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CENSORSHIP

Ever since the specter of "McCarthyism" faded into history, the liberals have been searching for a new boogeyman to frighten people into contributing generously to left-wing causes. Since Senator Joseph McCarthy has been dead for 25 years, it's pushing credulity a bit to convince even gullible people that he is still a threat to our liberties.

Now, the liberals have discovered a new buzz-word to make their adrenaline flow, and the writers, publicists, actors, and agitators who have easy access to the media are riding the wave. The new left-wing boogeyman is "censorship." Just cry "censorship" and you will rate instant coverage on network television, plus plenty of column-inches in liberal newspapers.

Leading the pack in a massive mail-order campaign to warn about this newly-discovered horror is "People for the American Way" (PAW). That's a creation of Norman Lear (author of other current TV fiction), who has been joined by Barbara Jordan, Theodore Hesburgh, John Anderson, and John Gardner.

People for the American Way is tearfully seeking contributions of "$20, $25, $35, or as much as you can give" in order to stop what it calls "a massive censorship and book banning campaign" by those who want "mind control over this nation's school children." PAW claims that some books are being censored such as -- oh, the horror of it all -- "Peter Pan" and "Snow White."

PAW brags that "already, through two series of televison spots, People for the American Way has demonstrated its ability to effectively frame the issues in a way which engages public attention." PAW solicits "your generous tax-deductible contribution" so that it can "mount a massive media campaign," produce a series of half-hour television shows, a monthly bulletin and quarterly report, a speakers bureau, a citizens action program to train local community leaders, a syllabus and study materials, and an instant communications network to alert the public.

The entire promotion is as phony as a $3 bill. "Peter Pan" and "Snow White" were two of my most favorite childhood stories, and the claim that there is any serious attempt to "censor" them is nothing but a hallucination of paranoid liberals.

The real problem is whether school children can read at all. According to a 1979 Ford Foundation report, 25 million Americans can't read at all and 35 million more are functionally illiterate. That means that 60 million Americans cannot cope with the routine paperwork of life such as a job or driver's license application, or instructions to operate appliances or machinery.

The United States is on the way to becoming a nation with one of the highest illiteracy rates in the Western world. Corporations complain that their productivity and profits are suffering badly because of new job recruits' inability to read. Some companies complain that 70 percent of their dictated correspondence has to be retyped at least once because of errors.

The New York Times recently reported how sales orders are botched, bank transactions bungled, messages scrambled and papers misfiled because of a lack of basic reading skills. Several years ago, a herd of prime beef cattle was accidentally killed when a Chicago feed-lot laborer misread a package label and gave the cattle poison instead of food.

Skilled labor jobs in industry and in the armed services depend on the ability to read instruction manuals. If employees can't read, they cannot operate the machinery properly; great sums of money (and sometimes even lives) are at stake in the proper handling of million-dollar machinery.

We live in an era when "bonehead English" classes to teach young people the reading skills they didn't learn in the first grade are conducted by colleges and universities, by the Army and the Navy, by two dozen major companies such as General Motors and Philip Morris. What a redundancy of resources and a waste of learning years!

The real censorship in America today is the censorship of the phonics reading method out of first-grade readers. The lack of This essential training in the syllables and sounds of the English language has deprived millions of Americans of their right to read anything. People for the American Way could render a constructive service if it would direct its massively-financed effort into helping children to read, instead of into fighting hobgoblins of their imagination.