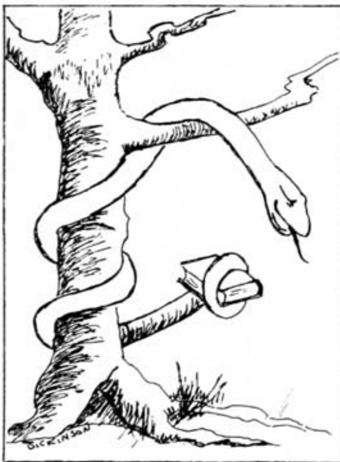
A TREE GROWS IN EDEN

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



THE PEOPLE of Ridgefield, Connecticut, the town next-door to mine, are angry with one another. The can't seem to agree on what they should tell their 5,700 schoolchildren about America. Recently a group calling itself the Concerned Parents—consisting of either sensible traditionalists or crazed Rightwingers, depending upon one's point of view—demanded that East Ridge Junior High School remove a dozen controversial paperbacks from the classrooms.

"The basic issue is not book-burning but garbage removal!" these parents assured their fellow citizens in a full-page advertisement in the local weekly. The "garbage" they wanted removed included: *Voices of Dissent,* essays by Eric Sevareid, Martin Luther King, Max Rafferty, George Wallace, Malcolm X and others; *Police, Courts and the Ghetto,* a discussion of police relations with black Americans; *Playing it Cool,* writings by Sam Levenson, Robert Frost, Dick Gregory, et al.; and *Tomorrow Won't Wait,* stories and poems by Pete Seeger, Evtushenko and others, as well as selections from *The New English Bible.*

The Concerned Parents consider these books spiritually subversive. "They tear down America," says one parent. "They sing the sad song of cynicism," says another. Norman Little, an airlines pilot who leads the Concerned Parents, has called these books "the lowest form of educational materials on the market. They could undo what I'm trying to do with my children."

But what Little is trying to do with his children may be impossible. He objects to *Police, Courts and the Ghetto* because it paints "a pretty grim picture." He thinks children should read "traditional" books like Jack London's *Call of the Wild.* (Some of his opponents in town were delighted to inform him that Jack London was a confirmed Socialist who spent time in jail for advocating violent revolution.)

Little's views on education may be based on his childhood memories. In those days the schools often taught certitudes. If questions were raised, they were quickly and definitively answered. Nowadays, he complains, the schools raise questions that are "out of place."

Louis Garofalo is equally unhappy. A local insurance broker, he is president of Ridgefield's Taxpayers' League, which frequently opposes increases in school budgets. "Why do our schools get involved in controversial subjects?" he wants to know. "Why don't we teach patriotism?"

He is asking for no more than the American public school system has traditionally delivered. In his intro-

duction to *The Government Class Book,* a civics text published in 1859, Andrew M. Young wrote, "To preserve and transmit the blessings of constitutional liberty, we need a healthy patriotism. It has been one of the objects of the writer to bring to view the excellencies of our system of government, and thus to lay, in the minds of youth, the basis of an enlightened patriotism."

Surely an admirable notion; after all, a nation that fails to appreciate its liberties will not keep them for long. The trouble comes when one's efforts to inspire "a healthy patriotism" lead to distortions. Andrew M. Young wrote his book on the eve of a Civil War that came close to wiping out "the blessings of constitutional liberty." Yet not once did he suggest to his readers that slavery was a political issue. Like so many textbook writers who followed him, he depicted America as a political Eden without a serpent and without a Tree of Knowledge—i.e., a sense of evil. He kept his readers innocent.

Our textbooks today, despite a good deal of educationist rhetoric to the contrary, are often just as misleading. They wave the flag in a manner that renders the flag ridiculous. "Last year," begins a characteristically fatuous world history text, "the hearts of many boys and girls beat a little faster as they read about the great achievements our ancestors made in building the Western Hemisphere."

Or they reduce debatable political questions to simplistic levels. I read an elementary history text not long ago that described Formosa as "an island of hope and freedom"; and another that treated our A-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as necessary expedients, without bothering to suggest there was another way to look at it.

Such books have long been the despair of intelligent teachers, and in recent years some schools have either abandoned them altogether, or at least supplemented them with other materials, especially paperbacks. Ridgefield schools are not exactly the cutting edge of the educational world, but they have introduced some interesting paperbacks in social science and English classrooms. Most of the paperbacks deal with "now" topics—racism, poverty, drugs—which students tend to feel are more "meaningful" than Euclid or *Ivanhoe*. One can see their point. Yet one wonders whether these contemporary subjects are being taught in a manner that gives students a sense of history and not simply a sense of outrage.

In any case, these are precisely the sort of subjects Garofalo and his friends seek to expunge —in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. They are asking the schools to "go back to basics," meaning not only the three Rs but the sort of mindless pride-of-country our schools have traditionally taught. As civil libertarians these parents are not very useful; indeed, they can be dangerous. As watchdogs of a national educational system given to faddishness—a system that sometimes seems more eager to be "relevant" than to be right—the Concerned Parents could do us all a service.

Today's passion for "relevance" can be just as silly as yesterday's passion for patriotic pap. I know of a high school course in critical thinking—not in Ridgefield—that has turned into a course in critical *feeling*. Some days the students form a circle and touch each other. That is interesting; it may even be helpful; but it is certainly not critical thinking.

Unfortunately, the Concerned Parents of this world seem to want neither relevance *nor* critical thinking. What they want is a school system that reflects their biases. They do not object to Formosa being portrayed as an island of hope; they *do* object to Harlem being portrayed as an island of despair.

Sometimes they get their way. In the case of the Ridgefield books, for example, they have had considerable success. School Superintendent David Weingast's response to the book-banners at first seemed to be thoughtful. "I do not believe," he said in part, "that pupils' patriotism and loyalty are endangered, provided the material is judiciously taught. I do not believe that youths' love of their country becomes attenuated by realization that their country is grappling with grievous problems. To recognize difficulties and to deal with them realistically is one sign of successful adulthood."

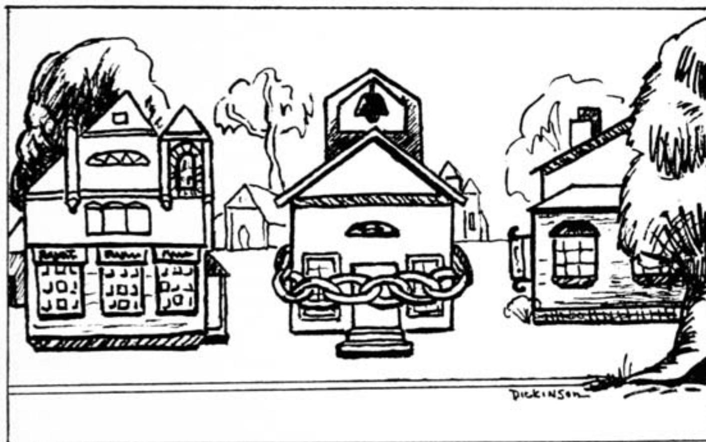
But then he issued orders that most of the books under attack either be moved to the senior high school or else be shelved. Under this ruling, if a teacher wants to use any of the shelved books, he will have to get "special written permission" from his principal and department chairman. To date, no teacher has tried.

Weingast came to Ridgefield four years ago ("I've learned to love small-town life!"). He had already survived 35 years in the political jungle of the Newark school system, so we may assume he knows something about the art of self-defense. But in this instance he has let his guard down. His teaching staff and a growing number of residents accuse him of having caved in to Right-wing pressures; the book-banners, meanwhile, insist he has not caved in enough. "I've tried to satisfy both extremes," Weingast says, suggesting that in matters of censorship there is a golden mean. "But everybody on both sides has gotten so glandular."

To a visitor Ridgefield seems not at all glandular. It looks like a painting by Norman Rockwell—a gracious New England village of stately mansions, thick maples and quaint shops which sell old pewter pots and heavy fireplace tongs. It seems to symbolize, in Heywood Broun's phrase, "the swaggering underemphasis of New England," a Yankee Eden that is both innocent

and smug. One gets the impression that Ridgefield's average citizen would agree with Longfellow's complacent rhyme: "A town that boasts inhabitants like me/ Can have no lack of good society."

Ridgefield is not precisely what it appears to be, though. If it has few poor, it has many strugglers, uptight blue-collar workers and newly christened executives, whom inflation and pride have forced to live beyond their means. To many residents who grew up poor and now are reasonably comfortable—or would be were it not for large mortgages and rising taxes—Ridgefield is the American Dream come true, the payoff for years of hard work and penny-pinching.



Warren Sharp and his wife are active in the Concerned Parents. Sharp, like Norman Little, is an airlines pilot. He began, years ago, by washing down airplanes in drafty hangars each day and going to school each night. Gradually he worked his way up. "The schools here try to teach that dissent built America," says Arlene Sharp. "That's not true. Hard work built America. Warren and I believe that there's nothing we can't have if we work hard enough for it."

Louis Garofalo's grandfather was a ditch-digger. "But he had opportunities in America. That's why my kids can live in Ridgefield, because of the opportunities. But they don't teach that in the schools any more. They teach conflict and Communism. I can visualize the day when we have an entire graduating class going into social work."

AGAINST that awful day, Garofalo and his fellow toilers are giving the best years of their lives. They rush from meeting to meeting, write letters-to-the-editor, issue manifestos, organize citizens, and call for the banning of books and the dismissal of teachers. Their style is strident, their judgments harsh. In both manners and motives they resemble the parents of Ocean Hill-Brownsville; for what they fear most is powerlessness and what they crave most is control of the schools.

"Why should we let the schools come between us and our children?" asks Arlene Sharp. "Why can't the school teach them the things *we* believe in?" It is a good question, and when it is posed by the residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant or by the Amish of Wisconsin, most liberals think they know the correct answer. The Wisconsin Supreme Court recently exempted Amish children from schooling beyond the eighth grade, on the grounds that public high schools "teach an unacceptable value system" to Amish children, which results in "a psychological alienation of Amish children from their parents. . . ."

These are the major concerns of the Concerned Parents. They see the public school system as a state-supported conspiracy bent on alienating their children and teaching them "an unacceptable value system."

A few months ago the Sharps' 12-year-old daughter, Laurie, was asked by her English teacher to participate in a classroom debate on whether or not pot should be legalized. Laurie was supposed to argue for the affirmative, a position which ran contrary to her views. But the teacher told her not to worry—the important thing was to learn how to make a persuasive case.

To Laurie's parents the assignment was an all too typical example of the school's forcing its dangerous opinions down their child's throat. (To the teacher, of course, it was simply a matter of putting process—learning how to debate—ahead of substance.) Their response was interesting: They consulted with Ridgefield's police lieutenant in charge of narcotics enforcement. The lieutenant told them the teacher was wrong; he said a debate over the legalization of pot was comparable to a debate over the legalization of larceny. Then he telephoned a school official, and the debate was canceled.

The Sharps had successfully brought police powers to bear on the school curriculum—a rather stunning case of overkill. After I heard the story I asked my 13-year-old son, who favors the legalization of pot, what *he* would do if his teacher asked him to make a case for the contrary view. "I wouldn't like it," he said, "but if it was an assignment, I'd do it."

My son, unlike the Sharps, considers himself to be disdainful of authority, yet here he was playing Billy Budd to Laurie Sharp's Jerry Rubin. If revolution comes, whose children will man the barricades?