

Who Decides What Kids Should Be Taught?

Virginia is a newly blue state, with a Democratic governor and two Democratic senators, that Joe Biden won by 10 points. Hence, former Gov. Terry McAuliffe was an early and solid favorite to regain the office he vacated in 2017. But if McAuliffe loses Tuesday, the defeat will be measured on the Richter scale. For if he does lose, it will be because of an elitist belief McAuliffe blurted out during a debate with Republican rival Glenn Youngkin:

“I’m not going to let parents come into schools and actually take books out and make their own decisions. ... I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.”

Yet, during his own term as governor, one Virginia school district pulled copies of “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “Huckleberry Finn” out of the schools because of the books’ use of racial slurs.

What McAuliffe was saying was that the knowledge, truths, and beliefs imparted to children in public schools are to be determined by school officials and teachers alone. Parents have no role and should butt out. His dismissal of any parental role in education did more than cause a backlash against McAuliffe. It put on the national agenda an issue that will be engaged and fought long after this Virginia governor’s race is over.

Former President Barack Obama was not amused at Virginia’s reaction to McAuliffe’s rejection of any parental role in education. “We don’t have time to be wasting on these phony, trumped-up culture wars,” said Obama during a campaign stop for McAuliffe. But to the voters of Virginia, who have been moving to Youngkin since McAuliffe made his now-famous remark,

these are real issues.

For what their children are taught and not taught in the public schools to which parents consign them from age 5 to age 18 are matters of grave concern for those parents. For it will affect the kind of adults and citizens their children will become. "Give me a child until he is 7 and I will show you the man" is a saying attributed to the Jesuits' founder St. Ignatius of Loyola. These schools are helping shape what children come to believe about the moral, social, and historical issues tearing our country apart. These schools are helping shape the men and women these children will become.

Consider. Under the landmark Supreme Court rulings in *Roe v. Wade* and *Obergefell v. Hodges*, abortion and same-sex marriage have been made constitutional rights. Yet both decisions contradict biblical truths, Catholic doctrine, and natural law.

While both decisions are today the law of the land, have parents no right to object if public-school teachers instruct their students that these decisions were right, moral, and just? Do students and parents have no right to dissent, both inside and outside the classroom?

According to the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," American history began when the first slaves arrived in Virginia, not when the colonies declared independence in 1776 or when the Constitution was ratified. Do parents have no right to object if the tenets of critical race theory—that America is shot through with "systemic racism," that whites are privileged from birth and blacks oppressed—are taught as truth about the country to which they have given their loyalty and love?

For generations, statues to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson stood on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. Now that the statues are torn down, both are reviled as "traitors." Yet, until he was 40 years of age, George

Washington was a loyal British subject. But when Virginia rose up against the British Crown, Washington joined the rebellion. Robert E. Lee was also a loyal U.S. soldier and hero of the Mexican War, until his home state Virginia seceded. Both men were slave-owners. The great difference: Washington was victorious at Yorktown, and Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

President Dwight Eisenhower regarded Lee, whose portrait he hung in the Oval Office, as among the greatest of all Americans. Whose view of Lee should be taught? Eisenhower's or Harvard's?

The question raised by McAuliffe is: Who decides? Who, in the education of America's children, decides what is historically, morally, and socially true? And who is allowed to participate in those decisions? The nation is today divided over whether America is a good and a great country, or whether it has been irredeemably stained by its sins against the indigenous peoples and slavery. As the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl said, "History is indeed an argument without end."

Again, the question: Who decides which version is taught in the public schools that are paid for with the tax dollars of the parents who send their children there? Middle America's view of the country is more than a little distant from the Ivy League's, and somewhat closer to Merle Haggard's. "When you're running down my country, you're walking on the fighting side of me."

Whatever happens Tuesday, "the McAuliffe issue" will be on the table in the elections of 2022.

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