# High school student grilled by US Secret Service over artwork

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A 15-year-old high school student in Prosser, Washington, was questioned last week by United States Secret Service agents after he turned in drawings for an art class. The assignment had been to keep a sketch journal depicting the war in Iraq, but apparently not to question it. When the student's drawings called for an end to the war, school officials called the police.

One of the drawings shows a man in Middle Eastern dress with an AK-47 rifle and an oversized head of President Bush on a stick. Another depicts Bush as a devil firing rockets. A third showed the Bill of Rights and the Constitution in flames. A caption said, "End the War—on terrorism."

While expressing a definite point of view in a straightforward fashion, there was nothing particularly disturbing about the cartoons. However, their voluntary submission to an art teacher immediately set off alarm bells all the way up from the school hierarchy to the state's branch of the Secret Service.

Criticized for their excessive violence—this in a culture that routinely views multimillion dollar films and TV shows which are veritable orgies of killing—the cartoons have been treated as either an actual threat on President Bush's life, or as symptomatic of a potential school-shooting psychopath.

Prosser is a town of only 5,000 people located 200 miles from Seattle in a wine-growing county in largely rural Washington State. The town's police chief, Win Taylor, was quoted as saying that school officials have a right to be concerned. And while the school superintendent has refused to comment, previous reports indicated that the student had been "disciplined," though he is charged with no crime, or even wrongdoing.

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) spokesman Doug Honig cited a Vietnam War-era Supreme Court ruling that a youth does not give up his civil rights when he enters school. But giving a hint of the right-wing trajectory of this civil liberties group, he also cautioned that a school has a right to impose limits on a student who threatens the safety of other students or disrupts the learning environment, even though there is no indication that the student's cartoons did either of these things. Honig said the ACLU was investigating the facts of the case before it decides whether to get involved.

That this expression of a political viewpoint by a high school student should be treated with such hysteria by school and state authorities underscores the crisis of an administration that must depend upon the de-legitimization of political protest at all levels of American life, even at a local high school, in order to quash opposition to its policies.

It also brings to light the extent to which the US government has put in place many of the actual mechanisms of a police state, even if they have been set in motion prematurely or even somewhat haphazardly in this case. The further extension of police-state powers under the Patriot Act II, pushed through Congress in October 2001 with little public debate and signed into law by President Bush, broadens the FBI's ability to compel the turnover of records by "financial institutions" defined so broadly as to include medical and real estate records, as well as school transcripts. So while a high school student's cartoons might seem like rather small fish to fry, it is not inconceivable that they would be of interest on some level to these agencies at some point.

Kevin Cravens, a friend of the student's family, compared the incident to George Orwell's *1984*, a cautionary novel about totalitarianism, in which the state exercises constant surveillance of its citizens'

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thoughts, as well as actions, through the omnipresent Big Brother.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the incident, however, is the fact that probably well-intentioned teachers and other school administrators could have mistaken an entirely legitimate, and arguably healthy expression of opposition to a criminal war as evidence of potential criminality.

In the atmosphere of fear and incomprehension maintained since the school shooting in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, unfortunate disorientation is not surprising. Led in large part by a mass media that has provided no pertinent analysis at the time or since, these professionals have gained little insight into the true causes underlying such tragedies.

Such homicidal outbursts by teenagers are the inevitable outcome of mounting social and political dysfunction in a society that glorifies militarism and war while suppressing outlets for social commentary and political debate—including cartoons and other forms of satire. But the response to these tragedies is all too often the meting out of preemptive punishment in response to any and all expressions of opposition to prevailing social norms or public policy.

As though this provided some insight, it was pointed out by the media that the student in question wore a Mohawk hairdo and plays in a punk rock band, which is not common at Prosser High. Nevertheless, other students supported their classmate, rather than treating him as a pariah. Seventeen-year old Tom Smith considered the incident ridiculous and embarrassing, saying "that [it] was a constitutionally protected opinion.... I realize that schools do have to turn in kids that may be a threat, but he's not a threat."

It is a mistake, however, to dismiss the student's drawings as just stupid cartoons by a smart aleck, as some of the boy's defenders have done. Denying them all significance becomes its own form of censorship. Nor is it just a matter of freedom of speech in the abstract, but freedom of opposition in particular that is under attack.

The incident in Prosser is an example of the effect on ordinary people of the efforts by the ruling establishment and the media to cast all expressions of political opposition to the war in Iraq as illegitimate at best or, at worst, a sign of impending violence.

Against this suffocating and reactionary political environment, young people, not least among others, must be encouraged to find the progressive trajectory of their opposition, including through the drawing of cartoons that puncture the inviolability of the "emperor's new clothes," or in this case a president's myriad lies.

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