Contested Curriculum & Pedagogy: California During the Rafferty Era

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"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

- Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Abstract

Max Rafferty served as California's Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1963 to 1971, through some of the most contentious and transformative years in California education. Rafferty sought to transform the educational system and vowed to kill Progressive Education in California. His efforts altered both pedagogy and curriculum in California schools.

David Tyack, writing in 1974, offered "the conjecture that historians a hundred years hence may consider the ferment of the 1960s and 1970s to be a major turning point in the history of American education" (Tyack 1974). The nation entered an era of vibrant social experimentation and rebellion in the 1960s. As historians have noted, "Much attention was paid during the 1960s and after, to the powerful liberals who molded social policy … from the Left. But the dominance of liberalism was attacked just as loudly from the Right" during the 1960s. "The Right established itself as a unified and potent political movement during the same decade" (Isserman 2000, 206). In California, Max Rafferty was a part of that process. In the early 1960s, while student radicals at U.C. Berkeley anticipated the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, scarcely noticed, just a few miles away in California's State Capitol, the first stirrings of the conservative revolution that would transform the nation in the 1980s were already evident. Indeed, the man who came to embody that transformation, and even lend his name to the Reagan Revolution, was inaugurated as Governor of California on January 2, 1967. But if one person were to epitomize the curriculum and pedagogical contests of that period it is Max Rafferty.

Max Rafferty taught in rural high schools in Southern California in relative obscurity until he ran for the office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1962. His often vociferous speeches excoriating "life adjustment" and progressive education won him the backing of a coalition of conservatives and those on the political far-right. Rafferty began writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column on educational matters that brought him a national audience and made him the foremost advocate of "back-to-basics" education in the 1960s. Rafferty trod the path of the arch-conservative in pedagogical matters, but in matters of ethnic inclusiveness in textbooks he pushed tirelessly for improvement.

Max Rafferty was elected to the non-partisan office of Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of California in 1962. He held this office for two terms, from 1963 to 1971, through some of the most contentious and transformative years in California's Education. Rafferty's educational philosophy was one of back to basics. He claimed that he ended progressive educational practices in California's classrooms and considered it one of his greatest achievements. Whether he actually did end progressive practices is highly debatable. To some Americans in the early 1960s, Max Rafferty appeared to be a reactionary conservative harking back to an educational past. The longer perspective of history may instead see Rafferty as a harbinger of the educational policies embodied

in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Thus, Max Rafferty's notions of educational policy and practice deserve the attention of educational historians seeking to locate the origins of the educational agendas in place at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Two conflicting educational trends emerged under Rafferty's tenure. The back-to-basics movement and "Education in Depth," championed by Rafferty's office, stressed phonics instruction over the "look-see" method and a return to core subjects in lieu of so-called "fuzzy" curriculum said to characterize Progressive Education. On the other hand, a rising awareness of the lack of minority representation in school textbooks and the curriculum generated calls for improved materials and greater diversity. The portrayal of minorities when they were mentioned in textbooks also came under increased scrutiny, particularly in history texts. The pedagogical transformation driven largely by political ideology and imposed from Sacramento changed instructional methodologies but was not successful in its intended goal of eliminating progressive educational practices from schools. However, the grassroots drive for greater diversity, and more positive portrayals of ethnic minorities in textbooks, permanently changed the content of the curriculum in America's schools.

Dueling With John Dewey

Max Rafferty saw his election as a mandate for purging progressive educational practices from California's schools. Progressive educators seek to center the educative experience in the emotional, intellectual and social experiences of the child. Thus, a child's education is child-centered and individualized. These notions ran counter to essentialist educators, like Rafferty, who believed that schooling ought to impart a fixed body of knowledge in a variety of subjects at each grade level. The Progressive innovation most vilified by traditionalists was 'life adjustment.' Life adjustment eschewed academic content in favor of social adjustment of students to their surroundings. Indeed, critics, such as Arthur Bestor, had argued for years that, as Wayne Urban put it, "schools needed to be rescued from progressive educators" (Urban 2009, 332). While many theorists contributed to the theoretical and pedagogical practices that comprise what is known as Progressive education, Max Rafferty saw John Dewey as its primary proponent. In fact, Dewey had written a book titled *Experience and Education* in 1938, in which he condemned the anti-academic tendencies then coming to dominate the life-adjustment curriculum, but that made little difference. In speeches, Rafferty tirelessly attacked educators who followed what he called "the gospel according to St. John Dewey" (Rafferty 1965a, 1966a, 1966b, 1969a).

"The Progressive Educationists – the spreaders of the gospel according to St. John Dewey – have much to answer for," he wrote in 1969 (Rafferty 1969a). He insisted they were "most dangerous when they are most dedicated, they war against your children in the firm belief that they are helping them" (Rafferty 1969a). Rafferty railed against "the tired old dogma of Progressive Education," with what he called, "its bubble-headed jargon of 'life-adjustment'" (Rafferty 1969a). "Since the mid-thirties," Rafferty wrote, progressive education "has clung to the body of American education like a barnacle to the bottom of a boat" (Rafferty 1969a). According to Rafferty, progressive educational practices would cause children "to grow up cultural barbarians, popular illiterates, adrenal rather than cerebral, indoctrinated instead of educated" (Rafferty 1969a).

In place of progressive practices, Rafferty spoke out for what he called "Education in Depth." Announcing his campaign for reelection in March 1966, he declared, "Before Max Rafferty, California was the center and the fountainhead of 'life adjustment,' Progressive Education in these United States. Today, Progressive Education as our official statewide philosophy is as dead as a doornail" (Rafferty 1966b). In its place, he advocated "Education in Depth." Rafferty told constituents, "It's teaching through phonics … It's history taught as history, geography taught as geography, civics taught as civics. It's an end to 'social studies' and 'social living'" (Rafferty 1966b). In another speech, Rafferty insisted he stood "foursquare for Education in depth, Americanism in our schools, and observance of the principles of law and order on the part of students and instructors" (Rafferty 1969b). But, he warned, "Too many local school districts still follow the mandates of outmoded Progressive Education – the Gospel according to St. John Dewey" (Rafferty 1966b). Nor did Rafferty intend to confine "Education in Depth" to California. He told audiences, if "we can maintain in this state the philosophy which this victory represent[s] … can [we] encourage its adoption in the other 49 states" (Rafferty 1965b).

Rafferty's 'Education in Depth' often involved more rhetorical flourish than substantive curriculum reform. In 1964, Rafferty ordered the "substitution of terms 'History and Geography' and 'Social Sciences' for 'Social Studies'" (Rafferty 1964a). He insisted that the "enchantment with "social studies" and "social living" instead of history has taken us a long way down the road to oblivion" (Rafferty 1965c). Five years later Rafferty was still assuring constituents that "California on the state level no longer uses the terms Social Studies or Language Arts. We are calling subjects by their right names" (Rafferty 1969b).

Although Rafferty savaged Progressive educational practices in speech and print, throughout his eight years in office, he had surprisingly little lasting impact in classrooms. Progressive pedagogy survived and even thrived in California schools in the 1970s and beyond. However, his efforts at curriculum reform fared much better.

Textbooks and Curriculum Reform

Max Rafferty may have sought to turn back the clock where subject titles and pedagogy were concerned, but he also recognized the dramatic changes in the world beyond the schoolroom, and sought to influence curriculum in positive ways. He tirelessly advocated early phonics instruction and made lasting changes in the reading curriculum. During his tenure, the content found in California textbooks, particularly history textbooks, changed in dramatic and substantive ways. The way California obtained textbooks changed as well.

In 1884, State Senator George Perry of San Francisco introduced an amendment to California's State Constitution to allow the State Printing Office to publish a State Series of textbooks. The measure passed, and the Legislature ordered the State Board to adopt a State Series of textbooks to be printed and sold by the State Printing Office. Thereafter, California insisted that publishers lease their plates so that any textbooks adopted could be printed at the State Printing Plant in Sacramento. The first break with this tradition came in 1960 when the State adopted the reading books of Ginn and Company, despite the firm's refusal to lease the plates. By 1963, several non-leasing firms had secured adoptions, and the state began purchasing

fully manufactured textbooks directly from the publishers.

Max Rafferty's most enduring curriculum reform restored phonics to a place of primacy in early reading instruction in California classrooms. Max Rafferty actively sought to embed phonics instruction in California's classrooms. He advised textbook publishers, "My special interest lies … in the area of elementary school reading books and their treatment of phonics" (Rafferty 1963a). When Rafferty was elected, most California school districts taught pupils to read using a word recognition approach, the so-called 'look-see' or 'look-say' method. The basal readers used text that mirrored the method, "look, see Spot run." Phonics was introduced later. Teachers, Rafferty argued, "drag phonics in by the scruff of the neck months after the 'look-say' damage has been done," and this, he believed was a mistake (Rafferty 1969c). Rafferty noted that, "under this system, the tests showed a steady decline in reading ability" (Rafferty 1969c). As a frequent contributor to major newspapers, he sought to utilize the press to apply political heat to advocate for curriculum change, believing that "even the enemies of phonics will reluctantly use it to pull their chestnuts out of the fire if the fire finally gets hot enough" (Rafferty 1969c). Rafferty boasted of the example of the Los Angeles Unified School District. After implementing curriculum reforms (he endorsed) that introduced phonics from the very start of reading instruction, student test scores rose. Test results, he exulted, showed "for the first time in umpteen years the reading scores are up" (Rafferty 1969c). The introduction of early phonics instruction is perhaps the most enduring educational reform of Max Rafferty's tenure as State Superintendent, but he also sought to impact educational policy and pedagogy.

Rafferty led the effort to transform the content found in history and geography texts. Efforts to revise the textbooks, to be more ethnically inclusive and give previously unrecognized peoples a visible place in the American narrative, began early in Rafferty's first term. He wrote to textbook publishers explaining, "My interest lies in the possibility of exploring with you … problems that exist … in connection with … history and geography books and the treatment accorded minority groups in these textbooks" (Rafferty 1963a).

Textbooks and Civil Rights

With the Civil Rights movement gaining momentum and Freedom Summer underway in 1964, Rafferty sought the opinions of noted historians, asking them to critique the portrayal of minorities in proposed history textbooks. One such critique, of the fourth grade text *California and the West*, by historian Winthrop Jordan concluded, "if it is not intended that fourth graders be taught about social problems concerning minority groups, this book is by no means a poor introduction to California's people and land, despite its rather boost-California tone. On the other hand," Jordan continued, "if it is hoped that a textbook of history and geography can convey to young students some knowledge and sense of the social problems engendered by the presence of minority groups in California, then this book fails completely by omission" (Jordan 1964). Historian Kenneth Stampp, commenting on several potential texts, including the one reviewed by Jordan, said:

> In their treatments of minority groups [the texts] suffer from the same shortcomings as the high school and junior high school texts … Once more the chief sins are sins of omission. The existence of minority groups in

> California, the resulting social problems, and the contributions that members of minority groups have made, are largely underplayed, or overlooked altogether (Stampp 1964).

That failure by omission proved unacceptable to the State Curriculum Commission, the State Board of Education, and concerned citizens; other history texts would soon face greater scrutiny.

With Civil Rights at the forefront of the nation's agenda, new constituencies demanded important editorial changes. Rafferty commissioned a panel of six prominent historians, Kenneth Stampp, Winthrop Jordan, Lawrence Levine, Robert Middlekauff, Charles Sellers, and George Stocking Jr. to examine textbooks for their treatment of minorities—as that term was then understood. The resulting report titled "The Negro in American History Textbooks" examined both the ideal of historical scholarship and how the portrayal of minorities in textbooks differed from the interpretations of contemporary historians. The report opened with the observation that, "We are concerned first of all as historians that the history taught in our schools should accurately reflect the best findings of current scholarship." They also cautioned, "Professional scholars are aware that historical 'truth' is an elusive quality." That said, the historians noted:

> Most of the textbooks we have examined reflect views on racial and sectional themes that have been rejected or drastically modified by the best of current historical scholarship. (Stampp et. al. 1964)

The commission concluded, "the greatest defect in the textbooks we have examined is the virtual omission of the Negro. … the Negro does not 'exist' in the books" (Stampp et. al. 1964). In the sections covering the history of the antebellum and Civil War eras, these historians found that "The 'southern' view tended to prevail. The deference of textbook publishers to the special sensitivities of the southern market has caused it to continue by and large to prevail in textbooks to the present day." The committee observed, "Important aspects of Negro experience … differ from that of many other groups in America … no other group could be so readily indentified by its color, no other group was so systematically enslaved, and no other group has been subjected to as persistent and virulent discrimination." Noting, "there is a danger in assessing historical writing in terms of its social consequences," the commission offered both cautions and recommendations to textbook publishers. The committee warned that the "desire to combat racism" and "to bolster self-respect among Negro students, might result in exaggerating Negro contributions and the heroic qualities of Negro figures." They argued, "this would be an equal distortion of historical truth, and in the long run would fail to have the desire[d] social effects." The committee also pointed out that "the seriousness of the problem of racism underscores the textbook author's responsibility to portray the Negro's role in American life fully, accurately, and without either sentimentality or condescension." The historians on the committee concluded, "[the] civil-rights revolution seems to us to be one of the major historical events of the mid-twentieth century and to demand full treatment in any American history textbook … Surely the state of California can no longer tolerate textbooks that fall short of this minimal standard" (Stampp et. al. 1964). The committee then went on to offer specific critiques of the adopted history texts for grades five, eight, and high school.

George Stocking found that *The Story of American Freedom* (McMillan 1961), a fifth

grade text, "treads a very narrow course between a dominant traditional concern for Southern prejudices and a dawning consciousness of … Negro-liberal sensitivities." Lawrence Levine examined *The Growth of America* (Prentice-Hall 1959), an eighth grade text, and found "the author's treatment of slavery can be called favorable." The account of the events leading to the Civil War are described as "generally brief and inadequate" and the account of origins of the Emancipation Proclamation as "novel and fanciful." Most fell between these two extremes. None of the textbooks gave a good account of minority contributions, and most clearly suffered from what Winthrop Jordan called "an apparent subservience to Southern sensitivities" and Robert Middlekauff called "shrink[ing] before the tender sensibilities of the South" (Stampp et. al. 1964).

One of the first textbooks to provide a full account of African-American accomplishments appeared two years later. It faced intense opposition, not for its portrayal of minorities, which was far better than previous texts, but for its perceived ideological bias. The State Board of Education approved the 8th grade history textbook *Land of the Free* on May 13, 1966. As partisan political opposition to the text quickly arose, the conservative Max Rafferty insisted that the book was approved by a board made up of persons appointed primarily by his democratic predecessor, Governor Edmund Brown. He declared, "After their approval, I did the only thing I could do, and that was to 'blow the whistle' on this book to the parents of California, a book that I saw as being inaccurate, biased, and prejudiced" (Rafferty 1967). Rafferty requested a number of revisions to the text but his changes were primarily ideological in nature. He observed that following his suggestions, Presidents Taft and Hoover, and John D. Rockefeller were "dealt with more fairly and completely than before." Revisions toned down praise of the New Deal and added acknowledgment of some of its less successful aspects.

Once again, a committee of prominent historians, Allen Nevins, Glenn Dumke, and Charles Sellers examined the book. Unlike Rafferty, the committee was "impressed" by the "high quality of the book and the earnestness and merit of many of the critical judgments" (Nevins et. al. 1967). The committee lauded the text for its focus on "civil liberties and social justice" and found it "superior to the textbooks … used in the past," but they also noted, "it emphasizes national shortcomings and mistakes too heavily." While gentler than Rafferty in their criticism, they too found that "the text seems weighted against a conservative interpretation," and "more balance is clearly needed and would help the authors avoid an impression of distortion." The committee agreed with Rafferty that while the successes of the WPA and TWA during the New Deal era were "well treated the failure of the NRA [wa]s not." In the end, however, the committee praised "the book's many good qualities" and concluded that *Land of the Free* was "superior to many school textbooks" (Nevins et. al. 1967).

By mid-1967, opposition to war in general and to the Vietnam War in particular was increasing, and the disaffection in the larger society filtered into the textbook debate. Max Rafferty demanded that certain editorial changes be made. He ordered the publishers to make clear "the fact that Communist revolutionaries began the Viet Nam war," and insisted that The Atomic Energy Commission not be "described as 'the nuclear warfare agency'" (Rafferty 1967). Rafferty wanted a textbook that presented a balanced portrayal of the conservative views he advocated and, at the height of the Cold War, a textbook that was sound on anti-communism.

While Max Rafferty supported commissions to revise and enhance minority representation in textbooks, he strenuously opposed so-called 'forced busing' to achieve desegregation of schools. Nineteen-seventy was an election year. Rafferty lost both his bid for a seat in the United States Senate and his State Superintendency. The voters who embraced Rafferty and his back-to-basics reforms in the early 1960s abandoned him in 1970, but his legacy remained evident in California classrooms for many years afterward. While he had little impact on pedagogy, and progressive practices survived, the phonics instruction that Rafferty fought stridently for remains a mainstay of the primary reading curriculum.

The debate over the content and interpretations presented in the history curriculum and textbooks reemerged in the 1990s as the so-called social studies wars. Many of the debates during Rafferty's tenure, including the focus on basic subject-matter content versus progressive pedagogy, also re-emerged in the 1990s with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and continues to animate American education today. This, perhaps, confirms David Tyack's "conjecture that historians a hundred years hence may consider the ferment of the 1960s and 1970s to be a major turning point in the history of American education" (Tyack 1974). Max Rafferty stood at the center of the political stage, creating a fair amount of that ferment. He also contributed to the ideological foundation for the resurgent conservative educational paradigms that arose with the so-called 'social studies wars' and the back-to-basics movement embodied in No Child Left Behind in the 1990s.

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