

# Bill Kaplan: Banning books, ideas and speakers

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The First Amendment is under assault from multiple directions in America, including Wisconsin. “The American Library Association (ALA) ... released new data documenting 1,269 demands to censor library books and resources in 2022, the highest number of attempted book bans since the ALA began compiling data about censorship in libraries ...” (ALA).

The “book police” targeted Muskego High School in Wisconsin where the local school board overruled educators who recommended students read “When the Emperor Was Divine” by Julie Otsuka. Publishers Weekly gave the book a top rating: “This heartbreaking, bracingly unsentimental debut describes in poetic detail the travails of a (Japanese-American) family living in an internment camp during World War II, raising the specter of wartime injustice in bone-chilling fashion.” But one objecting school board member said the book had been selected because of “political correctness.”

Perhaps he and the other board members need to study U.S. history with both the high and low moments. President Ronald Reagan signed a bill passed by Congress that apologized for the un-American internment of Japanese-Americans and offered restitution. Reagan said: “Yet no payment can make up for those lost years. So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with honor. For here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.”

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The Muskego School Board might atone for their moral failure with a teaching moment honoring Wisconsinite Kaz Oshiki. Despite having been interned with his family in a horse stable, Oshiki enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps, serving in the Pacific. He later earned a degree in journalism from UW-Madison and was a reporter for the Capital Times. Wisconsin Democratic Representative Bob Kastenmeier, also a WWII veteran, hired Oshiki as his top aide. Together they worked to address the injustices of the internment.

Meanwhile, the GOP-led legislature has gone to war against the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Fearmongering Republicans, seeking to divide Wisconsinites, want to ban books, eviscerate constitutional rights and chill the enforcement of civil rights laws. This includes a retaliatory cut in the UW System budget for implementing DEI. Small legislative minds.

Similarly, the Medical College of Wisconsin mistakenly canceled a rightwing panel event with Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson that intended to pan DEI. But even bigots are protected by the First Amendment. A better idea would be to allow Johnson's panel along with a symposium on Doctor Ronald Davis, President of the American Medical Association (AMA) 2007 - 2008. He led the effort to apologize for the AMA's past racism including barring Black doctors from membership. To its credit the Wisconsin Medical Society supported ending the ban in 1964. The event could also highlight the roles of the Medical College, Wisconsin Medical Society and Cream City Medical Society (Black health care professionals) in reducing racial (and rural) health care disparities. It should also highlight how Medicaid expansion would address disparities and improve health equity. Good speech always trumps bad speech.

*-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.*