

Textbook issue—white knights battled darkness

Little in this world is more enjoyable for a cynic than watching the birth, maturation and lingering death of a political or social issue. One such issue was the textbook controversy in Kanawha County, W. Va. last fall.

For those who have forgotten what happened and for the rest who didn't know it took place, the controversy began over a few parents' objections to some books being used by the local schools.

At first only eight books were objected to, most of which are anthologies containing controversial material such as e.e. cummings' "i like my body," Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Christ Climbed Down" and works by Germaine Greer, Eldridge Cleaver and Sigmund Freud.

Initial attempts at compromise failed and, with the arrival of national press attention, the small dissent became massive protest. The climax of this event included between 8,000 and 10,000 miners on strike, 25 per cent of the country's 44,000 students out of school for a week, two shootings, numerous beatings and even more numerous threats.

For example, one of the leaders of the protest, the Rev. Charles Quigley, asked that everyone pray a death curse on three of the school board members who supported the use of the books.

Indeed, Kenneth Underwood, the school superintendent, received so many death threats he and his family went into hiding.

The first reaction of people to this news last fall was illuminating. The liberals chuckled softly over their coffee mugs, all the while muttering "hillbillies" under their breaths and nodding knowingly.

The conservatives could be seen anxiously peering among the pages of the latest *National Review*, hoping that William Buckley would tell them wittily what to think and reassure them that this, too, was

part of America's slow awakening to the glories of conservatism.

The silent majority, as usual, was silent because, as an acquaintance of mine so aptly put it, "they have nothing to say."

As the issue grew, so did the response of the American public. To a cynic's delight, it was an event which allowed everyone to make fools of themselves.

First we have the press, which knew immediately it had the makings of a good story. It was the classic conflict: the white knight of intelligence battling the bastions of darkness and ignorance. It smacked of the Scopes Monkey Trial. It smacked of class conflict. It was the ultimate in a Menckian dream world.

bruce nelson cynic's corner

Then there were the liberals, preening and strutting and issuing platitudes concerning open-mindedness, freedom of thought and the dangers of censorship. Many of them had already forgotten their earlier speeches when they were quick to ban commonly used favorites such as *Little Black Sambo* as insulting to blacks or Dick and Jane readers as being sexist.

Finally, the liberals were to stand aghast at the beatings and shootings when many of their own hands were stained with the rock and rubble destruction of the late sixties.

This was to be expected, however, for the problem with the liberals is that they're always to inconsistent. The conservatives, while usually more consistent, are stunted with otherwise-fine 18th century minds.

Unfortunately, their minds were beginning to get even more corroded, for they, too, were becoming inconsistent. The activism and violence which they so deplored over civil rights or Vietnam was forgotten and the shootings in West Virginia were largely ignored.

Instead, they began to cry loudly of independence and individualism. They have a penchant for turning ugly ignorance and bigotry into craftily turned phrases such as "community self-rule." For example, take note of Boston, where one finds white parents screaming "nigger" at black children. If one were to listen to Buckley, he would have one believe they are fighting for some vague and nebulous self-governing right.

Meanwhile, the silent majority went on before in their unrelenting mass march to anonymity and the grave; rarely thinking and rarely feeling.

The press slowly began to leave West Virginia, stopping here and there to interview another Bible-thumping fundamentalist or a blinking miner just emerging from the ground. The conflict wasn't over, but the story was.

The real questions—who governs the curriculum or whether we accept a "hillbilly" culture as much as we accept a black or Indian culture—go unanswered.

The books, too, remain, stored in a dark and lonely warehouse—once the vortex of a threatening tornado, now only a small eddy, slowly dying. There they sit, untouched by either human hands or minds, both the books and the people.

The only change will be a new outburst of graduate students in sociology or anthropology who, taking their tape recorders with them to Appalachia, will return and publish more learned papers telling us again that the people there feel alienated. Meanwhile, America's uneasy conscience moves on.

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