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HOW POLITICS SHAPED THE TEXAS SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOK ADOPTION IN 2002

The State Board of Education in Texas last adopted textbooks for courses in history, geography, government and economics 12 years ago. Political activists, pressure groups and state board members lodged numerous ideological objections to textbook content at the time. Publishers resisted some demands to change that content to satisfy those political objections. For example, one publisher rejected a call to emphasize “states’ rights” as causing the Civil War. The publisher noted that scholars have shown slavery was the main trigger for secession and the ensuing conflict. By the time the state board voted in November 2002 on which textbooks to adopt, however, publishers had agreed to make a number of other content changes. Among those changes:

Slavery and Civil Rights

- Publisher agreed to delete a sentence reading “Christians would later accept slavery in other contexts.” A critic had argued that textbook discussions of slavery in the United States were too negative and anti-Christian. Critics also complained the textbooks placed too much focus on slavery in the United States without noting that the practice was common elsewhere and that Americans ultimately ended slavery in this country.
- Publisher deleted a Critical Thinking question asking students whether they think civil rights activists who broke the law (many, such as Martin Luther King Jr., engaged in civil disobedience) in their fight for equality were justified. A critic argued that the question encouraged students to break the law themselves.

Religious Ideology

- Publisher of a world geography/cultures textbook for sixth grade altered references to the formation of glaciers and landscape features “millions of years ago” to instead read “in the distant past” and “over time” so that the passages did not conflict with the beliefs of biblical creationists that Earth is just a few thousand years old.
- Publisher agreed to eliminate references to fossil fuels being formed “millions of years ago” so as not to conflict with biblical timelines.
- Publisher agreed to add the following sentence to its world history textbook: “Christianity, for example, appealed to educated people, as it adopted a complex set of ideas about God and life. Its spirituality and its promise of eternal life also appealed to many other groups.”

Islam

- Publisher agreed to delete a sentence reading “[M]any other teachings in the Quran, such as the importance of honesty, honor, giving to others and having love and respect for their families, govern their daily lives.” A critic had called the sentence simply “more propaganda” for Islam.
- Publisher altered a passage that discussed how Osama bin Laden’s instructions to kill Americans were not supported by the Quran, which tells soldiers to treat

civilians with kindness and justice. A critic insisted that the passage was an example of textbooks “going to great length to put a positive light on Muslim teachings.” The publisher changed the passage so that it said simply said that not all Muslims agreed with bin Laden.

Government and American ‘Exceptionalism’

- Publishers altered long-accepted descriptions of the Constitution as a “living document” (in some cases deleting the phrase) because critics argued that this description was hostile to a strict interpretation of the Constitution favored by political conservatives and implied (they argued) that the document could be changed without amendment.
- Publisher deleted “In the United States, everyone has a right to free public education” after a critic argued that the sentence suggested education is an entitlement.

Science and the Environment

- Publisher agreed to delete a textbook feature article on Earth’s environment because a critic objected that the passage suggested global warming is real.
- Publisher of a world geography/cultures textbook changed “many scientists” to “some scientists” in a discussion of scientists who accept the overwhelming evidence about the greenhouse effect and global climate change.
- Publisher agreed to delete a sentence reading “Acid rain that is produced in the United States and carried north by wind is a major environmental problem for Canada.” A critic had objected to the negative impact of acid rain being discussed as a fact and to the implication that America was responsible.
- Publisher of a world geography textbook removed links to the Environmental Protection Agency website after a critic complained that a textbook passage on the environment contained “too much trash” and “promotes activism and sends students to EPA websites.”