More than describing the activities of a concerned Texas couple, *Textbooks on Trial* illustrates the excruciating problems facing the public schools in serving a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and religiously plural society.

Not all who read this short book will sympathize, as the author did, with the activities and goals of the Gablers. Many educators will wave the "bloody shirt" of censorship. Others will praise the Gablers for pointing out the secular humanistic bias of many texts. Regardless of one's disposition toward the activities of this nationally known couple, educators and laymen interested in the grassroots controversy over textbook content, the politics of education, and how individuals can influence the public school system would profit by spending a few hours with this informative, though not profound, book.

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