

No free speech for “Voices in Conflict”:

US: High school play about Iraq war cancelled

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A high school play about the Iraq war, “Voices in Conflict,” was abruptly cancelled by the school administration in Wilton, Connecticut last month when a student whose brother was serving in Iraq circulated drafts of the play to parents and others in the community in order to get it shut down. After having supported the project of the advanced drama class for almost two months, the school’s principal, Timothy Canty, deemed the play “unbalanced” and potentially inflammatory for its presentation of the war in Iraq through the voices of US soldiers, as well as Iraqi youth who have experienced the war firsthand.

Wilton High drama teacher Bonnie Dickinson, who developed the play with the group of 15 students, described the objective of the play in an interview with the *New York Times*, saying it was meant to show “people close to the same age as the students who were experiencing very different things in their daily lives and to stand in the shoes of those people and then present them by speaking their words exactly in front of an audience.”

The play was compiled of direct quotes from the books *In Conflict: Iraq War Veterans Speak Out on Duty, Loss and the Fight to Stay Alive* and *Baghdad Burning*; a documentary film, *The Ground Truth*; plus various web logs and other sources.

However, to bring the Iraq war home with such vividness was not acceptable to some in the politically conservative Wilton community. In his press release supporting the decision of Principal Canty, Wilton Superintendent of Schools Gary Richards objected, “Book, film and web site sources are cut and pasted together in a way that does not give them attribution or cite the viewpoint of the authors. Students directly act soldiers’ parts rather than read the sources, an approach that sensationalizes the material.” By such standards, all dramatic theater would prove unacceptable.

The question of “balance” was generally seen by the students as a complaint that the play was antiwar. They

rewrote the first draft, removing references to violence or explicit policies of the Bush administration. More patriotic characters were added, including L. Tammy Duckworth, a Thai-born Iraq war veteran who lost both of her legs in a helicopter crash and subsequently ran for US congress in Illinois in 2006.

But after further review by the administration, it was determined that these amendments were not enough to make the play sound sufficiently supportive of the war, nor was there enough time in the semester to “develop a script that meets appropriate educational standards.” Principal Canty met with the class on March 13 to deliver the bad news. The play was not to be performed on school grounds, neither during nor after school hours. Both Ms. Dickinson and a number of her students have also claimed that they were even discouraged from performing the play at an alternate venue.

Principal Canty has denied making comments of this nature and has claimed in statements released on the school’s web site that the production of “Voices in Conflict” was not banned, but “postponed,” entitling his press release, “Not a Question of If, But When.” However, with the spring semester drawing to a close, and a good number of the cast graduating seniors, the administration’s policy is clearly one of waiting out the controversy.

This approach seems to have backfired as the news of the play’s cancellation spread in the media. After the story appeared March 24 in the *New York Times*, it was picked up by the Fox and NBC news networks. The question of whether the play was censored has sparked vociferous blog debates across the political spectrum on the Internet, including on the *Washington Post*’s “OFF/beat Politics.” Within a week, the students received 400 offers of alternative venues in which to perform the play. Letters of support came in from around the country and from as far away as Italy and Japan.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with three students

from the cast of “Voices in Conflict” in Wilton: high school juniors James Presson, 16, and Nick Lanza, 17, and senior Afton Fleming, 18. Afton called the play “a collection of dramatic readings from soldiers in the Iraq war.”

“We did a lot of research to put it together,” James added. “We didn’t say to ourselves, ‘Let’s have an antiwar play.’ We wanted to let the soldiers speak for themselves.”

The students recognized that the question of the play’s ostensible lack of balance was a cover for the fact that the school administration thought the script was critical of the war. “Everything has a bias. This is not unbiased. It is biased toward the troops,” James said.

When the issue of support for the troops was raised, Nick responded, “We were trying to bring [the troops’] voices to a wider audience by letting people hear what they had to say. This has been better [support] for them than a yellow ribbon on the back of a car.” Indeed, the group has received thanks and support from a number of US troops, including Sean Huze and Charlie Anderson, who were among the Iraqi vets who appeared in the documentary *The Ground Truth*.

The WSWS pointed out that the quotes from *The Ground Truth* used in the play were not even among the most critical of the war. In the documentary film, the vets speak of the lies and manipulation used by the US military to get them to enlist, the absence of clear mission when deployed in Iraq and the demoralization of occupying a civilian population, as well as the neglect for their health problems, particularly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), upon their return. In response James said, “Given the conservative administration here, we could not come out with as strong statements as we wanted to,” while being careful to stress that the play was not meant to have a political agenda.

The conservative backlash from their school community was no surprise to the students, who say at best only half of the student body endorses their efforts, even though some of the cast members themselves are supportive of the war, and do not view their participation in the production as undermining that. But the topic is considered too sensitive for Wilton families, some of whom may have lost family or currently have family serving in Iraq. Among these are Elizabeth Neuffer, a reporter for the *Boston Globe* killed in Iraq in 2003, and Pvt. Nicholas Madaras, who was killed in Iraq in September 2006 at the age of 19. Both were Wilton High School graduates.

Located an hour from New York City in southwest Connecticut with a population of 18,000, Wilton is one of a handful of towns considered among the wealthiest in the US with a median family income of \$155,300 and a median house value of nearly \$1 million. The affluent demographics make economics a less likely factor in enlistment, with only a few students doing so out of each graduating class at

Wilton High.

The town’s social conformity was the target of Ira Levin’s 1972 science fiction novel *The Stepford Wives*, with subsequent film versions in 1975 and 2004, in which the impossibly gorgeous and compliant wives of Stepford turn out to be robots.

Levin wrote a letter in support of the students to the *New York Times* March 27, commenting: “I am not surprised to learn that Wilton High School has a Stepford principal, one who would keep his halls and classrooms squeaky-clean of any ‘inflammatory’ material that might hurt some Wilton families. It is heartening, though, to know that not all the Wilton High students have been Stepfordized.”

The Bush administration’s recent “surge” in troops has intensified the debacle of the war, adding to the number of US and Iraqi casualties—now recorded as upward of 3,275 and an estimated 665,000 respectively—without significantly improving their ability to establish control over the country’s oil resources, which has provoked a crisis within the ruling elite itself. In this context, the Wilton High students’ attempt to examine the causes and experiences of the war is seen as particularly divisive and unwelcome.

But the struggle to produce the play has proved educational despite the administration’s claims to the contrary. “We are now learning that our situation mirrors the feelings of people all over the nation and the world who are not able to talk about this issue of the war, even though everyone is thinking about it. That is why we have gotten so much support.” James said. Nick added, “It struck a chord all over ... it is such an international issue; it needs to be brought home.”

The International Students for Social Equality condemns the move by the Wilton High School administration to cancel or even postpone the production of “Voices in Conflict” as an act of censorship and an attack on academic and artistic freedom. As of this time, no further arrangements have been made to stage the play, though the students remain committed to doing so.

To read the script of “Voices in Conflict,” go to www.freewebs.com/voicesinconflict



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