

## Education, Religion, and the New Right

I. DAVID WELCH, DONALD C. MEDEIROS, AND GEORGE A. TATE.

There is in the United States today a powerful evangelical movement, well funded and dedicated to conservative political issues. It is pro-family and pro-school prayer. It is anti-evolution, anti-separation of church and state, and anti-humanistic. This new conservative movement has been willing to exploit religious convictions for political gain. It was an important factor in the election of Ronald Reagan as President.

Over the past few years, the conservative right has put increasing pressure on the American educational system to return schools to an image of what they used to be, complete with prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, creation according to Genesis, back-to-basics curriculum, and strong support of traditional family values (that is, Dick and Jane and Spot living in the suburbs with both Mom and Dad).

This pressure is coming primarily from religious fundamentalists who have allied themselves with ultra-conservative politicians, the New Right. Together, they seek to impose a particular religious and political conviction on the people and government of the United States. As educators, we are aware that the conservative right influences a wide variety of issues that directly affect what happens to teachers and students in the classroom. Thus, these issues are of

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A politically powerful religious right threatens separation of church and state in America.

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utmost importance and deserve to be looked at from the educator's perspective.

### Church and State

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*

There are some who fear that the establishment clause of the First Amendment will not survive the 1980s. Certainly, the separation of church and state guaranteed by the Constitution is under attack and violations are nationwide. And there is widespread sentiment among single interest groups that they should be exempted from the restrictions of the First Amendment.

By and large, as a nation we have winked at connections that do exist. The oath of office, "In God We Trust" on our currency, military chaplains, and Congressional prayer breakfasts have all been a part of our national life. It is confusing and, in part, probably contributes to our present problems. To many, the line separating a tradition such as the oath of office and certain activities

carried on in the public schools is very fine indeed.

For instance, in North Dakota, the Ten Commandments were placed in public school classrooms. In South Dakota, the clergy have given religious instruction on school property during school hours. In Wyoming, bibles have been distributed on public school property by religious groups. In Tennessee, public school teachers have included religious aspects of bible study in schools. And, in Utah, students have been given "release time" for religious classes for which academic credit is awarded.

Most of these practices have been challenged in the courts, but their advocates are holding firm. James Robison of James Robison Associates, a fundamental Christian organization, claims that separation of church and state "... is not God's idea. It should be clear to anyone ... that separation of church and state ... means there will be no state church."<sup>1</sup> In fact, if we are to believe the authors of the First Amendment, it means a great deal more than prohibiting a state church. It also means that no religious point of view can be an official view of the United States government. Thus, the Judeo-Christian perspective, no matter how widely held, is not the official religious conviction of the United States.

That was made clear by James Madison, the primary framer of the First Amendment, when he vetoed a bill that would have given land worth \$10 to a Baptist group in the Mississippi Territory. Madison told Congress that the separation of church and state was absolute and that even

such a small bequest could set a rule of law that violated the meaning of the Constitution. In 1802 Jefferson wrote his famous "wall of separation" letter, which made it clear that the First Amendment condemned an "alliance" between church and state.

In spite of this, a bill is occasionally submitted to Congress to declare an acceptance of one religious point of view over others. In 1961 Congressman John Anderson proposed the "Christian Amendment." That amendment would have had the United States "devoutly" recognize "the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and ruler of nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of almighty God." Later, during the presidential campaign of 1980, Anderson said, "It was a dumb thing to do and I should not have introduced it." Nevertheless, we may expect to hear of other such attempts in the coming years.

A closely related area to this is public support, in the form of voucher plans and tuition tax credit, for religiously-oriented private schools. One of the values of a democratic society is freedom of choice. The doctrine of separation of church and state prevents the use of government funds to support religious schools and thereby maximizes freedom of religious belief. If the government supports no religion, then all are free to stand on their own merits.

### School Prayer

There is also increasing pressure from the New Right and religious fundamentalist groups to enact legislation to mandate prayer in the public schools. In separate decisions in 1962 and 1963, the Supreme Court ruled that prayer cannot be introduced into public schools without violating the doctrine of the separation of church and state. No agency of the government can tell children when, where, how, why, or to whom to pray.

Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Jewish leaders, as well as the National Council of Churches, have all affirmed their opposition to legislation making school prayer more likely. It is only members of the evangelical right who consider prayer a major issue and keep it in the news. Their desire to mix education and religion is an effort to force the public schools to

accede to their particular form of religious belief.

The term "voluntary" prayer is often used by advocates of school prayer. Their use of the term is somewhat misleading. What it means is that mandated group prayer would become law and that someone could choose *not* to participate. In fact, the present law is a voluntary prayer law. No law precludes private prayer in the schools. What is forbidden is public, group prayer. Any student can pray in school—before school, between classes, in class, or at lunch. The same holds true for teachers. However, the "voluntary" school prayer laws are constructed to create pressure to pray. Imagine the agony of a student caught between parents who, because of religious beliefs, say not to pray and friends and teachers who do pray.

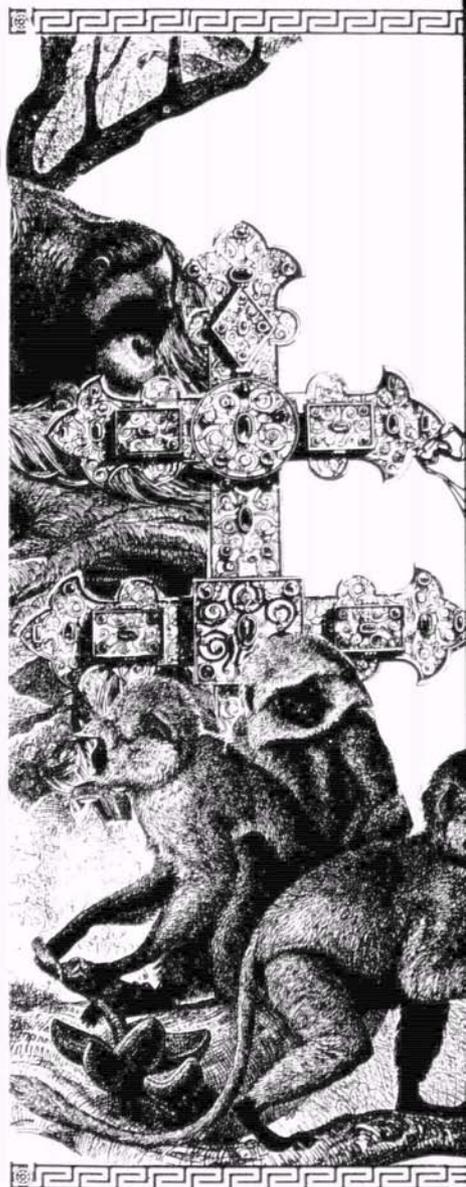
Religion and prayer are personal values that no one, especially government, has a right to impose or forbid. The Constitution is explicitly clear on this issue. The Supreme Court decisions have not forbidden teachers or students from praying in school, and most educators respect this right. They also respect the right of teachers and students who do not pray to be spared any social pressure to alter their beliefs to avoid insult or condemnation.

### Censorship

A related problem is the attempt by conservatives and others to control the contents of textbooks, library books, and other learning materials. A recent study sponsored by ASCD and other associations concluded that censorship pressures are "real, nationwide, and growing."<sup>2</sup> The attitude of some fundamentalist leaders who are encouraging these attacks is typified in the words of Moral Majority head Jerry Falwell:

Textbooks have become absolutely obscene and vulgar. Many of them are openly attacking the integrity of the Bible. Humanism is the main thrust of the public school textbook. Darwinian evolution is taught from kindergarten age right through high school. . . . For our nation, this is a life-and-death struggle, and the battle line for this struggle is in the textbooks.<sup>3</sup>

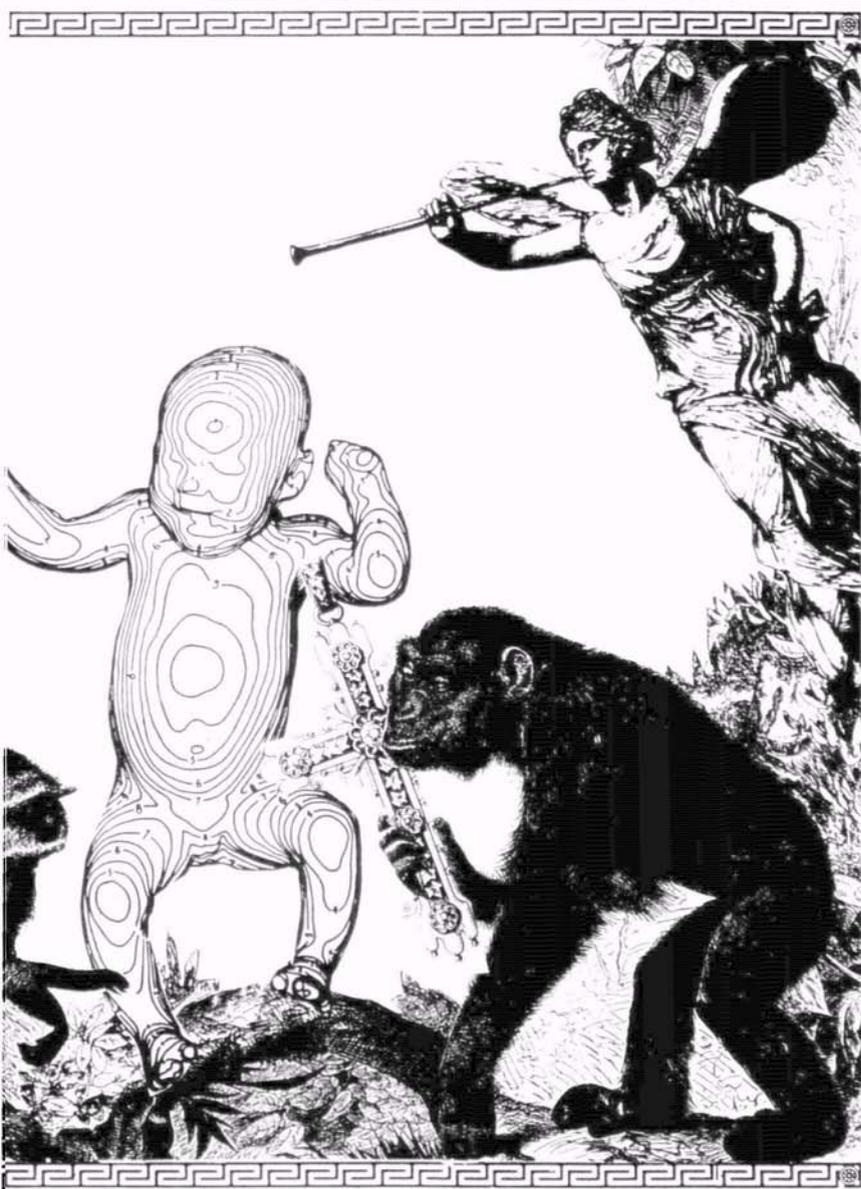
The strategy used by the New Right and religious fundamentalists is to "go public" by contacting community leaders and the media. In bringing pressure on school board



members, the appearance is given that the community actively supports censorship of certain books. It is questionable, however, whether the American public really wants to censor books in a nation committed to freedom of the press and to the concept of personal freedom.

### Evolution vs. Creationism

The anti-evolution issue was supposedly laid to rest years ago because of the strength of the evidence regarding evolution and the agreement of the religious establishment



that evolution could be a process of creation. Such agreement assigned to religion the "why" of creation and to science the "how." But a number of factors have recently added fuel to the issue. First, the New Right has used the religious fundamentalists' concern over biblical creation as a political issue to court votes. Second, President Reagan's comment that he thought the story of creation should be taught in schools has been used to advance claims of the need for a creationist point of view in schools—claims based on a belief that religion

can more adequately answer both the "why" and the "how."

Actually, there is much more teaching of the creationist point of view than even the creationists wish to admit. For example, in 1965 Betty Chambers, a past president of the American Humanist Association, discovered that her children's biological science classes in Spokane, Washington, used films produced by the Moody Institute of Science, which is closely connected with the Moody Bible Institute. It turned out that the entire school district used

these films, as did 1,600 other districts including Seattle and San Francisco. According to Chambers, these "beautifully made films are extraordinarily artful works of religious propaganda intended to suggest the fixity of species."<sup>4</sup>

A leader in the campaign to have creationism taught in the schools is the Institute for Creation Research, which is affiliated with the Christian Heritage College, a small evangelical school. Another is the California-based Institute for Creation Life Studies, which has played a major role in legislative efforts to have creationism introduced in Georgia's schools. Creation Life Studies distributes a kit to those who wish to promote creationism in the schools and cautions its users not to reveal its source. As a publisher of instructional materials on creationism, the Institute stands to gain millions of dollars a year where states require use of such materials.

There are several issues about which educators need to be informed. First, evolution is a scientific principle that is concerned with *how* the universe was formed, not *why*. Many religious persons see no incompatibility between the principle of evolution and their religious views. Second, the problem with teaching both evolution and creationism is that evolution is a theory of scientific inquiry, submitted to severe questioning and investigation. Those who believe in creationism hold it as an article of faith.

Advocates of scientific creationism are not simply asking to have the bible taught in science classes, but to present a scientific justification for Genesis.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, scientific creationism holds that (1) the earth is young (10,000 years old rather than 4 billion years, the estimate of prevalent thought); (2) the great flood shaped the features of the planet; (3) planets, stars, plants, animals (in fact, all things) were literally created in six days; (4) plants and animals were created as they are and have not evolved from other plants and animals; and (5) fossils are the result of animals drowning in the great flood.

Scientific creationists have done little original research, using instead bits and pieces of accumulated scientific information. Their major claims against the theory of evolution are

## A Statement Affirming Evolution as a Principle of Science

*The following statement, which was drafted and endorsed by a number of leading scientists, educators, and religious figures, appeared in Humanist and was distributed to major school districts throughout the country.*

For many years it has been well established scientifically that all known forms of life, including human beings, have developed by a lengthy process of evolution. It is also verifiable today that very primitive forms of life, ancestral to all living forms, came into being thousands of millions of years ago. They constituted the trunk of a "tree of life" that, in growing, branched more and more; that is, some of the later descendants of these earliest living things, in growing more complex, became ever more diverse and increasingly different from one another. Humans and the other highly organized types of today constitute the present twig-end of that tree. The human twig and that of the apes sprang from the same apelike progenitor branch.

Scientists consider that none of their principles, no matter how seemingly firmly established—and no ordinary "facts" of direct observation either—are absolute certainties. Some possibility of human error, even if very slight, always exists. Scientists welcome the challenge of further testing of any view whatever. They use such terms as *firmly* estab-

lished for conclusions founded on rigorous evidence that have continued to withstand searching criticism.

The principle of biological evolution, as just stated, meets these criteria exceptionally well. It rests upon a multitude of discoveries of very different kinds that concur and complement one another. It is therefore accepted into humanity's general body of knowledge by scientists and other reasonable persons who have familiarized themselves with the evidence.

In recent years, the evidence for the principle of evolution has continued to accumulate. This has resulted in a firm understanding of biological evolution, including the further confirmation of the principle of natural selection and adaptation that Darwin and Wallace over a century ago showed to be an essential part of the process of biological evolution.

There are no alternative theories to the principle of evolution, with its "tree of life" pattern, that any competent biologist of today takes seriously. Moreover, the principle is so important for an understanding of the world we live in and of ourselves that the public in general, including students taking biology in school, should be made aware of it, and of the fact that it is firmly established in the view of the modern scientific community.

Creationism is not scientific; it is a purely religious view held by some

religious sects and persons and strongly opposed by other religious sects and persons. Evolution is the only presently known strictly scientific and nonreligious explanation for the existence and diversity of living organisms. It is therefore the only view that should be expounded in public school courses on science, which are distinct from those on religion.

We, the undersigned, call upon all local school boards, manufacturers of textbooks and teaching materials, elementary and secondary teachers of biological science, concerned citizens, and educational agencies to do the following:

—Resist and oppose measures currently before several state legislatures that would require creationist views of origins to be given equal treatment and emphasis in public-school biology classes and text materials.

—Reject the concept, currently being put forth by certain religious and creationist pressure groups, that alleges that evolution is itself a tenet of a religion of "secular humanism," and as such is unsuitable for inclusion in the public school science curriculum.

—Give vigorous support and aid to those classroom teachers who present the subject matter of evolution fairly and who often encounter community opposition.

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that dating methods are uncertain, fossil records are incomplete; we have seen stars "die" but have not observed a star being "born"; and the second law of thermodynamics demonstrates that evolution is impossible.

These arguments are countered by the scientific community, which insists that Carbon 14 and other dating methods have been verified by historical records and vigorously checked to reveal consistent patterns. Fossil records are incomplete for higher life forms, but there is a mas-

sive amount of evidence to indicate the evolutionary changes among lower life forms. The second law of thermodynamics has been demonstrated by Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine to apply only to closed systems. And, finally, scientists hold that we are in fact seeing stars being born every day; it's just that it takes 10 million years. What we see in the universe are stars in various stages of life.

It becomes a question of whether or not creationists wish to have creation presented as a theory and submitted to the same rigorous scrutiny

to which scientific theories are exposed. We suggest that since the philosophical position of American education is inclusive, it should not oppose creationism being introduced in the classroom—as long as it is open for debate the same as any other subject brought up in class.

### Moral Education

Another objection of the New Right and religious fundamentalists is to values clarification techniques, which, it appears, have been misinterpreted. Educators have been accused of trying to induce students to reject the

values of their parents and to accept a "hidden curriculum" of values their parents do not hold.

In truth, values clarification does not teach values. Rather, it attempts to help students define the values they already have and understand how they influence their behavior.

### Different Kinds of Humanists

Much of the criticism over moral education is leveled at humanists and humanistic philosophy. There is much confusion about what is meant by the word "humanist." This is partly because there are several humanist groups whose definition of the word varies according to their individual perspectives.

First, there is the American Humanist Association. It is to this group that the New Right and religious fundamentalists refer when they take exception to what is happening in the schools. The American Humanist Association represents the thoughts of the classical humanists in modern life. The classical humanists valued the importance of humans in nature against the primacy of a god. This view is expressed in a number of questions often printed on the back cover of *The Humanist*,<sup>6</sup> the official publication of the AHA. For example:

- Do you believe that we will continue to learn more about the way the earth was formed, the way life developed, and how we create our ethical and moral systems?
- In your view, are religious and sacred scriptures human creations that serve different purposes at different times and places?
- Do you decide whether an action is right or wrong on the basis of its probable consequences to yourself and others?
- Are you convinced that respect for ecological balance and personal restraint are necessary until we can more clearly see paths into the future?
- Do you feel that self-fulfillment comes through concern and involvement with the well-being of others?

The Association for Humanistic Psychology, which admits to membership both psychologists and non-

### Guidelines for Handling Attacks from Religious and Political Extremists

1. Establish procedures for handling community conflict before it becomes a crisis.

2. Keep lines of communication open with the media so that false information, unjust criticism, and misrepresentation can be corrected quickly—preferably before it reaches the public.

3. When attacks are serious, present the case to the public as quickly as possible. Make sure the educator's point of view is heard far and wide.

4. Don't dismiss criticism without considering if it is justified. If a criticism is fair, accurate, and well-documented, it is foolish not to admit to error.

5. Challenge irresponsible methods quickly, firmly, and openly. Insist that charges be specific, that the context of quotes are given, that statistics and percentages are explained, and that sources of information are identified.

6. Obtain *in writing* any charges made against a person or program.

Make sure that persons who are charged have an opportunity to respond before any legal action is taken.

7. Refer any question of censorship to school attorneys immediately, without discussion at the building or district level.

8. Don't allow any decision about an issue to be made in the same meeting in which the issue is first raised.

9. Study rhetoric of extremists and single issue advocates. Be alert to vague writing, slurs, and broad charges with little or no factual basis. Be alert to the argument of correlation as cause.

10. When asked a loaded question and caught off guard, take time to dissect the question and expose it for what it is. After discussing the question, ask that it be rephrased. This will avoid the impression of evasiveness, frustration, or deceit.

psychologists, is concerned with human nature. Within AHP, there is a religious network and acceptance of a theistic understanding of the world. Many AHP members hold religious views and a number are themselves members of the clergy. It is probably true that they are at the liberal end of the religious continuum, but they are not atheists and the association does not represent an atheistic point of view. Humanistic psychologists assume, for example, that humans supercede the sum of their parts, that humans have choice, and that humans are best understood by studying humans. None of these assumptions, of course, precludes a religious point of view.

Third is the Association for Humanistic Education, which represents a wide variety of concerns about education. There is no official policy concerning the religious beliefs of its members who, in fact, represent a number of religious beliefs and denominations. The AHE believes that humans should develop all aspects

of themselves and that schools should not be concerned solely with facts to the exclusion of the physical body, values, social issues, and personal worth. The purpose of the AHE is printed on the inside back cover of the *Journal of Humanistic Education*:

The Association shall serve to facilitate the development and dissemination of knowledge, skills and techniques, to aid educators and students in nurturing the capacity to live as fully functioning human beings, and to assist persons to participate fully in humanistic social transformation.<sup>7</sup>

There is nothing about the goals and concerns of the AHE that precludes a person from holding deeply felt religious convictions.

The positions of the AHP and the AHE are considered to be inclusive philosophically, which means that so far as information is concerned, any topic of study is legitimate. The positions of the AHP and the AHE have no argument with the personal beliefs of students or parents. They are, in fact, organizations that democra-

cies foster and that foster democracies.

### Secular Humanism

There is a fourth category of humanism, one that has no official organization or philosophical framework. Yet it is this brand—secular humanism—that is most strongly criticized by religious fundamentalists and the New Right.

What is secular humanism? For most, the word "secular" means a concern with worldly things, apart from church and religious affairs. If secular is defined as opposed to religion, then it cannot itself be a religion. However, while religion is often identified with belief in a divine being, it can also refer to any system of beliefs, practices, or philosophy involving a code of ethics.

Religious humanism, often referred to as secular humanism, is described by the American Ethical Union as willing to base its convictions on respect for human beings rather than belief in the supernatural.<sup>8</sup> Its fundamental tenets aim at the full development of every human being, the universal use of the scientific method, affirmation of the dignity of all humans, personal freedom combined with social responsibility, and fulfillment through the development of ethical and creative living.

Although secular humanism may be considered a religion, it is not an organized religion like the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Moslem, Protestant, or Jewish religions. Secular humanism has no church, no rituals, no professed doctrine. It exists only in the minds of those who wish to align themselves with a certain perspective, which as a result, may vary from secular humanist to secular humanist.

The New Right and religious fundamentalists believe that opposition to public prayer and aid to parochial schools is a tenet of secular humanism, and that because the government does not support parochial schools and has banned public prayer, the government is therefore supporting secular humanism.

The position of the United States Constitution is that government must remain neutral regarding religion.

Neutrality must not be confused with negation. When the courts rule against violations of the First Amendment, they are not being punitive with regard to religion; they are reaffirming the right to freedom of religion in America.

Aside from that, the actual number of Americans who are secular humanists is not great. Any religious "contamination" of the public schools probably errs on the side of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs rather than on the side of any secular humanist point of view since the great majority of school board members, administrators, and teachers are Christians and Jews.

As educators, we should resist efforts of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or anyone else to have children in the public schools participate in practices, traditions, and rituals of particular religions. We must resist the imposition of any religious point of view on the public school system.<sup>9</sup> ■

<sup>1</sup> Larry Rochelle, "Born-Again Politics: Now the Republicans," *The Humanist*, November-December 1980, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> See report on p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> "Textbooks in Public Schools: A Disgrace and Concern to Americans," *Journal-Champion*, May 4, 1979, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Bette Chambers, "Why A Statement Affirming Evolution?" *The Humanist*, January-February 1977, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> "Putting Darwin in the Dock," *Time*, March 16, 1981, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> For example, *The Humanist*, November-December 1979.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of Humanistic Education*, January-February 1977.

<sup>8</sup> *The Humanist*, September-October 1976, back cover.

<sup>9</sup> For other suggestions and sources of help, see Harry Overstreet and Bonaro Overstreet, *The Strange Tactics of Extremism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1964); Peggy Shriver, "A Briefing on the Right Wing" (Office of Research, Evaluation, and Planning National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027); J. Charles Park, "Community Conflict and the Schools: Procedures for Response," *Wisconsin English Journal* (April 1980): 28-29.

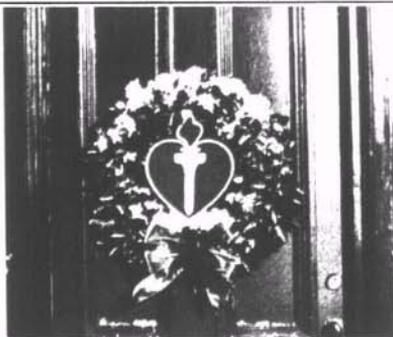
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