

The banning of Michelangelo's "David" and the orgy of cultural censorship in the United States

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On March 20, Principal Hope Carrasquilla was forced to resign from the Tallahassee Classical School, a K-12 charter school in Leon County, Florida, after parents of sixth graders complained that they were not informed that her students would be shown an image of the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti's masterpiece, "David," finished in 1504. The image was part of a lesson about Renaissance art that included such works as Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" and "The Creation of Adam," and images from the Sistine Chapel, also by Michelangelo.

In other words, the pictures were those typically shown to American children in courses on art or world history, and certainly mandatory in a school that claims to adhere to a classical curriculum, as the Tallahassee school does.

While there is controversy over whether one of the parents called the statue "pornographic," it is clear that the most backward, censorious and anti-artistic cultural sentiments motivated both the complaint and the removal of the principal.

The Tallahassee Classical School Board has attempted to disguise the reasons for the forced resignation of the principal. It has claimed that the image has been shown before, but with adequate notice to parents, and that Carrasquilla was asked to leave for other unspecified reasons in addition to the failure to notify parents. As the chair of the School Board, Barney Bishop III, said in an interview with *Slate*, "If there's controversial topics or subjects, we tell parents in advance."

This begs the question of why an institution of learning in the 21st century (or the 19th or the 17th) would consider showing "David" to 10- and 11-year-olds "controversial." Clearly, Carrasquilla did not think it was. She told the media, "[H]onestly we did not have to send out a letter regarding Renaissance art."

But in the interview with Bishop, the reason, or a part of it, becomes clear: "Parents are the ones who are going to drive the education system here in Florida," he said. "The governor [Ron DeSantis] said that, and we're with the governor."

It is in the name of "parents' rights" that fascist elements in the Republican Party are now censoring books and works of art that refer to sexual or political content that they oppose, and DeSantis—a leading contender behind former President Donald Trump to be the Republicans' presidential candidate in 2024—is taking the lead on this in Florida.

DeSantis has repeatedly prompted and signed legislation that

would allow parents to attack school curriculums. He pushed the infamous 2021 "Don't Say Gay" law that prohibits educators from giving instruction or holding classroom discussion on gender identity or sexual orientation.

DeSantis' reactionary Stop WOKE Act, prohibiting instruction that could make students feel they bear personal responsibility for historic wrongs because of their race, sex, etc., is ostensibly aimed at the teaching of Critical Race Theory or the racist 1619 Project, but its real goal, as the WSWs noted, is "to gloss over or wipe away lessons about American history concerned with opposition against inequality or references to racial, gender and sexual oppression and discrimination."

The Republican-controlled US House of Representatives also voted for a Parents' Rights bill late last month that would give parents a wider role in determining school curriculums and the selection of school library books. Amendments to the bill by fascist Representative Lauren Boebert included parents' right to know when a school athletic program allows transgender youth to participate or when transgender youth share a locker room or bathroom.

Currently another bill making its way through the Florida legislature allows books to be removed from school libraries on the objection of a single parent while their status is pending. Material that is deemed to contain "pornographic" or "sexual" content by a parent could be removed. The definition of these terms appears to be entirely subjective.

Parental control, in other words, is a euphemism for the legalization of censorship by far-right individuals and groups, such as Moms for Liberty, of what children are taught and what they read. The pending legislation in Florida gives small groups virtual veto power over school curriculums.

The laws not only encourage, but to some extent give a legal cover to, what has become an orgy of book-banning and censorship throughout the United States, but especially in Florida—as the incident over the "David" statue shows—at the behest of small fascist constituencies.

The numbers and types of books that have been removed from Florida schools are truly staggering. In February, in Martin County, Florida, over 80 works by authors such as Toni Morrison, James Patterson and Jodi Picoult were removed from elementary school libraries at the request of a single parent, who wrote that

these works had no “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value for students.” The parent, Julie Marshall, is the head of the local chapter of Moms for Liberty.

One of the books removed, Picoult’s novel *The Storyteller* (2013), is a bestseller that tells the story of the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor who meets a former SS officer. “Banning *The Storyteller* is shocking,” Picoult told the *Washington Post*, “as it is about the Holocaust and has never been banned before.” This ban recalls the censorship of the graphic novel *Maus* in Tennessee, with its distinct overtones of anti-Semitism.

When one parent in Pinellas County complained that Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), had a rape scene in it, the principal of the local high school banned it, and it was subsequently banned in the entire county. In February over 100 high school students protested the decision.

According to the Florida Freedom to Read Project, as of April 1, *The Bluest Eye* has been targeted in 18 Florida school districts and has so far been removed or restricted in at least five schools and six entire districts. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a 2007 young adult novel about teen suicide by Jay Asher, has been challenged in 19 districts, and removed, restricted or not ordered again in eight schools or districts.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a 2005 work of literary fiction about a nine-year-old boy in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has been challenged in 14 Florida school districts and removed or restricted in five of them. Other books or works banned include Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood.

The list goes on.

Another factor in the censorship of Michelangelo, and right-wing censorship generally of other works of art, lies in the organized right-wing character of the charter school movement itself. A closer examination of the Tallahassee Classical School makes it clear that the scandal over the image of the “David” was neither accidental nor innocent.

Tallahassee Classical belongs to the network of private charters founded by Hillsdale College in Michigan, which has emerged as a far-right think tank for the dismantling of public education. Its journal *Imprimis* calls for preparation of war with China, claims the events of January 6 are an “insurrection hoax” and advocates the herd immunity program of the Great Barrington Declaration.

Hillsdale’s charter network, Barney Charter School Initiative, teaches something called an American classical education, which seems to be “classical” only insofar as children are taught Latin. Considering the Michelangelo incident, students are no doubt asked to read a highly selective list of Roman authors who, whatever else one may think of them, would not have shielded their children’s eyes from a statue of a naked man.

In fact, the curriculum is a super-patriotic one in which students “acquire a mature love for America,” and which inculcates a “culture of moral virtue, decorum, respect, discipline ...” Hillsdale College and its offshoots reek of bigotry and anti-democratic sentiment. Ginni Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and a January 6 conspirator, was a graduation speaker and

has long been associated with the school.

The removal of Principal Carrasquilla and the defense of the action by School Board Chair Barney Bishop III has embarrassed Hillsdale College. On Thursday, in a press release, it announced that it was cutting off all ties with the Tallahassee Classical School, and stated that the Michelangelo incident “has become a distraction from, and a parody of, the actual aims of classical education.” On the contrary, it is the logical consequence of everything the far right, especially including Hillsdale College, is doing to education.

It would be wrong, however, to associate censorship and its justification exclusively with the far right. The Michelangelo incident and frenzied book-banning in Florida has called forth a heavy load of hypocrisy and cynicism from other wings of the ruling class who are guilty of the same thing.

In first place comes the historical falsifier Professor Timothy Snyder of Yale University. Speaking on MSNBC, he declared, “When I look at Florida, I have to say what I think about is communism. The book bans and the public gatherings and the singling out of authors and the denunciations.”

It is instructive that Snyder would not first mention the book burnings of the Nazis, which the fascist acts in Florida resemble so closely. Snyder has produced works of historical revisionism that, amalgamating the crimes of Stalinism with genuine socialism, equate Stalinism and Nazism, and downplay the Holocaust. Snyder is a fervent supporter of the right-wing Ukrainian regime that is currently banning books and tearing down statues of Russian authors.

Not to be outdone in hypocrisy is PEN America, which issued a statement decrying Florida’s banning of books. This comes from an organization that has fully embraced—and promoted—the goals of the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine, and claimed that the support of Ukrainian culture means, along with other methods, removing books by Russian authors from library shelves.



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