**EDITORIAL/OPINION WRITING**

**NEWS ANALYSIS: Frankly, it’s been a terrible time for Culpeper**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Thursday, February 4, 2010

***Author:*** *Rob Humphreys*

It's been eight days since the story broke about Culpeper County Public Schools apparently pulling the uncensored version of Anne Frank's diary from its classrooms.

To say the topic has generated a vast amount of criticism would be an understatement. Everyone from local parents and students to European bloggers and the national press has chimed in on the issue.

Even Jay Leno got in on the act Monday night.

"And this seems very bizarre in this day and age," Leno wisecracked during his stand-up monologue. "School officials in Culpeper County, Va., have pulled a version of Anne Frank's diary off the school shelves because one parent complained about a brief passage where Anne Frank writes about her body. You know the next book this parent wants pulled? ‘Moby Dick.'"

It seems everyone's getting a good laugh — or generating a good amount of outrage — at Culpeper's expense.

But what's the real story behind this public relations nightmare?

Several accounts have been written, with school officials seemingly tweaking their story by the day. Yet more than a week later, under an intense media spotlight that includes coverage by the Star-Exponent, Washington Post and the Associated Press, a better picture has emerged.

And while CCPS Superintendent Bobbi Johnson has not returned this newspaper's recent phone calls and e-mails for comment, it is evident from her press releases and a statement to the Post by CCPS Director of Instruction Jim Allen that the school division did not follow its own protocol.

Citing a parent's complaint about passages in which Frank, as a teenager, discusses her vagina and other sexually graphic material, the book was initially removed from the eighth-grade reading curriculum without undergoing a required review by a committee consisting of the school's principal, library media specialist, teacher, complainant, parent and/or student.

A day after the story appeared, Johnson defended the decision. Then, all hell broke loose and a flurry of damage control ensued.

To gain a clearer understanding of exactly what happened, and what will happen next, here's a timeline of how this story transpired:

\* Jan. 26: The Star-Exponent got a tip that CCPS had "banned" the definitive version of Anne Frank. (The definitive version was released in 1995, the 50th anniversary of Frank's death in a Nazi concentration camp. Earlier versions of the book were edited by her father and did not include the passages in question.)

\* Jan. 28: The Star-Exponent published a story in which Allen confirmed CCPS had, in his own words, "pulled" the unedited version and that the older, edited version would be used in the future. Allen said a teacher had already assigned the book in the fall and that students had completed the assignment before the parental complaint was made. "What we have asked," he said, "is that this particular edition will not be taught. I don't want to make a big deal out of this."

But others did. And at least two members of the Culpeper County School Board, including Chairman George Dasher, were caught off guard by the move, saying they were not aware of it.

\* Jan. 29: Allen admitted to the Washington Post that CCPS's protocol on "public complaints about learning resources" was not followed. The Post article reported that, "Allen said the parent registered the complaint orally, no review committee was created and a decision was made quickly by at least one school administrator. He said he is uncertain about the details because he was out of town."

Also on Jan. 29, the Star-Exponent published a story titled "Head of schools defends pulling Frank's memoir" in which Johnson released a brief statement via e-mail to the newspaper. "The essence of the story … is not lost by editing the few pages that speak to adolescent discovery of intimate feelings," she wrote, saying the sexually oriented entries could "foster a discussion in a classroom that many would find appropriate."

\* Jan. 30: The Star-Exponent reported a press release from CCPS that said its instruction department "will convene a committee during the spring of 2010 to review both versions prior to another teaching in the fall of 2010. The definitive version has not been banned nor removed from the middle schools." In the press release, Johnson said new efforts would focus on parents having the ability to review reading lists for middle and high school English courses in advance of assignments.

In the same story, school board member Bob Beard, without naming any administrator, expressed disappointment with how the situation had been handled. "In my opinion," he said, "somebody made a mistake somewhere along the line in not going through the policy that's been prescribed by the school board."

\* Feb. 2: A story in the Washington Post reported that the book might be taught in a different grade level and revealed crucial new details about how the incident arose. Johnson, addressing earlier reports, was paraphrased as telling the paper, "A Culpeper mother of an eighth-grader at Floyd T. Binns Middle School became concerned about an entry in which Frank describes having erotic feelings for another girl and another in which she describes what her vagina looks like. The mother did not want the book removed. She was asking that her daughter not be required to read the book aloud, as the class had been doing."

"Johnson," the Post continued, "said she reviewed e-mails among the parent, the middle-school principal and director of administrative services Russell Houck in late November and early December after the concern was first registered and found‘no evidence ... that anyone ever asked that the book be removed.' She said that Allen and some teachers were misinformed about whether there had been such a request."

Unanswered questions

So, is that what this boils down to? A big misunderstanding among school officials that mushroomed into a disaster? Is Johnson right that Allen and "some teachers" were "misinformed" as to whether the parent wanted the book "pulled" from the shelves?

Whose decision, exactly, was it to "pull" the book … and did administrators backtrack because of public pressure or because internal protocol was not followed?

Considering the political impact of removing a version of Anne Frank's diary from classroom reading, why didn't school administrators at least bring the matter to the school board before making a decision?

And with CCPS getting skewered across the globe, why did it take nearly a week for Johnson to tell the Post the "real story" that school the school division made a colossal mistake and the parent never intended for the book to be "pulled" at all?

More details should emerge in the coming weeks and months as the school board digs into the matter and the committee assigned to study the book issues its findings.

Until then, Johnson and CCPS administrators have quelled much of the initial backlash by keeping the definitive version of Frank's diary on the shelves — if it was ever pulled at all.

But for Johnson, a newly hired superintendent who assumed command in the summer, this episode could expose major challenges in how she moves forward with an already difficult job.

In the wake of a grueling eight days of unprecedented negative attention, how Johnson deals with high-level subordinates, parents, the media, general public and — perhaps most importantly, frustrated members of the school board — could go a long way in rectifying a bad situation.

**OUR VIEW: Bold Webb starting to sound like a conservative**

» Virginia’s Democratic senator is speaking against affirmative action and Obama’s military decisions.

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Friday, August 13, 2010

***Author:*** *Star, Exponent staff editorial*

Democrat Jim Webb, Virginia’s junior senator, has created some interesting headlines over the past few weeks, taking strong stands against affirmative action and the president’s plan to close a giant military command center in Norfolk.

How refreshing for someone of Webb’s stature to swim opposite the current on two politically explosive topics.

In late July, Webb — somewhat protected by the “D” label — wrote an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal in which he argued that post-1965 affirmative action laws have only led to discrimination against whites while hurting the progress of African-Americans. Granted, Webb took a lot of heat for this stance, but certainly not as much as if a senator on the other side of the aisle had done the same thing. Still, it took a lot of courage.

Despite the obligatory, misinformed cries of “racism” directed his way, Webb didn’t back down. Throwing political correctness to the wind, Webb crafted a poignant, sensitive piece that dared challenge a sacred cow. We need more politicians who will do the same.

This week, he was back in the news again, expressing displeasure with Obama for putting the U.S. Joint Forces Command on the chopping block. For Webb, former secretary of the Navy, parting ways with the White House on this issue makes sense because he is a staunch military advocate protecting a good chunk of his constituency. On the flip side, it won’t win him any points with the administration.

Skeptics might chalk up all of this to strategic posturing for a likely rematch in 2012 with George Allen. Perhaps, but it takes guts to do what Webb has done, and there are no guarantees it will win votes. Such a bold approach does match his “born fighting” demeanor, though.

Mark Warner, Virginia’s other Democratic senator, often brags about being a “radical centrist,” but Webb actually backs up that kind of talk, unafraid to rile the party brass while advancing potentially career-breaking ideas.

It just makes you wonder if Webb — on some topics, at least — isn’t better suited to wear the “R” label.

**OUR VIEW: The JTHG's tree-planting initiative just won't work**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Saturday, September 11, 2010

***Author:*** *Editorial staff*

The nonprofit Journey Through Hallowed Ground partnership continues to drum up support for its ridiculous attempt to plant 620,000 trees — one for every soldier who died in the Civil War — along a 180-mile corridor from Monticello to Gettysburg, Pa.

That’s a whopping 3,444 trees per mile, or roughly one every 18 inches, along U.S. 15 — a national scenic byway that certainly does not suffer from a lack of foliage.

There are so many problems with this plan, we don’t know where to begin. For starters, it might simply be impossible to plant that many trees because of private property concerns and right-of-way issues. Second, it takes a lot of manpower and time to put 620,000 trees in the ground (at a rate of 100 a day, it would drag on for 17 years.)

Third, the JTHG wants to plant the trees in “battalions” so as to create powerful imagery of lives lost during the war. Really? When you look at a clump of trees, do troop formations come to mind? Will anyone even be able to recognize that the trees are aligned in battalions? We doubt it.

Finally, there are several battlefields along the Journey — such as Cedar Mountain and Brandy Station in Culpeper County— that would not benefit from additional forestation. The same goes for vast stretches of open farmland that occupy the roadsides along U.S. 15.

In her pitch to a Culpeper town committee last week, JTHG President Cate Magennis Wyatt didn’t inspire a lot of confidence.“I don’t know that it can be done,” she said, “but it is an eloquent idea in theory and practice.”

And there you have it. The tree-planting initiative is one of those ideas that sounds really good when board members are sitting around a big table looking for ways to gain positive publicity. But when you start digging into the feasibility of such a plan, you realize it’s an idea that will never work.

Why the JTHG keeps pushing it is beyond us.

We usually have no problems getting behind the Journey’s noble mission of promoting and preserving regional history. But this time, the group needs to rethink things.

**OUR VIEW: Sheriff made right call by reporting his son's arrest**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Friday, November 5, 2010

***Author:*** *Star Exponent Staff*

It’s never easy to see your child fall into trouble with the law — especially when your job is to uphold it. So we give credit to Culpeper County Sheriff Jim Branch for his handling of a very difficult family situation.

Branch’s 19-year-old son was one of three people arrested over the weekend on drug-related charges that resulted from a traffic stop near his home in Richardsville.

On Monday, the sheriff’s office issued a press release about the arrest, giving it the same treatment as any other case involving similar circumstances.

That must have been a difficult decision, but it was definitely the right one. The sheriff even offered prepared remarks that addressed the incident from a professional and personal perspective.

Granted, the news would have gotten out eventually, especially in this small town. But alerting the media to your son’s arrest takes a lot of guts.

By being transparent and not bunkering down, Sheriff Branch made a wise change in how he handles a crisis. Upon taking office three years ago, history suggests Branch might have used a different approach. Back then, he mismanaged a pair of very public ordeals — his shocking dismissal of two valuable employees and the Cpl. Jason Compton sex-with-a-minor case. Both times, he needed to show better leadership and have a more meaningful dialogue with his constituency.

Now, however, it seems Branch has matured. Perhaps he now realizes it’s smart to get out in front of stories that carry potential for embarrassment.

From a media standpoint, it should be noted that this newspaper is not out to play “gotcha” with an elected official’s family. The fact that someone’s father holds public office serves as more of a contextual note than anything else — and it usually won’t warrant front-and-center treatment in our pages unless the alleged crime fits the bill. So, in that regard, we, too, will treat the sheriff’s son like anyone else.

Finally, we speak for the community when we say we hope this young man gets the help he needs.

**OUR VIEW: It's high time fake weed gets pulled from shelves**

» Synthetic marijuana products — billed as incense — are dangerous and should be illegal across U.S.

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Tuesday, November 30, 2010

***Author:*** *Star-Exponent staff editorial*

In a front-page story Nov. 14, the Star-Exponent wrote about an emerging problem in the nation’s war on drugs — synthetic marijuana. As of now, fake weed — sold in some local convenience stores under a variety of brand names including K2, Spice and Kush — is legal in the state of Virginia.

Thankfully, the DEA last week used its emergency powers to essentially ban synthetic marijuana (starting in late December) for at least a year while the issue is further studied. In addition, the General Assembly will soon consider a bill making its possession, sale or distribution a crime.

If Virginia outlaws this stuff, it would join a growing list of states and localities to clamp down on the dangerous mixture of dried herbs and chemicals that produces nasty side effects — hallucinations, heart palpitations, temporary paralysis, near-death experiences — worse than actual marijuana.

K2, produced in China and Korea, bills itself as an “incense” for “magical and ritualistic purposes only and under no circumstances should it be consumed!” But the real reason people buy fake weed is to smoke it. After all, how many people would pay $30 an ounce for some incense?

One of the more disturbing aspects of colorfully packaged synthetic marijuana is its popularity among teens and college students. And the fact that it has been legal since 2006 exposes a real loophole in U.S. drug enforcement policy.

We commend the lawmakers, including state Sen. Edd Houck, who are pushing to permanently do away with fake weed. It’s the right move.