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**America ends 2021 with censorship surge. Will 2022's new year be better?**

As 2021 nears its close, a spasm of book banning has spread surprisingly quickly among state and local officials.

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By Dennis Aftergut, former federal prosecutor

As 2021 nears its close, a spasm of book banning has spread surprisingly quickly among state and local officials. Happily, if history is a guide, this accelerating spread of censorship will fail. But in the meantime, conservative elected officials have used this year to charge headlong backward into the 19th century.

Texas is a repeat offender in this culture war. On Oct. 25, Republican state Rep. Matt Krause, now campaigning for Tarrant County district attorney, asked school districts to report if they had any of 850 books that "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." Not surprisingly, Krause’s wide-ranging list included well-regarded nonfiction and fiction works focused on LGBTQ identity, race and history. (The Amnesty International tome “We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures” is one notable example.)

Krause’s purported motivation, protecting students from racial or gender discomfort, might sound laudable. But as Yale University historian Timothy Snyder observed this summer: “Discomfort is part of growing up. ... Teachers in high schools cannot exclude the possibility that the history of slavery, lynchings and voter suppression will make some non-Black students uncomfortable.”

A month later, in November, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott targeted … book content with a censorship directive that specifically called out two books on teenage gender identity. Try as he might, Abbott can’t wish the reality of LGBTQ youth away, but putting books about them in the closet can sure make their challenges harder. In early December, a San Antonio school district said it had removed 400 books from its library shelves. Texas censorship has now officially infected public libraries.

Then, on Dec. 16, Oklahoma state Sen. Rob Standridge, also a Republican, merged two toxic streams flowing across his state’s southern border. He combined Texas’ book banning initiatives with its anti-abortion bounties law that the Supreme Court has so far refused to invalidate. Standridge proposed legislation that would allow a parent to compel book removals in schools. If the book is not gone within 30 days, the complaining parent could collect at least $10,000 in court, and the librarian could be fired.

(“Cancel culture” would get a mention here if the phrase hadn’t been beaten to a pulp.)

These Texas and Oklahoma book-banners are not alone. In the last four months of 2021, conservative community members’ protests led school libraries in states like Kansas, Virginia, Missouri, Utah and Florida to remove books from their stacks.

For example, a Wichita, Kansas, suburb’s school board said it would take 29 books out of circulation in November, including “The Perks of Being a Wallflower.” That young adult classic features the kind of strong language that — spoiler alert! — young people actually use. In Virginia, now-Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin attacked his Democratic opponent, former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, on the campaign trail for refusing to sign a bill that gave parents veto power over the books assigned for their children’s homework reading.

Stalin’s USSR banned the novel “Doctor Zhivago” for its unflattering portrayal of the Russian Revolution. East Germany’s communists forbade Mickey Mouse comics in East Berlin because they said the cartoon figure was an “anti-Red rebel.” As journalist Sophie Whitehead wrote in the University of Edinburgh’s Retrospect Journal in the spring, “All book banning revolves around fear of change.”

In the internet age, taking books off library shelves is unlikely to close informational channels to diverse thinking, historical fact or human sexuality. Thus, the current … initiatives seem mainly aimed at gaining and holding power.

But even here, history is against them. In 1633, the Vatican moved to ban a book by astronomer Galileo Galilei. He had the temerity to argue that the Earth rotated around the sun.

Many Texas librarians appear to know their history. They have launched an initiative they call #Freadom, whose mission is to resist the anti-book tide. In doing so, they follow the honorable tradition of President Dwight Eisenhower, who told a Dartmouth College graduating class in 1953: “Go in your library and read every book,” save for the obscene. “That should be the only censorship.”

The aim of education is opening minds through access to ideas. The Supreme Court recognized the importance of this concept in Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico by Pico, which noted how access to diverse ideas “prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic, often contentious society in which they will soon be adult members.” Fear stifles citizenship and the ability to get ahead. The road to a better future is not paved by study of the purely conventional.

The American Library Association and other organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship and Pen America, which fight for freedom of expression, understand that in difficult times, it needs allies to fight for it. Students in York County, Pennsylvania, organized, protested and gained a temporary reversal of their school board’s decision to take books off the shelves. With enough opposition to book banning, it never succeeds, at least not in the long run.

**Questions:**

* **Using evidence from this text, explain why books are challenged and banned.**
* **Why do you think banning books is becoming a “cultural war”?**
* **If the “aim of education is opening minds through access to ideas”, how does book banning affect education?**
* **Explain what you think President Dwight Eisenhower meant when he said: “Go in your library and read every book,” save for the obscene. “That should be the only censorship.”**
* **Explain why or why not, we should be concerned about book banning.**