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Witness:

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New York, NY

Testimony:

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

My experience with history textbooks and publishing goes back some twenty-five years. In 1978, I was the co-author of an American history textbook, *After Hiroshima: The U.S.A. since 1945*. For fourteen years, I have been director of the American Textbook Council, an independent New York-based educational organization that reviews history textbooks and social studies curricula. It is dedicated to improving instructional materials and civic education nationwide.

Since 1989, the Council has identified many problems with history textbooks. In American Textbook Council reports and in persuasive books such as Sandra Stotsky's *Losing Our Language* and Diane Ravitch's *The Language Police*, textbook critics reach the same conclusions. Textbook content is thinner and thinner, and what there is, is increasingly deformed by identity politics and pressure groups.

The first history textbook problem is what educators, critics and journalists informally refer to as "dumbing down." Many history textbooks reflect lowered sights for general education. They raise basic questions about sustaining literacy and civic understanding in a democratic polity and culture. Bright photographs, broken format and seductive color overwhelm the text and confuse the page. Typeface is larger and looser, resulting in many fewer words and much more white space. The text disappears or gets lost. Among editors, phrases such as "text-heavy," "information-loaded," "fact-based," and "non-visual" are negatives. A picture, they insist, tells a thousand words.

This declining textbook quality is neither a right nor a left issue. Publishers are adjusting to short attention spans and non-readers. Too many children cannot or do not want to read history, which contains concrete facts and complicated concepts, reading that requires some facility with language. So textbooks become picture and activity books instead.

The second history textbook problem—increasing content bias and distortion—involves political judgments. The critique of distorted content in history is, of course, a problematic one. One person's distortion is another's correction. Yet the list of textbook activists grows. It spans gender, ethnic, religious, environmental and nutrition causes that want to use textbooks to advance their agendas. New heroes in leading textbooks—Mansa Masu, Anne Hutchinson, Rigoberta Menchu, Chico Mendez, and Anita Hill—are designed to advance a political agenda that highlights and ennobles people of color, peace advocates, anti-colonialists, environmentalists, and wronged women. One-time historical giants like Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius, Copernicus and Magellan, George Washington and Napoleon, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, Albert Schweitzer and Winston Churchill play supporting roles.

The defenders of the revised history textbooks claim that textbooks used to be racist, sexist, ethnocentric, and jingoistic, and now they're not. This is a political half-truth, a spurious and calculated claim, but it has been an effective one.

A large part of the problem rests with the textbook publishers. The consolidation of educational publishing from a domain where many independent, competing companies created and sold textbooks has changed the field. Today, four defensive, revenue-driven multinational corporations—Pearson, Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt and McGraw-Hill—offer fewer and fewer standard textbooks for states and teachers to choose from. None of these publishing giants shows the least interest in innovation, change or offering books that come closer to meeting the wishes of textbook critics and state-level curriculum reformers. Instead, publishers cater to pressure groups for whom history textbook content is an extension of a broader political or cultural cause. They make books whose content is meant to suit the sensitivities of groups and causes more interested in self-promotion than in historical fact, scholarly appraisal, or balance. They are, more likely than not, listening to the wrong voices.

Unlike in the college textbook market, where authors write their own books and market shares for each textbook are small, "el-hi" history textbook authors have such minimal control over their product that authorship is to be doubted. The big names become involved—i.e., lend their names to the enterprise—for the money. Publishers have shrunk their editorial and production staffs, moving toward a writing-for-hire production system and abandoning the royalty-based author system. Some new secondary-level history textbooks have no authors at all. Authors have been replaced by a long list of contributors, censors, and special pleaders, concerned first of all that history meets the standards of multiculturalism.

When multiculturalism promised a reformed social studies curriculum of “inclusion” in the 1980s and early 1990s, its almost universal appeal lay in its pledge to broaden the nation’s understanding of minorities and ordinary people who had been unduly ignored by “presidential” and “elitist” history. Thus multiculturalism calls for a reformed history of new voices with a distinct political subtext. The American epic is transformed into a fight and triumph over white, elite, patriarchal, “European” oppression. From the age of exploration to the present day a slanted, anti-traditionalist, shaming story of oppression runs as a thematic thread.

National history standards developed in 1993 and 1994 provided outlines and thematic cues for social studies publishers involved in textbook content revision. These standards ratified historical content and themes that social studies editors had been incorporating into textbooks for longer than a decade, changes often being made under activist pressure. But content makeovers had occurred unbeknownst to most people except textbook publishers, curriculum specialists, and political activists, which is the main reason they were greeted with such public alarm and condemnation in the Senate in 1995. The historian Gordon S. Wood of Brown University said of these history disputes: "So what might seem to be a petty academic debate about the nature of historical writing in fact has momentous implications for the kind of nation that we Americans want to be." The collaboration of educational publishers with pressure groups and textbook censors is disturbing. Determining what history children will learn, who will be heroes and villains, what themes will dominate, and what message will be sent are crucial subtexts in civic education. At worst, biased instructional materials are undermining students' appreciation for America and citizenship. In American history—establishment of responsible government, development of a national economy, extension of democracy to blacks and

women, influence in world affairs, a rising standard of living for most if not all—seems the main casualty of the multicultural idea.

Massachusetts, Virginia and California have all produced strong history standards. Still, a gulf exists between state standards and textbook content. California adopts textbooks through a state-level process. The most recent history adoptions in California (1999) and Texas (2002) indicate that these two key states are no longer really selective about the history textbooks that they adopt. Nor can they be, given the problem of four mega-publishers that exert iron control over the market.

Publishers claim that they are only responding to state pressure and state standards. They say the state adoption process is already an open, public process. In fact, textbooks that states adopt may conform minimally and mechanically to state standards. State and local textbook adoption procedures rarely, if ever, address matters of style and textual quality. The main point of state review, as far as I can discern, is to comply with detailed guidelines for representation and to give pressure groups a chance to vent and bully.

Publishers should be producing cheaper books that are more text-centered, simpler in design, and more honest in content. They are failing to do so.

Meanwhile, a growing number of concerned educators and parents of all political stripes are asking for history textbooks that are easy-to-read and understand, that tell a story, that are compact, legible and accurate, that do not "jump around." They want history textbooks free of the political pressure groups willing to corrupt schoolbook history in order to advance their single interest. The four giants in education publishing are ignoring these commendable efforts in order to maximize revenues.

Thank you.