



## The Blurring of the Fringes: From "Dangerous Organizations" to "Obtrusive Pluralists"

Mary Anne Raywid

*"Educational wisdom has long presumed that the nation could survive the particularism of local educational choice and determination—and it has urged district control precisely in the interests of differentiation and responsiveness. Perhaps today these interests might better and more appropriately be served within each district, rather than simply on a geographic, district-to-district basis."*

Fifteen years ago I completed a book called *The Ax-Grinders* on extremism and the schools. It was presumably that book that led the editor of *Educational Leadership* to invite me to explore the question of "Dangerous Organizations" in response to ASCD's resolution about such groups passed in Miami last March. I accepted with interest because I had not revisited the topic for several years, and it presented a good occasion for a fresh look. In the interim, I had heard relatively little of dangerous organizations, though of course there had been much news of dangerous

*Photo: The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal, reprinted with permission.*

situations, such as the Kanawha County book controversy and the South Boston busing issue.

It did not take long for the organizational activities to surface, however. The first was an incredible story I heard from a high school principal who had been tarred and feathered by the Ku Klux Klan—not decades past, but in 1971, and not in the rural South, but in a suburb of Detroit. This administrator had been brought in with the hope that he might ease racial tensions at Willow Run High School. Following the traditional Klan warning of surveillance—the tendering of an organizational calling card—his car was halted on a lonely road one night, and hooded figures ordered him out at gunpoint. The Grand Dragon of the Michigan Klan is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence for his part in this incident, and in the earlier exploding of ten buses scheduled to be used to integrate the Pontiac, Michigan, schools. Trial testimony indicated that until the very day of the incident, the plan had been to murder the school administrator. It was only the thought of optimal Klan publicity that changed the plan from murder to tar and feathers.

### The Allegations Are Quite Similar

Not long afterward, an acquaintance at the University of Wisconsin told me of repeated warning messages left on his front porch by the local Nazi organization that objects to his beliefs and his religion. And still another friend in Minneapolis wrote of hate literature marked with swastikas, which has turned up in high school lockers and classrooms.

There is a useful index to the activity level of such organizations. Look at some recurring controversies and try to detect patterns and discern which organizations seem represented within them—to seek, as television would have it, the “Dangerous Organizations’ M.O.” For the past several years, the censorship issue has popped up in a number of places. Kanawha County, West Virginia, was the most explosive and the site of the most violence—with fire bombings, dynamite, and terrorism—but the same issues raised there have also arisen in such distant places as Georgia, New York, California, Texas, and North Dakota.

The allegations are quite similar: By virtue of their obscenity, immorality, godlessness, and/or otherwise subversive nature, school texts or library books must go. And the instigating pat-

tern is also often quite similar: A list of offensive books, as promulgated by some organization quite likely to be little-known at the time, is presented to the board of education. (There are evidently some boards willing to accord such a list full faith and credit, as in Island Trees, New York, where the books listed were duly removed without the board’s even having read them!)

There are also patterns of collaboration and synchronization. For example, in Island Trees the all-important list of offensive books came from an organization named PONY-U, or Parents of New York United. The head of PONY-U has been praised in the right-wing press for her itinerant efforts to warn numerous communities about the books in their libraries and classrooms. She is also on the board of the Heritage Foundation, a Washington-based organization that was represented in Kanawha County by one of its attorneys who counseled the dissidents. In fact, several organizations were represented in Kanawha County, the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society among them. An NEA inquiry into the controversy concluded that the conflict was undoubtedly both intensified and prolonged by such groups.

Although the foregoing merely suggests the sorts of ties and interrelationships that yield to probing, there are also overt alliances important for their influence and power potential. One such was a meeting in Washington last March bringing together, among others, the bus protesters from South Boston (ROAR or Restore Our Alienated Rights) and the book protesters from Kanawha County. The purpose of their meeting was a national rally and the forging of a permanent political alliance, the Populist Forum.

### The Move Toward Respectability

The formation of the Populist Forum is indicative of one sort of change in the activities of “dangerous organizations” over the past 15 years. Many of them have moved in the direction of acceptable political activity. The Ku Klux Klan nominated a presidential candidate last year, and the Nazis (the National Socialist White People’s Party) made a formally correct approach to the Republican Platform Committee with its list of recommendations. In Milwaukee, a Nazi official ran for mayor.



*A member of an organized anti-busing group in Louisville, Kentucky, is subdued by police during the September 1975 protests. Photo: The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal, reprinted with permission.*

So the procedural grounds, or the tactics they employ to hold sway, no longer serve as definitively as they once did to separate the dangerous organizations from legitimate dissenters. The *substance* of the complaint sometimes suffices, however, as in the case of the PONY-U member who wanted the Cold Spring Harbor High School yearbook withdrawn for the obscenities students had included in it. (Missing from her list of obscenities, however, was her own son's contribution to the volume: "Kill a nigger a day. . .") Yet with respect to issues, the lines separating the "beyond the pale" position from the more normal sort seem somewhat more blurred today. For instance, it is not just fundamentalists and right-wingers who want to eliminate objectionable books. Feminists concerned about the impact of stereotyped sex role presentations on young minds have been very anxious to affect book selections for elementary school readers.

Winnetka's New Trier High School has been the scene of a long, still-unresolved debate over *Huckleberry Finn* and whether its presentation of race relations does not disqualify it for use in the school (according to Nat Hentoff, a majority

of the faculty members believe it does). I suspect that a number of people might be highly ambivalent about a recent New York Civil Liberties Union denial that any legitimate educational purpose could be served by excluding *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—the paradigm in hate literature.<sup>1</sup>

Times have changed a bit. Twelve years ago, the assertion that "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice" played a prominent part in the defeat of a presidential candidate. Today that same assertion might earn a "Right on!" from a fairly impressive array of special interest groups. Surely the Klan and the Nazis would buy it. But so would the Jewish Defense League; several militant black groups; some of the 60's reform groups; some Archie Bunker, "hard hat," and ethnic groups; and very probably a number of the good people of rural Kanawha County, along with the beleaguered folk of South Boston, and those of Chicago's racially tense Marquette Park.

<sup>1</sup>The "Protocols" is perhaps the most famous single piece of hate literature ever disseminated. It is a forged document of a purported Jewish plot for world domination.

Over the years, ideological fashion has changed. This is not the place where developments can be carefully traced and documented, but two relevant and converging tendencies can be sketched in broad strokes to help describe the shifts. Twelve years ago, the ideas of "extremists" were sharply distinguishable from those of the "mainstream," and most of our institutions operated largely on the mainstream's mandate. For schools, that meant a "melting pot" where the rough edges of ethnic, religious, racial, and economic difference in belief were smoothed over, yielding to that blend we now more openly recognize as a middle-class orientation. The "mainstream" has since fragmented into numerous rivulets leaving no single one of them as large as was earlier the case, and no divergent stream quite as remote from the rest as some had previously appeared. In other words, there has been a marked tendency in the direction of pluralism and differentiation. The tendency has been manifest in many ways, for example, in the careers of Malcolm X and Vine Deloria and in the work of Michael Novak and Amiri Baraka (formerly Le-Roi Jones), who have all in one way or another sounded the call to strong ethnic identification. Many have also urged major psychic affiliation with otherwise constituted groups on the basis of sex or sexual orientation, for instance, or on the basis of intellectual style.

### Revolution of Rising Expectations

Whatever the identification base in individual cases, the overall effect is the building of individual meaning systems and primary loyalties in terms of smaller, more particularistic groups, rather than something so diffuse and remote as "the nation" or "the middle class."

At the same time that we were experiencing these pluralist tendencies, people also began identifying a new sense of entitlement, constituting what some called a "revolution of rising expectations." Such expectations, particularly when unfulfilled, bred a new assertiveness among many of the burgeoning identification groups, and some of these groups generated political styles and techniques for expressing their new assertion: the demonstrations, take-overs, and demands of the politics of confrontation. What is more, the new methods often proved successful.<sup>2</sup> A new pug-

nacity surfaced in American public life, a lowered tolerance for any form of denial, restraint, or coercion.

Now as rough as this characterization of the American mood of the past dozen years may be, it helps illuminate contemporary educational discord. In the first place, it accounts for the diminishing allegiance among many Americans to the broad universals as to value and belief that must ground a genuinely "common" school. Instead, we find large numbers clinging more closely to particularist values not shared by other identity groups. And simultaneously, we find a heightened unwillingness to "go along" quietly with the rest—not just pluralism, but an *obtrusive* pluralism. It is not a period when a minority's sense of obligation to majority rule is likely to rest heavily on any group. And this is particularly so when anything as important as education is at stake. It would be hard to find a question more emotionally laden than whether our children are going to turn out to be "our own kind" of people, or whether they will become individuals who cannot comprehend, or doing so, even deliberately reject what we affirm and are as human beings.

### Ordinary People Caught in Stress

Thus, the educational controversies of today take on a distinct flavor, despite the continuing presence of some previously familiar names and tactics. It becomes much more difficult to identify the "dangerous organizations," an undertaking that cannot even begin without presuming the correctness and legitimacy of existing institutions. (From the Mafia's point of view, the courts are the dangerous organizations; but theirs is not the perspective we normally assume or expect others to be taking.)

There just doesn't seem to be enough difference and distance between the program and, under certain circumstances, the tactics of the Klan and the groups that must be accorded at least quasi-legitimate status. The people of Kanawha County, South Boston, and Marquette Park are exhibiting what has variously been called "the politics of the powerless," "the politics

<sup>2</sup> For a documentation of their success, see: Alexander W. Astin, *et al. The Power of Protest*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1975.

of despair," and "up against the wall." Regardless of how others may appraise their stance, in their own eyes, their very way of life is being threatened. And when people find themselves in such circumstances, we cannot be surprised at volatile response. Perhaps the bulk of those populating the ranks of the extremist groups really are, as a major study concluded, "ordinary people caught in certain kinds of stress."<sup>3</sup>

If this is so, then the most obvious way to defuse "dangerous organizations" and their threat to the rest of us would be to relieve the stress wherever possible. There is no doubt that this would require significant compromises on the part of others as to social arrangements and institutions. But I see no better way to deal with the civil strife which, by virtue of the trends and developments I have traced, may only intensify. The past decade has generated such strongly centrifugal forces, along with expanded notions of individual and group entitlements, that earlier solutions seem less and less viable for today's conditions of obtrusive pluralism.

We must devise new ways to deal with the resulting discord. For example, if the *Milwaukee Journal's* analysis of the Marquette Park situation is correct, new mechanisms and procedures for controlling local real estate and banking practices might be far more helpful than trying to deal with the incendiary outcomes of present practice.<sup>4</sup> As far as schools are concerned, I have become convinced that obtrusive pluralism makes the idea of the "common" school far less viable than before. Differences in perception, belief, and priority have become too pronounced to prove compatible with an educational program geared to instilling common knowledge, beliefs, and values.

### The MACOS Controversy

Nowhere is this more evident, it seems to me, than in the MACOS controversy, which has reverberated from Kanawha County farms and mines to Georgia Baptist conventions, the halls of

<sup>3</sup> Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. p. 484.

<sup>4</sup> See: Gregory Gordon and Albert Swanson. "Evolution of a Ghetto: Blacks Greeted by Terror." *Milwaukee Journal*, December 14, 1976.



Woman strikes a defiant pose during 1974 textbook controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia. Photo: Charleston Daily Mail.

Congress, and the offices of the National Science Foundation.<sup>5</sup> This struggle is paradigmatic for its vivid display of the inherent contradictions and logical incompatibilities at stake. In pedagogical terms, the MACOS program is unique and absolutely outstanding. It effectively brings sophisticated concepts, inquiry skills, beliefs, and values to a level where 10- and 11-year-olds can deal with them.

Vehement objections to MACOS have addressed precisely what advocates claim to be its major advantages! Kanawha County fundamentalists do not *want* their children taught an analytic response to social customs, in preference to a moralistic one. They neither want their children to construe social organization as situationally evolved, nor do they want them to learn the skills of ethnographic inquiry. It would be hard to find a more sharply delineated case of one man's meat constituting another's poison.

But what does this suggest, then, for the school? A number of proposals have been offered, among them committees and advisory boards to review new programs and materials and arrangements for providing substitute materials in individual cases where a book offends. These proposals fail, I think, to heed the extent and significance of the differences among us. They may have sufficed to keep the peace at an earlier time, but they will be increasingly hard pressed to do so in a period of obtrusive pluralism. For as one of the authors of a recent joint "Censorship" publication pointed out, "No mechanism will prevent the kinds of problems you have in Kanawha County."<sup>6</sup>

It is my own conviction that we ought to be looking to alternative educational programs to be made available on an optional basis within every community. For surely if the identity groups we have nourished for a decade have any practical meaning, it is that they recommend different educational arrangements and practices, along with different educational goals. The Kanawha County fundamentalists are absolutely right in believing that the MACOS program would conduce to the kind of adults they do not want their children to be. That is just what I happen to want for my own child, so I would like to be able to opt for MACOS. Why can we not *both* be served as we wish? Our views are antithetical, and clearly no compromise could ever really satisfy either of us.

I am aware of at least some of the objections that might be raised against such a proposal. It could further diminish the sphere of what is shared or common among us all, and it could encourage separatism. It might also reduce the ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions some feel important to our durability as a social system.

Educational wisdom has long presumed that the nation could survive the particularism of local educational choice and determination, and it has urged district control precisely in the interests of differentiation and responsiveness. Perhaps today these interests might better and more appropriately be served *within* each district, rather than simply on a geographic, district-to-district basis. If it has not proved too divisive to educate children of different districts differently, why need it prove more so to educate individuals differently within the same district? Such an arrangement might far more accurately reflect the nongeographic character of many of today's most important differences.

This is not the place for marshaling the full argument for educational alternatives. But I have come to conclude that they are the best and most appropriate educational arrangements for an obtrusively plural society—a society where it is not just a few isolated fanatics, but substantial groups of previously sane people who may rather quickly become the "dangerous organizations."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Man: A Course of Study" (MACOS) is a program developed under the leadership of Jerome Bruner by the Education Development Center, with the assistance of the National Science Foundation. It has prompted notice and action on the part of rightwing members of Congress, and it has given rise to national discussion of the meaning and implications of "Secular Humanism."

<sup>6</sup> See: "Censorship: The Challenge to Freedom in the School." Washington, D.C.: American Association of School Administrators, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1975. p. 8.



Mary Anne Raywid is Professor of Education, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York.

Copyright © 1977 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.