

To the Committee Discussing House Bills 322 and 327:

The two Ohio House Bills (322 and 327) up for discussion in the Ohio Legislature aim to prevent educators from teaching children and young adults about the world in which they live. Specifically, they prohibit the teaching of “divisive issues” and “controversial content” in K-12 and higher education throughout the state. As professional historians, we find this not only an impossible but an irresponsible proposal.

Even if it were somehow possible to eliminate everything “divisive” or “controversial” from teaching the past, it would rob the next generation of the knowledge they need to live as engaged citizens and solve the problems they encounter. It is irresponsible to indoctrinate our children with a sanitized past rather than equip them to face historical realities.

Those who propose this legislation feel uncomfortable with our nation’s flawed past, with the fact that our high ideals have often been both unmet and directly contradicted by our collective actions. But ignoring the realities of our world and its history by engaging in mythmaking does not produce devout patriots—such fictions are easy to spot when they don’t match lived reality. This legislation is the antithesis of the American founders’ goals for a community in which reason and truth, freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech, along with critical thinking about political and social traditions, were to guide informed citizens in a democratic society. To shy away from controversy would be to turn our backs on the ideals of liberty and equality, justice and tranquility. This legislation encourages the indoctrination of young people with a fantasy of the American ideal and the American past; such indoctrination is the tool of authoritarian systems, not democratic ones.

In 1988, the last leader of the Communist Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, as a part of his dismantling of the Stalinist Soviet regime, canceled the annual history exams for elementary through high school students, children who had been indoctrinated in Soviet totalitarianism and heroic fantasies in their classrooms for their entire lives. In doing so, he acknowledged that for generations children had been tested not on the reality of the Soviet past, but comforting, self-celebratory lies. This kind of false history was, and is, a tool of dictators. Our American classrooms should, instead, be places where people can openly discuss the realities of our past and present, and where people can disagree, so that we can build a better future based on an honest assessment of what will help us move closer to our noble ideals.

History teachers don’t just teach a narrative of our human past. They also teach how to figure out what really happened and why, whose accounts to believe and how to determine a source’s agenda, how to figure out which variables were most important. They teach truth-seeking. A strong society values those skills, while a weak one fears them. History education also promotes empathy with people who lived different experiences from ours, helping us to coexist in a diverse society by understanding people who may not share our personal worldview.

Our world faces real challenges that can only be met by informed citizens who can discern truth from falsehood and who can develop innovative solutions based on real-world assessments. Constraining teachers to “avoid” controversy or anything that may be perceived (by anyone?) as

“divisive” hamstrings the next generation from being able to move us forward on that arc bending toward a more just and peaceful world. While the divisive or controversial topics removed from discussion today may support your particular political and social worldview, what will happen when those in power find your ideas are too controversial or divisive to be discussed in school? Perhaps those sponsoring this legislation could lead the way to improve the quality of history education in the state by expanding resources for instructors rather than by hobbling them.

A patriotism built on lies, or the promotion of comforting falsehoods, is not a true patriotism at all. Our American patriotism is strong enough to handle the truth about our troubled and yet noble and striving past. Is yours?

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