

# Against Ban Books' Threats (United States): Our Movement of Rising Resistance

Sunday 30 July 2023, by [GRAFF Harvey J.](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2023).

**Across the media and elsewhere, we hear of organized efforts to ban books, especially for school-aged young people, and to censor school curricula, primarily history and civics**

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New currents of resistance, especially by young people, rise in response. We hear too little about them. Underreported and seldom viewed together as a national counter-movement or movement in its own right is what I now identify as not yet connected elements of a 2020s “massive resistance.”

This is the developing response to misinformation and suppression of basic rights by censorship, overreach, and unconstitutional, anti-democratic dictatorship at all levels.

The strength of widespread reactions to anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ attacks has rational Republicans concerned about losing votes. The results of the 2022 mid-term elections as well as patterns across numerous opinion polls support their fears.

## The Attacks

False charges of teaching “critical race theory” (undefined by those attacking it) and “age-inappropriate” or “obscene” books do the work of politicians by attracting media and fearful parents’ attention. Following scripts from the Heritage Foundation, the Koch Brothers and Moms for Liberty, among others, well-funded groups on the right do grave damage to public education.

These book-banning campaigns seek to reverse more than a hundred years of efforts to combat censorship and establish children’s rights. Although the historical precedents are lengthy, today’s efforts began in earnest during the last three years.

The ideologues contradict the wishes of the far greater number of parents and students. All reputable surveys agree with CBS News that “Americans overwhelmingly reject the idea of banning books about history or race. One reason for that: a big majority also say[s] teaching about the history of race in America makes students understand what others went through.

“Large majorities — more than 8 in 10 — don’t think books should be banned from school for discussing race and criticizing U.S. history, for depicting slavery in the past or more broadly for

political ideas they disagree with.” More than 70% of those polled in a survey commissioned by the American Historical Association support “divisive” and “uncomfortable” schooling, across all lines of party, education and age.

Republican politicians, right-wing opinion columnists and editorial boards, and Fox News re-circulate talking points from Tucker Carlson, Christopher Rufo, Ted Cruz and Donald Trump. Mounting evidence suggests that they appeal to a declining minority.

The well-funded, highly organized national misinformation campaign targeting public education and literacy is very successful in reaching its intended audiences: rightwing sympathizers and fearful, manipulable parents.

Funded by the Kochs, Heritage Foundation and PAC, Bradley Foundation, Robert Gates and others, their propagandists like fake journalist Rufo admit to fabricating quotations and allegations. Books are banned; so are curricula topics.

The anti-factual message is dishonestly spam-mailed with fallacious “opinion surveys” and requests for donations to unknowledgeable millions by the Faith & Freedom Coalition and Michigan’s Hillsdale College. The latter offers “free” online courses to tempt the fearful and unknowing to purchase online degrees on the 1776 Project’s white-washed fictionalization of American history.

Hillsdale now also markets a speculative chain of “Classical Academy” Latin- and STEM-based private elementary “schools” as franchises of Hillsdale College. Private Christian and precariously accredited Hillsdale is DeSantis’ model for remaking liberal arts education in Florida.

## **The Resistance Rises**

Young adult novelist and literature professor Ashley Hope Perez’s national prize winning novel *Out of Darkness* sat unchallenged on library shelves from 2015 until 2020, when organized banning actively commenced. With civil rights, free speech, authors’ rights, librarians’ and citizens’ challenges, bans that violated district and state guidelines and laws are facing resistance.

So far, bans of *Out of Darkness* have been rescinded in several counties particularly in ban-flooded Utah after district superintendents or school boards were confronted with their own formal free-speech policies. That is a growing movement of legal resistance to unconstitutional actions, sometimes by authors and their representatives and sometimes by civil liberties groups.

With few exceptions, the authors of targeted books are racial and ethnic minorities, women, and/or LGBTQ, regardless of the national and international acclaim they have earned sometimes over decades. The only white male authors on banned lists have LGBTQ protagonists. Mere mentions of sexuality, romantic attraction, or differences lead quickly to radical exaggeration and distortion.

Few book-banners have any familiarity with the actual contents of their targets. Graphic novels including Art Spiegelman’s award-winning account of Jews in the Holocaust, *Maus*, and an adaptation of Anne Frank’s *Diary* attract condemnation and outright banning because they might make readers “uncomfortable” or are purported to be “divisive,” categories that are never defined.

The underreported new and mounting “massive resistance” is an increasingly joint effort by librarians, students, authors, publishers, and civil libertarians more or less in that order. I call for greater communication and cooperation.

Not surprisingly, librarians lead in fighting back, at least as often individually and locally as with the national American Library Association's and Freedom to Read Foundation's leadership. This is sometimes part of union organizing drives and sometimes at the risk of losing their own jobs.

Imaginatively and originally, the Nashville (Tenn.) Public Library introduced a limited edition "I read banned books" library card. Teachers and librarians also remind youth people, "You can ban a book, but can you stop teens from finding it online." Banning parents and school boards typically, and ironically, miss that.

Individually, sometimes along with librarians, sometimes cooperatively with PEN America, scholarly organizations, ACLU, National Coalition Against Censorship, Red.Wine.Blue and publishers, authors also fight back. We need stronger leadership and organization across genres, generations, and interest groups.

Especially impressive, imaginative, and courageous, teenage high school students across the country and especially in Texas lead by organizing "read banned books clubs" and reading groups. Sometimes they act with the help of individual schools, teachers, parents, and local booksellers and authors who provide copies of books.

Social justice, LGBTQ rights, freedom to read, and the rights of the young are major motivations and themes. Some of the clubs initiate lawsuits against schools and local authorities. Texas, Florida, and even small-town Pennsylvania groups set examples that inspire peers elsewhere.

Some exceptional teens, often racial and ethnic minorities, add individual voices brilliantly. In the Dallas Morning News, 9<sup>th</sup> grader Sriya Tallapragada writes, "Adults who want to ban schoolbooks don't understand how we students read them." She continues, "Often the larger message of a book overshadows any uncomfortable language."

In the Opinion pages of the New York Times, Viet Thanh Nguyen reports movingly how "My Young Mind Was Disturbed by a Book. It Changed My Life." The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, author of *The Sympathizer*, attributes his intellectual beginnings: "When I was 12 or 13 years old, I was not prepared for the racism, the brutality or the sexual assault in Larry Heinemann's 1974 novel, *Close Quarters*."

He continues, "If we oppose banning some books, we should oppose banning any book. If our society isn't strong enough to withstand the weight of difficult or challenging — and even hateful or problematic — ideas, then something must be fixed.... And loving books is really the point...."

Four months later, on April 18, 2022, Southern California high school junior Sungjoo Yoon boldly announces, "Take it From a Student: We Should Argue About Books, Not Bans." As a sophomore, he led a petition drive to remove five classic novels from a banned book list (it gathered almost 5000 signatures) and spoke at school board meetings.

From these experiences, he "had a long-overdue realization: How we as Americans approach restrictions on literature curriculums is not only flawed but also wholly reactionary. My experience... convinced me that the problem is not that we disagree but how. We need to shift focus away from reflexive outrage about restrictions and bans, and toward actual discussions of the merits and drawbacks of the individual books."

If only more adults would read and listen. Can they?

## **Next a Spectator Sport**

Founder and president of Interfaith America, author and father, Eboo Patel adds an accompanying adult parental voice. He writes clearly about “What I Want My Kids to Learn About American Racism.” Recalling his own educational awakening 30 years ago through reading, he observes that his children are learning about racism more immediately and at younger ages.

“My kids are 12 and 15. As they progress through adolescence and become even more attuned to the politics and culture of their nation, I want their schools to play the appropriate role in shaping them to be participating citizens of a diverse democracy. That means teaching an expansive version of American history and instilling in them a sense of responsibility to help make the next chapter more just and inclusive. Citizenship is not a spectator sport.”

This is precisely what Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education, Heritage Foundation, Faith and Freedom Coalition, Hillsdale College, and rightwing politicians do not want.

There are mounting signs of progress on the ground. I mentioned unbannings when citizens confront school superintendents and boards of education with their own stated policies upholding free speech, and/or threaten legal action. Many cases now move through the courts.

In rare instances, such as calls to “ban the Bible” or algebra, exposure of illogic and self-contradiction, as well as action on constitutional grounds, is effective. Changing state laws to make banning books easier prompted one long-time Florida activist to the logical counter of proposing publicly banning the Bible in accord with new laws’ terms. A Washington Post humorist imagined that one state legislator added, “Let’s ban algebra, too,” because it causes widespread “discomfort.”

The Miami Florida Board of Education reversed itself by accepting sex education books that it had rejected previously. Some schools compromise by adding “content warning labels” instead of banning books.

Especially compelling is increasing evidence that few parents are choosing to take action by enrolling in programs to restrict their school-age children’s reading of school library books.

## **State-level Censors**

With right-wing Republican-domination and the ambitions of their governors, Texas and Florida lead the race for white supremacy and self-caricature. They spew fact-free violations of free speech and children’s rights, and contradict established understandings of child development.

The bar is low. A Tennessee Republican state representative, Jerry Sexton, responded to a colleague’s question about what he would do with the books he banned: “I don’t have a clue, but I would burn them.”

As part of a statewide election campaign (from which he later withdrew), Texas state house representative Matt Krause’s office produced — but could not explain — a list of 850 books supposedly in school or public libraries that he demanded without definition or explanation be “investigated.”

Inspection of the list quickly confirmed that it was compiled by a literature- and history-ignorant Google word search. Krause, his office, and his vocal supporters are completely ignorant of the contents of the books. This is part of what I’ve named “the new illiteracy,” the condemnation and

campaign to ban books while lacking any familiarity with their contents.

Again in Texas, the Governor assaults trans-youth, illegally denying health care and protection from bullying. He disallows protecting the young from parental and other adult abuse. In Oklahoma, a teacher was threatened with having her license revoked for explaining to her students how to access “banned books” legally.

One West Philadelphia teacher adds reality to the nondebates: “Book Bans? My School Doesn’t Even Have a Library. How underfunding is its own form of censorship.”

A number of states try to limit the books for which students may search. Virginia attempts to label books as “obscene” and alternatively ban them, restrict their sales, or sue publishers, booksellers, or the books themselves. Judges find no merit in these illogical, unconstitutional stunts.

In Ohio, a home-schooled, non-college educated, former member of the State Board of Education and current member of the State House, argued against inclusive history education because she believes that “both sides of the Holocaust must be taught” and “only 300,000 Jews” were killed. Her colleagues only gently scolded her.

Meanwhile, with no debate and ignoring all testimony and opinion polls, the substantially appointed State Board of Education rescinded its own 2020 resolution in support of anti-racist, inclusive education.

### **Fraudulent Faith and Local Lunacies**

For decades, across the states, Christian home-schooling parents proclaim doctrines of “parental rights” that have no basis in law and contradict the more than century-long struggle to establish the fundamental rights of children and young people. They clash with everything we know about child and adolescent development.

Among their tactics are myths about children “identifying” as animals in schools, the threat of unisex and gender-neutral restrooms, transgender young people competing in school sports, and endless streams of condemned but rarely read books, increasingly graphic books. Families home-schooling with a 1930s Nazi curriculum make the news but solicit no action by local or state authorities.

Most of the action, especially regarding efforts to censor reading, ban books, and limit libraries and librarians takes place in counties, cities and school districts. These are the trenches, sites of sometimes all-out rhetorical, socio-cultural, political, and legal warfare, often ignoring the law and established processes and procedures.

We know the anti-constitutional and anti-child development book, education, and growing up banners do not, and perhaps cannot, read. But are they listening? The future of young generations and a semi-democratic nation depends on it. We must act collectively, and quickly. [\[1\]](#) . [\[2\]](#)

**HARVEY J. GRAFF**

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## **P.S.**

- Against the Current No. 225, July/August 2023:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc225/our-movement-of-rising-resistance/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] At a moment of intensifying rightwing attacks and even defunding of libraries for refusing to remove books on Queer and anti-racist topics, the author has supplied an extensive list of references and sources, which can be obtained from him by writing to [graff.40@osu.edu](mailto:graff.40@osu.edu)

[2] Thanks to David Finkel and Ashley Perez for their comments.