

EXTREMISTS, CRITICS AND SCHOOLS

E. W. DAVIS

Associate Secretary for Special Studies

NEA Commission on Professional Rights and Responsibilities

1201-16th Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

A POPULAR image of the right-wing school critic was a little old woman in tennis shoes. In the past two years, the word-picture was altered to that of an extremist stomping across the land in hobnailed shoes. Now that the thunder and fury on the right has subsided somewhat, it is time for reflection, for an inventory of damage and for an analysis of the problems created by and the tactics of the extremists and critics.

The Extremist and the Critic

Criticism is a part of the American and the educational tradition. It is a recognized part of most of our professional meetings and our learning processes. Responsible criticism from the authorities, our colleagues, laymen and even from the uninformed is welcomed. These critics usually recognize and engage in fair exchange of ideas, facts and viewpoints. Problems arise when the uninformed pose as educational authorities, when the critics attack leaders and professional groups instead of their programs or ideas, and when the right wingers become so extreme as to be confused with the Communists or Fascists in their tactics and methods. The worst confusion in the present extremist campaigns on school issues occurs when

fear, hate and suspicion begin to supplant reason and communication of ideas. It is then that freedom to teach and to learn in the best American traditions suffers most.

Educators are concerned about the problems of extremists on the far left as well as the far right. The NEA's Professional Rights and Responsibilities Commission is charged with providing information about both types and has done so over the years. In addition to widely circularizing the profession about the newly formed Communist youth group, DuBois Clubs of America, we have answered inquiries this year about two other alleged non-educational Communist or Communist infiltrated groups. Normally such queries consist of less than one percent of the total inquiries, since such groups are usually not active in the anti-school movements but are rarely suspected of infiltration tactics.

The tactics and methods of irresponsible and destructive criticism can easily be recognized by examining the critic's message. This message deals in destructive remarks, personalities, misrepresentations, generalities, distortions, sensationalism, opinions, innuendos, or weaknesses of the schools.

Criticism of the schools is usually tied to some other cause or evil, such as Communism, tax reduction, patriotism, censorship, sex education, or "progressive" education.

What They Do

The inroads of this type of destructive criticism manifest themselves by many actions. Among such actions are textbook censorship, election of extremists to school boards, the seizing control, infiltration and take-over of PTA's, and the firing of worthy teachers and administrators. Destructive criticism has also brought about mass resignation of distinguished teachers, appointment of administrators backed by rightists, attempts to modify instruction or textbooks, and spying on teachers in and out of the classroom.

Such actions not only harass the individual but make whole areas apprehensive and defensive. The climate of teaching and learning suffers everywhere that these sensational news items appear. When "Hell Breaks Loose in Paradise," makes the national news media or when a state superintendent of public instruction reportedly supported by the rightists or extremists is elected, teachers everywhere suffer feelings of insecurity.

The extensiveness of rightist activities belies the charges that these are only isolated examples. During 1964 and 1965, the NEA's Commission on Professional Rights and Responsibilities received a larger number of inquiries on these problems than in recent years. Over 1,000 inquiries or reports about such problems were received regarding nearly 400 groups or individuals in the U.S. From news items and

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inquiries it was estimated that one in thirty school districts is faced with some type of extremist agitation.

Some sobering facts on the widespread activities of the rightists and extremists during the past year are these:

1. *A Directory of Rightist Groups*, compiled by the rightists, lists over 3,000 such groups, individuals, and newsletters.

2. One coalition of about 100 such rightist groups claims around 3 million members.

3. Right-wing radio and TV broadcasts in 1964 increased from 7,000 to over 10,000 programs per week, reaching into every state.

4. The right wing in 1964 spent an "estimated \$30,000,000" on political, educational and other programs.

5. Expenditures of 30 leading rightist groups between 1955 and 1964 increased from \$3 million to \$16 million.

6. A hard-core of about 150 rightist groups persistently and destructively criticize current school programs, and most of the other 1600 similar groups occasionally aid and abet them.

What They Say

We can best deduce what the rightists want by what they say. "Let's Close the Public Schools Now," said segregationist John Kasper of the defunct Seaboard White Citizens Council. This idea is still supported by the Hoiles' newspaper chain covering several states. "Let's put Washington in chains" said a speaker at a convention of We, the People (coalition of 40-50 rightist groups) in Chicago a few years ago. This group was advocating the abolition of the federal income tax in

order to reduce federal aid for education and other services to a mere dribble.

America's Future, in justifying its Textbook Evaluation Committee, claims, "But so slyly and slickly has the collectivist-internationalist philosophy been inserted into books . . . that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the average parent or school board member any longer to tell what is a good textbook" and what has been "poisoned." "There is not a single agency in the United States to which we can refer these correspondents for the information. . . ." Now what America's Future calls its Operation Textbook, functioning through its Textbook Evaluation Committee, claims to be the one agency fulfilling this need for providing textbook reviews. AF reviewers are mostly right-wing conservatives and some have affiliation with the John Birch Society. Other rightists become quite specific and want to eliminate all social studies courses and to require a return to traditional courses named history, geography, economics and sociology. This proposed retrogressive policy is supported mainly by their claim that "social studies" originated as a Communist plot to weaken the curriculum and training of pupils. Rosalie Gordon, in *What's Happened to Our Schools?* states, "Still another aspect of the results of progressive education can be found in what has become a nationwide problem—juvenile delinquency."¹

The main strategy behind these and scores of other extremist proposals is to enable these critics to impose their pro-

¹ Rosalie Gordon. *What's Happened to Our Schools?* New Rochelle, N. Y.: America's Future, Inc., 1956. p. 17.

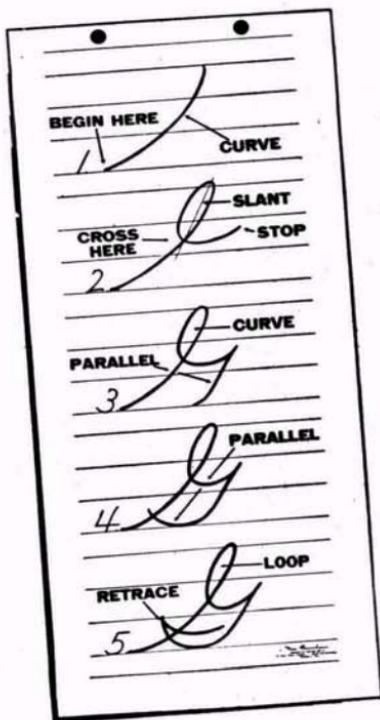
grams and ideas on the community and the schools, without benefit of advice from the so-called "educationist" or the professional educator. Others are strong in their claimed support for the public schools but advocate shrinking the curricula down to the three R's, including science, for the elementary schools and five academic areas for high schools, which changes they shrewdly suggest would also save taxes.

Their Tactics

The tactics employed by the extremist are even more revealing. They proceed to quote from the Birch Society *Blue Book* that "Democracy is merely a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud." They come to school board or other school meetings over a period of time to heckle, interrupt and harangue about something they want changed. Failing to get action through regular democratic channels, they then harass individual board members at their homes and at work.

Individual teachers are then selected for harassment in classes at school or at home by many irritating or secret methods. Hidden tape recorders in the classroom or at meetings, shadowing by private detectives to report on school staff, anonymous phone calls or letters, placing derogatory signs on the teacher's school or home door, night phone calls at all hours, and slurs or isolation of school personnel in public are a few of the scurrilous, vigilante practices reported. These are meant to drive the teacher from the locality, to silence him or to scare him into conforming with extremists' aims.

The usual milder methods of the



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rightists are to bring a rightist speaker to town, to deluge the community with pamphlets and other propaganda, to write letters to the editor, and to form an extremist unit or a citizens group with a deceptively respectable-sounding name. Advocates of the "basic education" tenets and of lower taxes sometimes become the local Council for Better Education, frequently using the initials CBE even though such groups were disowned by the national Council for Basic Education.

A John Birch Society chapter campaigning for certain reactionary, tax-saving candidates held public meetings under the name of Crusade for Survival. Many JBS chapters used other local aliases. A former White Citizens Council (segregationists) in the North became a local Citizens Council. A favorite tactic of extremist candidates for public or PTA office is not to reveal their rightist affiliations or support until after their election or attainment of majority control.

Their Operation

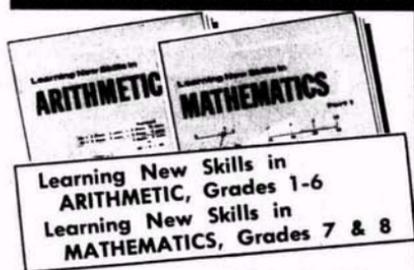
The problem of extremists or rightists gaining control of a school or PTA is a very real one. With the open support of such groups, two state superintendents of public instruction were elected in 1964 defeating the liberal or moderate candidates. Occasionally fine professional, moderate local superintendents resigned under pressure or were dismissed to be replaced by superintendents preferred by the rightists.

In some communities, large blocks of teachers resigned in protest over attempts to dictate both what was taught and how it was taught. Some Birch or rightist-supported candidates were

elected to school boards in recent years and some boards contain a majority with rightist convictions. Fortunately in most cases in 1964-1965, many board candidates with open rightist support were defeated from California to Massachusetts.

Some of the Birchers with the avowed aim to infiltrate the PTA and "to take it over" locally have succeeded alone or in coalitions. Of the attempted takeover of 5 or 6 state PTA conventions, none succeeded, but one contest was perilously close. The technique is either to take over the local PTA control and disaffiliate from the National Congress of Parents and Teachers or to send enough delegates to the state PTA convention to control it. Fortunately the national PTA officers are fully alert to this and have regained some lost locals. The power struggle now is to take over

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the local PTA and also to elect some school board members, then later to dictate school policy and program.

The interlocking officers and boards of directors of the John Birch Society with several other national and local organizations make a powerful coalition. In one county with 16 local rightist groups and interlocking officers and boards, the rightists and tax-savers were able to gain control of both the county council and the county school board in one election and to elect Bircher activists to the council. The influence of these two groups extended to many other public and private boards and bodies since there was extensive overlapping with the other 15 groups; membership in JBS trebled in the election year. Besides talking about the problem, the forces for democracy and good schools must organize, campaign and work in the precincts for educational and other cherished causes. The forces arrayed against us include three major coalitions of rightist groups with a total of nearly 200 organizations and millions of members.

Our Adversaries

If we are to grapple with extremist critics and groups, we must know who they are and what they advocate. We must read what they say and know the aims of their sponsoring groups. Some groups with a name like "Christian Anti-Communism Crusade" accurately describe their functions. Others including "Friends of the Public Schools" in their title may actually be anti-groups opposing certain school programs. Some propagandizing and lobbying mainly for reduction of taxes and school budgets, may crusade behind such titles as

"County Above Party" or "Institute for Social Science Research." Many have high-sounding, worthy purposes or functions agreeable to most school people, but their implementation is damaging to the schools through their newsletters, pamphlets, speeches or electioneering. Hence we say—know your adversary and read his literature.

Some of our foes have causes or aims bearing directly on education such as anti-consolidation, anti-modern education, anti-federal aid, anti-progressive education, or anti-social studies. Others tie these educational aims to a main aim of anti-federal government programs or to anti-UN, anti-Communism, anti-Socialism, anti-fluoridation, anti-mental hygiene. Others tie to a positive aim of pro-Americanism, pro-free enterprise, pro-American textbook (censorship), pro-fundamentalist or other appealing aims.

Some of the milder critics indiscriminately weave half-truths, mis-statements and plain falsehoods with their facts. Other extremists alienate regular conservatives by injecting fear, hate and suspicion into their campaigns against schools. Still others lay themselves open to legal action or investigation by deliberate use of innuendos, smears, libel or even slander. The increase in desperation charges has resulted in a marked increase in court cases or legal actions.

In the heat of a local controversy or a school election, it behooves the real friends of education to refrain from inadvertently or excitedly stooping to these tactics. In the long run these approaches weaken one's case and place the user of them under a cloud of suspicion and doubt.

Some Active Critics

Some of the prominent destructive critics of the past two decades have become defunct or quiescent. Others, however, are as active and as destructive as ever and are collecting much more money than at any previous period. Two characteristics of all these groups are their high-sounding names and their vigorous opposition to certain public school programs.

Two especially virulent rightist critics of education have revived strongly with new leaders after a slump, i.e., America's Future, under R. K. Scott, and Church League of America, under Edgar Bundy. National Education Program of Harding College, Life Lines, and Christian Anti-Communism Crusade reportedly are trying to improve their educational image by more positive programs and publicity.

Five giant-sized extremist groups sometimes hitting a million dollar income in recent years are the John Birch Society (\$129,000 to \$3,500,000 since 1959), Christian Crusade, Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, 20th Century Reformation Hour, and the milder Life Lines. Radio kings of the far-right, often strongly critical of education, with some stations in every state include: America's Future, McIntire's 20th Century Reformation Hour, Life Lines, Dan Smoot Report, Kershner's Comment on the News, Christian Crusade, Church League of America, and Fulton Lewis, Jr.

The above activities are supplemented by five major rightist speakers' bureaus, by hundreds of regular newsletters, thousands of pamphlets, and millions of paperback books. With such

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an array of publicity channels, a textbook censorship issue here, a school controversy there, an academic freedom attack elsewhere involving a local teacher or administrator, can grow from a local issue to a regional or national one in no time at all. Pressure groups with local affiliates or followers elsewhere can start other local bonfires or witch-hunts once the alarm is sounded.

There is an even greater proliferation of interlocking rightist leaders on the local level giving aid and encouragement to each other. The importance of knowing the programs and relationships of national and local groups becomes crucial when educational programs are at stake. To be able to contact national information sources when your local contacts produce little tangible information about the rightists is most essential. The best information sources

are Group Research, National Information Bureau, Better Business Bureau, Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, National Council of Churches, and the PR&R Commission of the NEA.

An Action Program

To know the facts of life about far-rightist critics and to do nothing about them denotes a sterile local educational association, short-sighted educators, or indifferent citizens. We know that about 150 of these rightist groups have done serious damage to local or state school programs and to their financial support or professional staffs. The other 1500 or more groups are so ineffectual or so extreme that they can usually be ignored. However, a weak national group may have a strong local group or leader and vice versa. Hence, there is no absolute

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rule for gauging the strength of these groups.

To know these groups and their programs is only the beginning. One must have an action program for dealing with them. As one professional leader with much experience in this area said, "Teachers must learn to fight back." If the attack is faced at once, a minor problem may not grow into a major crisis.

Following are some effective techniques for coping with extremists and critics:

1. *Prepare a fact sheet.* It can either describe the attackers and identify the leaders or can give their charges and the factual replies, or it can include all these things. Most extremist or rightist groups prefer to work behind the scenes. They cannot stand to have their positions, statements and affiliations examined in publicity media.

Keep in your files the materials to document your information and to support your replies. Distribute these fact sheets to teachers, PTA leaders and interested citizens in need of such information. Let the material be so responsible and authentic that you would not hesitate to give it to the opposition. They will eventually obtain a copy anyway.

2. *Prepare a reply to the charges made against your school, its program, or its personnel.* Replies can be a letter to the editor, a demand for equal time on radio or TV, a dignified and forceful reply at school board meetings, a talk to a community group, a scheduled open hearing, or a special association meeting. Be sure to see that advance copies of the reply are available to all

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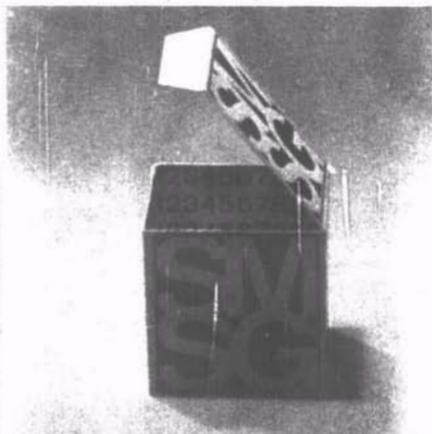
news media and that all media are notified.

3. *Arrange a debate on the controversial topic.* Have the opposition and the supporting side each select representatives. Make sure that both sides are heard, and provide opportunity for rebuttal.

4. *Schedule an outstanding speaker to talk on the constructive side of the subject at a public meeting.* Arrange the speech as the main feature of a PTA, citizens group or other public meeting and invite all citizens if possible. Establish an orderly procedure for the conduct of the meeting and for questions from antagonists and propagandists *without speeches from the floor.*

5. *Issue a critique, report or position paper on the subject in question.* Several papers released periodically throughout the year could become part of a public relations program, if there are several controversial issues in your locality. Such reports usually need not mention the opposition by name or recognize clashes with local pressure groups.

6. *Organize a citizens' committee for the public schools.* There may be 40-50 citizens groups in your city or school district, but is there one strictly "for the public schools"? Representatives of a school citizens' committee can participate in meetings of other groups, raise questions in meetings and through news media. They can testify at board and civic meetings. They can prepare statements for budget and other hearings and for bringing out the vote at school elections. Every community needs such a committee for the schools whether or



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not it has an extremist problem. For a community plagued with controversial groups and issues, however, the citizens' committee is an imperative.

7. *Bring out the vote at school elections.* This is not a task solely for the school citizens' committee. This is a job for every interested and active member in the educational association, the Association of University Women, the PTA's, League of Women Voters, and a score of other professional or community agencies. One such coordinated effort in a school district that in 1962 had lost to the rightists 35,000 to 25,000, swung the vote to the constructive side 100,000 to 35,000 in the fall of 1964.

8. *Adopt written board policies.* Every board of education should have written policies regarding the handling of the extremists and the critics. Spe-

cific guidelines should be set for handling critics, regulating speakers in the school building, and replying to responsible and irresponsible attacks. Other subjects to be covered are censorship, selection of textbooks, curriculum formulation and academic freedom. Then the board, administrators and teachers, confident in their knowledge of the ground rules, can deal effectively with crises involving the critics. A gripe or publicity stunt of some irate citizens then seldom grows into an issue, a crisis or a community battle.

9. *Devise specific procedures to implement board policy.* A regular procedure for handling a problem of a citizen demanding the removal of a book from the school library will soon become known to the faculty as well as the citizenry. Besides school staff procedures, there should be procedures by

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which an association can cope with critics through its officers and through a designated committee, such as a *committee on professional rights and responsibilities*. This provision also avoids two or three separate bodies muddying the local waters with several different solutions directed at the irate citizen.

10. *Promote a public relations program all year long.* This is not just the job of the superintendent's office or the paid publicity director, important as these are. Every local association, every PTA, every school newspaper, and every teacher should have a public relations program and be a publicity agent for better schools.

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major city, the school bond issue was voted down at three different elections while issues to provide funds for sewers, paving, health and other services were approved. By a change in attitude in every school and by having each school newspaper mention at least one achievement for each pupil during the year, an entire city changed its attitude toward schools and voted for the school bond issue the next time it was submitted. The children rushed home to show the account of their achievements in the school paper and their parents, grinning with pride, told their neighbors and friends. In happy climates like this, schools will have pupils and parents talking back to the rightists, extremists and critics of the schools. Such pupils and parents are the best possible publicity agents to answer the schools' detractors.

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