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Textbooks Held to Bogus Litmus Tests

By Diane Carman
Columnist

I knew they were nuts when the Citizens for a Sound Economy equated Colorado College professor Dan Chiras with Osama bin Laden. Chiras, an Evergreen scientist, has been writing textbooks for almost 30 years.

The director of the Texas chapter of CSE invoked Christianity, democracy, free enterprise and 9/11 in her defense of the Texas State Board of Education's rejection of Chiras' environmental science textbook.

"Sept. 11 was not an attack on our military or our financial institutions, but an attack on our freedom," said CSE's Peggy Venable. "We must defend attacks on our freedom both from outside our border and from within."

Say what? Now clean air is unpatriotic, too?

Chiras, the author of 20 books and numerous scientific articles, including sections of the *World Book Encyclopedia* and the *Encyclopedia Americana*, filed suit against the Texas Board of Education on Oct. 30. He claims his First Amendment rights and those

of Texas schoolchildren were violated.

His book, *Environmental Science: Creating a Sustainable Future* (6th Edition), was reviewed by educators at Texas A&M in 2001 and, with minor revisions, was recommended for use in Texas high schools. It was already being used on college campuses across the country, including Baylor University and the University of Texas at Tyler. Of three texts being considered by the board, a UT professor emeritus of ecology said it had "the best and most coherent discussion of the basic ecology of the Earth."

But on the day before the state board was to vote, CSE and another conservative lobbying group, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, denounced Chiras' book as unpatriotic.

When the screeching stopped, the elected board rejected the text on a 10-5 party-line vote. The only environmental text approved without censorship was one financed in part by the mining industry.

Chiras was livid.

"Here's what they considered un-American," he said. He noted a reference to the

statistics that the U.S. represents less than 5 percent of the world's population and produces 25 percent of greenhouse gases. The critics didn't say the figures were untrue, 'they deemed it unpatriotic to cite them. They said they make the U.S. look bad.'

The groups also criticized a chapter in which Chiras mentions a 1967 article by UCLA professor Lynn White Jr. in *Science* magazine titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

In the piece, White cites teachings in Christianity calling for man to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over nature.

"This was a very popular hypothesis in the 1960s," Chiras said. "A lot of theologians bought into it."

Chiras said he follows that section of the book with material challenging White's theories, including biblical citations instructing man to protect the Earth.

Describing such a controversy "helps students become critical thinkers," Chiras said. "You can't send students out into the world with just narrow viewpoints. They have to

understand the complexity of these issues.”

As for the charge of being anti-free enterprise, the critics complained that Chiras offered wind and solar energy as examples of renewable resources in contrast to fossil fuels, which most scientists consider finite - and by definition not renewable.

“What’s ironic about this is that Texas is a leader in production of wind energy in the U.S.,” Chiras said. “The state offers tax incentives for the development of wind energy. Essentially, they’re shooting themselves in the foot.”

But the impact of the Texas board’s actions go far beyond the state’s borders.

With 4.1 million students in public schools, Texas constitutes the second- largest textbook market in the country

behind California. If Texas rejects a book, bottom-line-oriented publishers are less inclined to market it.

So Texas, one of the few states with a centralized statewide authority choosing school texts, influences what schoolchildren all over the country will read.

Members of the Texas board were not available for comment, but one member, David Bradley, told the *Galveston County Daily News* that he objected to the book in part because it included photos showing how housing developments affect the environment. “I’m in real estate. I see that and I see \$250,000 homes; I see mortgage bankers; I see carpenters; I see jobs. I see tax base,” he said.

The Trial Lawyers for Public Justice in Washington,

D.C., is representing the author. “We’re very supportive of Dr. Chiras,” said Steven Baughman Jensen, a Texas attorney and board member of the lawyers group. He calls the board of education’s action unconstitutional and “blatant censorship.”

“The book is based on very sound evidence of trends,” Chiras said. “I believe I have a very solemn obligation in a textbook to quote sound statistics.”

In Texas, that’s tantamount to treason.

“They’re strangling textbook authors with their own bias,” Chiras said. “This has got to stop.”

Diane Carman’s column appears Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. E- mail: dcarman@denverpost.com.