

EDITORIAL

Our Watered-Down School Books

What is the purpose of education in a democracy? Is it to fill people's heads with facts and figures that will be filed away and forgotten? Or is it to try to provide them with some insight and understanding for the problems they will have to face and the decisions they will have to make?

Three centuries ago John Milton said in his famous essay, *Of Education*, "I call therefore a compleat and generous Education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices both private and publick of Peace and War." No one has yet improved upon that definition. Never before have we so badly needed men who could perform "justly, skilfully and magnanimously." Even the best that our society can produce will find it hard enough to cope with the problems of the nuclear world.

Yet there is disturbing evidence that we are deliberately impairing the understanding and insight of our young people in two of their most important studies: civics and history. In a recent article in *The School Review*, published by the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Education, Prof. Mark Krug poses this question: "Does not the exaggerated objectivity of the textbook writers . . . fail to stimulate in students a genuine knowledgeable commitment to the democratic system of government and way of life, fail to imbue them with a desire to improve our society, and fail to prepare them for intelligent choice making, which should be the basic characteristic of a citizen in a free democracy?"

Professor Krug is not the only authority who is concerned about "exaggerated objectivity" in our civics and history books. Henry Steele Commager, the eminent historian, says, "The whole purpose seems to be to take out any ideas to which anybody might object and to balance all sections and interests."

A textbook analyst of the Board of Education of New York City says: "Many of the textbooks

are strangely dull, lifeless and bear striking resemblances to one another. . . . Critical of neither the past nor the present, they encourage little respect for the historian's craft. . . . They betray a basic lack of confidence in presenting this country full face because some of the warts may show. . . ."

These are serious charges. How can our young people understand the difficulty and the complexity of the world they live in if we oversimplify its problems and water down every controversy to suit the popular taste?

As an example of this bland treatment of a controversial issue, Professor Krug points to the textbook, *Our American Government*, and the way it handles the Supreme Court decision of 1954, which outlawed segregation in the public schools. This, he says, is "in many ways an admirable book." Here is an excerpt:

The problem of educational opportunity is especially real in some sections of the country where different schools are provided for children of different races. In such cases the minority group often suffers because of its inferior schools.

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court made a decision that separate schools for Negro children were unconstitutional. This decision caused much controversy, but there was general agreement, however, that some system must be developed to provide equal educational opportunities for all children.

The decision caused a great deal more than "much controversy." It caused Little Rock and massive resistance. It caused the President of the United States to order the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock, because we are a government of laws, and ultimately it caused people to obey the law. It is misleading to say that "there was general agreement that some system must be developed to provide equal educational opportunities for all children."

This statement leaves room for the "separate but equal" doctrine, which is the very thing that

the Supreme Court outlawed, and there was violent disagreement about that.

Another popular textbook, *Civics for Americans*, cited by Professor Krug, explains the poll tax as follows:

. . . several states require the payment of a *poll tax*. This means that a voter must pay a certain amount of money in order to vote. The amount is small, perhaps one or two dollars. However, some states which require a poll tax also require that it be paid for a certain number of years before an election. If a voter has neglected to pay his tax, he may find that he owes ten dollars or more. If the voter is poor, he will probably not be able to pay his poll taxes and therefore he will lose his vote.

The truth about the poll tax is that it is an iniquitous device that has been used through the years to deprive Negro citizens of the right to vote. The truth also is that it is wholly incompatible with democracy. It now appears that it finally will be repealed by constitutional amendment.

The genius of the American system is its capacity for self-improvement. If we do not like something, we can change it without shooting our leaders. We believe in the truth. Unlike the Communists and other totalitarians, we admit our faults and our failures, because admitting them is the first step toward correcting them.

When John Glenn sat in his capsule waiting for the Atlas rocket to hurl him into outer space, no one knew for sure whether his mission would succeed. Yet we told the whole world, because as Colonel Glenn later said, "We are not ashamed of what we are doing, and we don't feel we have to hide it." To us that was the greatest glory of the event—greater than the technical achievement, greater even than the courage and the dignity of John Glenn.

If we can tell the world the whole truth at a time like that, how can we do less for our school-children?