The Phony Cries of "Censorship"

by Phyllis Schlafly December 18, 1996

If the education establishment wants to know why public schools don't get much respect from our citizenry, they need look no further than an Op-Ed editorial in last week's New York Times. This prestigious newspaper donated an expensive half page to complaints about the alleged problem of "censorship" in public schools.

Parents in Cortland, Ohio objected to their children being required to read a book that included what the parents called "rotten, filthy language." In the modern lexicon, parents who object to objectionable language are smeared as "censors." The name of the book doesn't matter; I can assure you, it's no classic.

The tone of the editorial is somewhere between shock and outrage. The nerve of the parents to object to their child being required to read such a book! Obviously, the parents need to be admonished, punished, humiliated! Lock them up in the stocks!

The editorial is patronizing. It says that the alleged "censorship" took place in a town so small that it doesn't show on most maps. Obviously, public schools should teach the children of these retarded parents the language and habits of the more enlightened people living in urban areas.

Only 6,000 people live in this small town and, horrors, it has no movie theater. Just think how disadvantaged these children are not to have easy access to Hollywood's current menu of blood, gore and illicit sex.

Perhaps the parents exaggerated the offensiveness of the book. According to the whining author, it really contained only profanity and teaching about sexuality. What reasonable person could object to that?

The teacher is portrayed as "courageous" because he stood his ground "for something I believe in," even though he is an "untenured teacher." If he were tenured, I suppose he would have had no problem!

The editorial uses the First Amendment and "the right to the freedom of ideas" to engage in more patronizing put-downs of parents. Freedom applies only to "courageous" teachers who assign books containing profanity, but it doesn't apply to small-town parents who haven't yet accepted street language as normal.

The Times Op-Ed piece tries to make a national cause out of the Cortland confrontation by citing People for the American Way (PAW), which claims that there were 300 attempts to censor school materials during the 1995-1996 school year, 120 of which were successful. PAW has developed a thriving mail-order fundraising business by crying "censorship" every time a parent criticizes public school materials.

Let's put this statistic in perspective. Only 300 objections out of 100,000 schools!

In the October issue of Harper's magazine, a former PAW researcher, Marc Herman, confessed that PAW's cries of increased "censorship" are bogus. He charged that the numbers that purport to support PAW's annual news release about "censorship" are "cooked."

Herman said his job with PAW was to research "book banning in the public schools, and, particularly, to investigate evidence of censorship promulgated by the religious right." He was responsible for putting together the annual PAW report called "Attacks on the Freedom to Learn," which receives wide press coverage every September.

Herman said he was ordered to make PAW's "censorship figures" worse every year. He said that PAW "omits truth . . . in the interest of publicity," and that PAW's annual report is "a problem being kept alive for the sake of an organization's press profile."

In the St. Louis area this fall, a teacher named Cissy Lacks was awarded $750,000 by a federal court because the school had fired her for allowing her students to use profanity during a class presentation. We don't know what the words were because the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which reported the story, did not think they were fit to appear in a family newspaper.

The principal, with the backing of the school board, had fired Ms. Lacks. The court ordered her reinstated, with the generous money settlement, in the name of the First Amendment.

The illustration that accompanied the New York Times Op-Ed editorial about the Cortland, Ohio case shows the "censored" book to which is fastened a tag reading "School Property." The illustrator missed the point; he should have pictured the child labeled with a "School Property" tag.

The real question is, are parents going to allow their children to become the property of the schools? Are they going to allow the First Amendment to be perverted into a tool to teach bad words to their children?

It's time for parents to rise up and reclaim their right to direct the education of their children. Eliminating profanity and obscenity from the classroom would be a good place to start.