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December 20, 2013  
EDUC 212- Beatty  
Final Paper

### God's Classroom: The Gablers' Textbook Crusade

In 1783, Noah Webster published his *Blue Back Speller*, the first American textbook of the newly formed United States, and advanced the idea of a single text to unite the country. From then on, textbooks in the American educational system became the primary way knowledge was shared among all Americans. Roughly 200 years later, beginning in the 1960s, and continuing for decades, one couple in Texas, Mel and Norma Gabler, attempted to dictate their own, very narrow grounding for Americans' shared knowledge through their system of textbook review and censorship. Choosing to ignore the increasingly diverse make-up of the country and refusing to adapt to the changes brought about by social progress, the Gablers, and their religious right supporters, maintained that only one set of knowledge should be shared by Americans students and taught within public schools, that which reflected their evangelical conception of Christianity and their politically conservative core values. How was it that one couple was able to achieve such a significant influence over the United States' educational system?

In Texas, the textbook selection process occurs at the state rather than local level and allows citizen participation in the hearings. Because the state wields great power as one of the largest textbook purchasers in the country, publishers go to great lengths to address the standards adopted by the State Textbook Committee. Since the textbooks purchased by many other states are influenced by Texas' demands, it has been said, "As Texas goes, so goes the nation."<sup>1</sup> The Gablers, a couple from the small town of Longview, Texas, became key figures in the censorship

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<sup>1</sup> People for the American Way (PFAW), "As Texas Goes, so Goes the Nation: A Report on Textbook Selection in Texas," 1983.

of textbooks by submitting complaints and offering critical testimony regarding the textbooks being considered by the Committee for purchase. In many of the textbook reviews the Gablers conducted, they pointed out genuine, historical errors, for which Texas duly reprimanded the publishers. According to the New York Times' obituary for Norma Gabler, "in 2001, Time magazine reported that their "scroll of shame" of textbook mistakes since 1961 was 54 feet long. In the early 1990s, Texas fined publishers about \$1 million for failing to remove hundreds of factual errors the Gablers had found in 11 history books."<sup>2</sup> Although these mistakes were often minor, they indeed needed to be corrected, and those corrections had the effect of successfully casting the couple as fact-checkers and truth-seekers. The Gablers then extended their roles as proofreaders to more subjective issues, such as the proper place of religion, morality, and ideology in education. In gaining legitimacy through their minor factual corrections, and in being able to claim the objectivity of citizen-participants, the couple was able to concomitantly serve their larger mission of guiding the role of religion in schools and imposing their traditionalist views in textbooks.

By allowing all citizens to participate in its textbook selection process, Texas' educational structure presents an essential democratic paradox: balancing a minority's right to express itself without overwhelming the majority's wishes. A report by the advocacy group People for the American Way (PFAW) determined that the Texas system failed to properly balance minority views with those of the majority. As the authors of the report detail, "Texas citizens who want to comment favorably on certain books, or in favor of including ideas, concepts or topics, cannot be heard in any phase of the process... Only protestors and publishers

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Martin, "Norma Gabler, Leader of Crusade on Textbooks, Dies at 84," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2007, B.8. This article provides an example of the kinds of mistakes the Gablers pointed out: "A textbook said that Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina had supported the tariff of 1816. He opposed it."

were permitted to testify before either the State Textbook Committee or the State Board of Education.”<sup>3</sup> By favoring complaints, the process did not allow for the majority to express its contentment with the standards; rather, the minority’s voice dominated the discussion. The report also states, “The Gablers argued that increased participation would destroy the democratic process.”<sup>4</sup> Although the couple often expressed sentiments that they felt their opponents were not interested in a balanced approach, their negative position on allowing positive citizen comment and feedback in the review process demonstrates that they took efforts to block others who would disagree with them. The recommendations given by the PFAW Report—to allow positive comment, expand public hearings, and increase public notice—all seem reasonable and meant to strengthen the democratic goals of the Texas process by allowing more citizens to participate.<sup>5</sup> However, the Gablers’ strategy succeeded and it had a significant ripple effect across the country not only because of Texas’ nationwide impact on textbooks, but also because of the amount of media attention garnered by the Committee’s hearings, and the Gablers’ campaign.

During the height of the Gablers’ crusade, there was considerable debate about how much influence over the textbook process they actually had. Members of the Committee and other Texas officials downplayed or denied the Gablers’ power in remarks to the media. In a 1982 interview on the MacNeil/Lehrer Report, Ms. Grace Grimes, the Deputy State Education Commissioner for Professional Development for Texas, expressed her belief that they did not have any improper influence on the process.<sup>6</sup> Grimes may have been answering truthfully, but because the Committee, the Commissioner, and the State Board did not submit for the record the

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<sup>3</sup> People for the American Way, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 22-27.

<sup>6</sup> “The Texas Textbook Debate: Interview with Mel Gabler, Michael Hudson, Tom GIBLIN, and Grace Grimes,” interview by Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer, *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, PBS, November 10, 1982.

official reasons for their decisions regarding the textbooks under review, one cannot know with certainty how large a role the Gablers played in the Committee's thought process.<sup>7</sup> Still, it is also possible that the denial of their impact by Ms. Grimes and others may have been made in an effort to make the process seem nonpartisan and to refute the perception that they were relying so heavily on just one couple's research and opinion. The veracity of such denials are made even less credible when considering the reports by watchdog organizations, such as the PFAW, or educators from outside states, who commented on the impact the Gablers had on their own curriculum. The PFAW documents that during the 1982 textbook hearings, almost one full day was devoted to testimony by representatives from the Gablers' organization, and this prolonged testimony came at the expense of 25 other protestors and organizations who were scheduled to speak during the four-day-long hearing.<sup>8</sup> In the MacNeil/Lehrer interview, Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services in Colorado, Tom Giblin, commented on the undue effect that Texas and the Gablers had on smaller states' textbooks. Disagreeing with Ms. Grimes' assessment of the Gablers' minor bearing, he stated, "I'm convinced nationally that the Gablers and the people who follow the Gablers are impacting this country daily. Public schools in this country need to be forums for multiple points of view. We need to have a balance."<sup>9</sup> The remove from which the outside groups viewed the Texas textbooks operation allowed them to see what the State Textbook Committee denied to others: that the Gablers were operating as uncensored censors and implementing their own ideals in the schools' curriculum.

The image the Gablers cultivated greatly enhanced their reputation and influence. By stressing their humble beginnings in small-town Texas, they downplayed their ever-growing

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<sup>7</sup> People for the American Way, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>9</sup> "The Texas Textbook Debate."

financial resources and staff. Defining their role solely as caring parents, and advising others involved in textbook reform to do the same, they were able to portray themselves as simple, non-threatening citizens, who were merely concerned about the quality of general education. While they may have begun as a father and mother who discovered a mistake in their son's textbook, their involvement grew over the decades much beyond that characterization as they became the leaders in the textbook censorship movement. In 1973, the Gablers established Educational Research Analysts, Inc. (ERA), which quickly expanded to include a staff of eight, a budget of \$120,000, a mailing list of more than 12,000, and which received about 200 letters a week.<sup>10 11</sup> They also traveled across the country giving speeches on effective methods to implement their brand of educational change. Along with fellow right-wing organizations, the Gablers helped create a network of parents who joined the campaign to purge what they perceived as liberal or immoral textbooks. Encouraging the Gabler model, a speaker for the conservative think tank, The Heritage Foundation, when advising parents how to complain about their children's curriculum, urged, "...not to give the *appearance* of an organized campaign."<sup>12</sup> In the Gablers' "A Parent's Guide to Textbook Review and Reform," published by The Heritage Foundation, the couple indicated that should ideologically aligned parents need any assistance, the ERA could provide them with in-depth reviews of textbooks.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent campaigns launched by parents across the country were meant to seem grassroots, but in fact they had very strong structural support from, and were occasionally prompted by various, ERA-affiliated

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<sup>10</sup> Dena Kleiman, "Education," *The New York Times*, July 14, 1981, C.1.

<sup>11</sup> "The Texas Textbook Debate."

<sup>12</sup> Connaught Marshner, *Blackboard Tyranny* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1978), 242, quoted in Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *Religious Fundamentalism and American Education: The Battle for the Public Schools*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990),16.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *Religious Fundamentalism and American Education: The Battle for the Public Schools*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990),16.

organizations. By emphasizing the local community response, the groups and their adherent parents were able to obscure the very real fact that they were participating in a political game, and were connected to powerful partisan advocacy and lobbying groups.

The Gablers' message appealed to many supporters because of the political, social, and economic uneasiness of the era. The radical activism and progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s made many citizens question if there remained a common understanding of American culture. The efforts of the progressive social movements to change textbook content, which often included sexist and racist stereotypes, spurred the religious right to try to counter their influence.<sup>14</sup> Feeling powerless as changes occurred politically and socially, and uncomfortable with the perception of looser morals, conservatives launched a concerted effort to focus back on the family unit and religious beliefs as the foundation of American life, and to convey and indoctrinate these ideals through education. In their 1985 book, *What Are They Teaching Our Children?*, the Gablers detail a litany of social ills, such as increased insubordination, pre-marital sex resulting in pregnancy and abortion, and high crime statistics, that they label as the fault of liberals' influence on the education system.<sup>15</sup> They argue that textbook modernization came from, "Humanist social engineers who want to abolish the traditional interpretation of the family, and from radical homosexuals and feminists, desperate for social and legal recognition of their perversion."<sup>16</sup> The Gablers reasoned that without the base of the family, which they defined exclusively as heterosexual, the entire nation's moral fabric would unravel. They feared that if textbooks did not highlight the familial, Christian, and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Mel and Norma Gabler, with James C. Hefley, *What are They Teaching Our Children?*, Wheaton: SP Publications, Inc., 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 149.

conservative American values, which they viewed as intertwined, sin would be pervasive within schools.

According to the Gablers, modern changes in textbooks came about as a result of the secular humanist movement. They warned, “Religion is back in the classroom in the form of Humanism, a religion of supreme idolatry that puts man, not God, at the center of all. It is a sad irony that the majority of parents, according to every poll, still subscribe to the faith of the bible. But after studying Humanist textbooks, will their children do so?”<sup>17</sup> New York Times writer Dena Kleiman observed that conservatives tended to use humanism “as a meaningless catch-all term...to describe all the nation’s ills,” while Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., in *Religious Fundamentalism and American Education*, recounts that the right-wing organizations maintained that there were hundreds of thousands of people within the humanist movement who were influencing the content of textbooks, but they could not actually identify any current leaders, and they based most of their arguments against humanism on John Dewey’s work from the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> They avowed that textbooks are written “from the perspective of people who do not believe in God or an absolute value system. This perspective...is a religion called secular humanism, which permeates every aspect of contemporary society and teaches youngsters to lie, cheat and steal.”<sup>20</sup> The Gablers either did not have an accurate understanding of what secular humanism means, or they ignored it in favor of their own definition, but certainly no unbiased observer would define it as a religion that calls for unethical behavior. However, by casting their mission in opposition to secular humanism, insisting it was more than a philosophy, but in fact a religion, the Gablers

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<sup>17</sup> Gabler, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Kleiman, A.1.

<sup>19</sup> Provenzo.

<sup>20</sup> Kleiman, C.1.

claimed that a religion was now indeed being taught in schools, and that their religious liberty was therefore being violated.

The Gablers' reasoning was cognitively dissonant; they ignored their opponents' arguments that the United States was constitutionally a secular nation, operating under the principle of separation of church and state, by insisting that it had been founded on Christian values. At the same time, they also argued that the secular humanists were violating the Constitution by establishing a state religion. The Gablers concluded that the teaching of secular humanism "not only defies Christian values and the authority of parents, but borders on treason and violates the U.S. Constitution by teaching a religion."<sup>21</sup> Claiming there was a state-sanctioned religion, they even stretched their rhetoric so far as to call schools "government seminaries."<sup>22</sup> The Gablers seemingly failed to realize that this double-sided argument regarding religion expressed two incompatible ideas. They wanted their religion prioritized and presented in the classroom and would argue for that goal through any convoluted necessary.

Their underlying belief that Christianity could not, and should not, be separated from the United States government was also endorsed by the newly elected President, Ronald Reagan, who proclaimed, "...we seek to protect the unborn, to end the manipulation of school children by utopian planners, and permit the acknowledgement of a Supreme Being in our classrooms just as we allow such acknowledgement in other public institutions."<sup>23</sup> In 1982, Reagan proposed an amendment to the Constitution that would have allowed voluntary school prayer.<sup>24</sup> Although it did not pass, Reagan's political position made clear that he sanctioned the efforts of right wing

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<sup>21</sup> Provenzo, xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Kleiman, C.1.

<sup>23</sup> James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.



groups, such as the Gablers' ERA, the Moral Majority, and the Eagle Forum, and saw no need to separate church and state, but rather more of a wish to bind them closer together. There was widespread support among the conservative powerbrokers, as well as the rank and file, for the Gablers' mission, which aided the implementation of their desire for an even wider-spread institutional Christianity.

On another front in their battle against the evolving, modern curriculum, the Gablers expressed their fear that the United States was being portrayed too negatively in modern textbooks, compared to the ones they used as reference points, such as those from 1885 and 1921.<sup>25</sup> Reporting on the couples' efforts and influence, the *New York Times* summarized in 1981, "They are asking specifically for history texts that emphasize the positive side of America's past, economics courses that stress the strengths of capitalism and literature that avoids divorce, suicide, drug addiction and other harsh realities of life."<sup>26</sup> It is clear that the Gablers felt that history is an unchanging subject, and they could not fathom why revisions of a static subject were necessary. They were also uncomfortable with history when it was presented for critical interpretation, as opposed to as a matter of previously settled fact. As publishers sought to give a more balanced and honest, less nativist approach to studying America, the Gablers protested that the proud moments in the nation's history were being minimized or ignored, and that students would suffer the result of a lack of patriotism and faith in their country.

The Gablers, as well as the politicians and religious leaders who echoed and bolstered their message, enlarged their political mission by conflating communism with secularism, and

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<sup>25</sup> Provenzo, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Dena Kleiman, "Parents' Group Purging Schools of 'Humanist' Books and Classes," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1981, A.1.

capitalism with Americanism. A supporter of the Gablers, evangelical minister Tim LaHaye, believed that the check-and-balance system of the nation's government was "borrowed directly from Scripture," and "The Puritan work ethic, free enterprise, the private ownership of land and capitalism have...evolved exclusively from Biblical teaching."<sup>27</sup> At a time when the country was still enmeshed in the Cold War with the communist Soviet Union, and feeling increasing pressure from globalization and economic competition with Japan, the need to adhere to and strengthen the United States' relationship to capitalism became a strong refrain in the religious right's message. Conservatives argued that without God in the classroom, students were sure to forget the teachings of their nation's founding religion and would begin to value themselves over any higher being. They expressed fears that secular humanism would lead to a breakdown of moral order and that the nation would become susceptible to atheistic communism.

Further, the Gablers' anxiety about the curriculum related to the larger question of what the objective of public education should be; that is, should it merely relate basic facts to the students through rote, unthinking learning, or should it emphasize depth of knowledge in order to cultivate analytical and thoughtful citizens. What the Gablers labeled as secular humanism, or occasionally called a "religion of intellectualism," seemed to be threatening to them because it encouraged a conversation about, or a potential challenge to, long-accepted normative ideas. They responded to that challenge by claiming that questions meant to provoke deep thought were invasions of privacy, and that facts were always preferable compared to discussions of concepts.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1980), 36, quoted in Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *Religious Fundamentalism and American Education: The Battle for the Public Schools*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), xiii.

<sup>28</sup> People for the American Way, 7.

The decades-long Gabler campaign to dictate the content of classroom textbooks had both substantive and symbolic success. According to the People for the American Way's Report, the Gablers had multiple triumphs: from the vague, but important decision by the Texas State Textbook Committee to not adopt any textbook that had language deemed offensive or material expected to cause embarrassing situations in the classroom, to their major achievement of having the introduction to textbooks state "that evolution is a theory, not a fact... 'only one of several explanations' for the origin of man."<sup>29</sup> The involvement of the Gablers' religious views in the science curriculum continued the debate that began with the Scopes Trial in the 1920s and continues even to the present day. Although the Gablers have both passed away, their organization, Educational Research Analysts, Inc., continues to operate—to review and target textbooks. Beyond their direct impact on the curriculum in Texas and the many other states that adopted Texas texts, the Gablers had a far-reaching impact on the nation as instigators of what became known as the "culture wars." As New York Times writer Douglas Martin summarizes, many conservatives celebrate the Gablers' legacy as "the mom-and-pop textbook-criticism enterprise [that] grew to occupy a prominent niche in the nation's conservative pantheon," while those opposed to their work less favorably remember them as "the most effective textbook censors in the country."<sup>30</sup>

Propelled by their discomfort of changing times and ideas, Mel and Norma Gabler tried to define what they believed American education ought to entail, and by doing so, they disregarded the wishes of many other Americans, as well as the founding principles of the country. The Gablers felt that religious and moral tenets were being erased from public institutions, but their efforts to command religious educational standards ultimately violated

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, B.8.

moral tenets that are found in the First Amendment: the right of all citizens to hold and practice their own beliefs and the affirmation that there is no one national religion. The struggle for control over Texas' textbooks, which thereafter influenced the textbooks read by students across the country, leads to a crucial question: how important, and how practical, is it for our nation to have one shared identity if we all hold such diverse beliefs? The American educational system, like the country itself, must never be centered around one set of religious beliefs, but rather it must continue to uphold the importance of respecting all beliefs and to support an unencumbered education for all.

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