

School Books

Cleaver Divides A Town

RIDGEFIELD, Conn.—The 20,000 citizens of this town—which looks like a picture by Currier and Ives but often behaves like one by Jackson Pollock—cannot agree on what they should tell their children about America. The argument between “liberals” and “conservatives” has been brewing for at least three years, and last Monday the Board of Education tried to settle matters.

First, by a 5-4 vote in the presence of 600 fervid spectators, the board blocked an attempt to withdraw from the curriculum two controversial books: “Soul on Ice” by Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther now living as a fugitive in Algeria; and “Police Courts and Ghettos,” a discussion of police relations with black Americans, by Marjorie Kilbane and Patricia Claire. Then, after most of the audience had gone home, the board voted 5-3 to suspend, as of next June, the two courses in which books were used.

Both courses—a high school unit on ethnic minorities and a “relevant” junior high school social studies pilot program — could presumably be reinstated next year, “after thorough review.” But most observers here interpret the board’s vote as a victory for those who wanted the books banished.

“A betrayal,” said a high school teacher. “Another step toward educational ruin.”

“A courageous act,” declared a member of the Concerned Parents, a group that has been protesting against what it perceives to be “leftist leanings” in the schools. “This will restore patriotism to its rightful place in the classroom.”

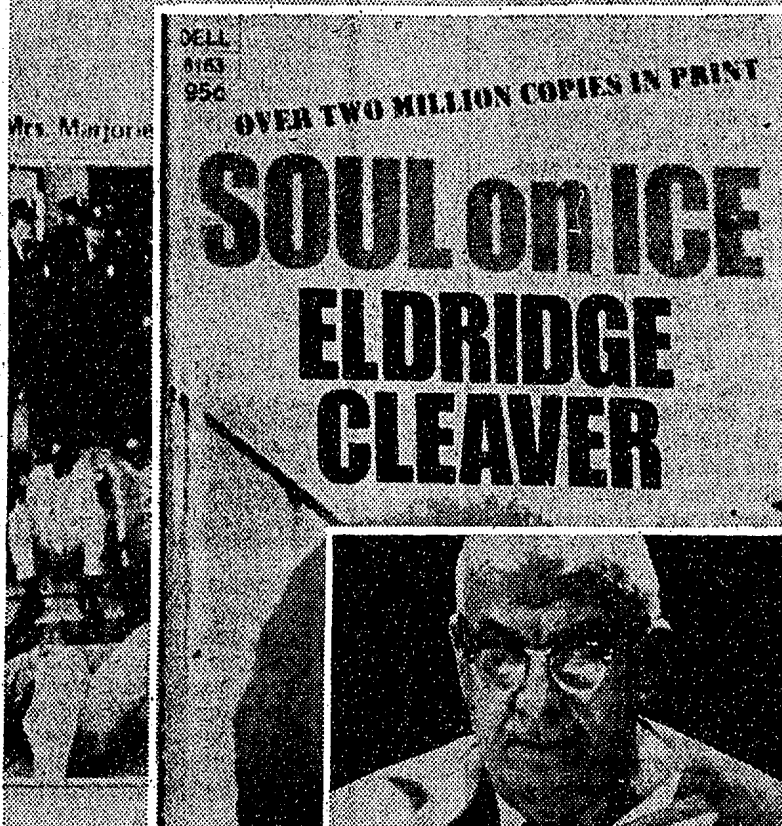
It may be a measure of the strong emotions aroused by the debate that neither spokesman wished to be identified.

A casual visitor would not suspect that Ridgefield had the jitters. The town is graced with thick maples, stately mansions and quaint shops which sell old pewter pots and brass andirons. It seems to symbolize, in Heywood Brown’s phrase, “the swaggering underemphasis of New England.”

But Ridgefield is not precisely what it seems. If it has few poor, it has many strugglers, blue-collar workers and newly christened executives, who often make economic sacrifices for the sake of their children. To many residents who grew up poor and now are reasonably comfortable, Ridgefield is the American Dream come true.

But for many there is no room in the dream for the cadences of Eldridge Cleaver. “That book has not one ounce of educational value,” says Leo F. Carroll, the 72-year-old school board member, a former member of the state police force who spearheaded the attack against “Soul on Ice.” “Cleaver brags about rapes and even makes fun of the blessed Trinity that is so near and dear to many of us.”

Police, Courts and the Ghetto



Leo Carroll, a school board member, has led a campaign to ban from the schools of Ridgefield, Conn., the use of these books by Eldridge Cleaver and Marjorie Kilbane and Patricia Claire.

The “Soul on Ice” dispute is a continuation of old, unresolved conflicts. Two years ago, for instance, the Concerned Parents demanded the removal of a dozen controversial books from the junior high school. These included the writings of Malcolm X, Eric Severeid, Martin Luther King, Robert Frost, Dick Gregory and Sam Levenson. “The basic issue is not book burning but garbage removal,” argued Norman A. Little, an airline pilot and chairman of the group. That dispute was reduced to a simmer after Dr. David E. Weingast, Superintendent of Schools, announced that his staff would write new guidelines to govern the selection of books for the classroom.

Each new argument about the schools seems to put a greater strain on emotions and more thoroughly divide the town. The teaching staff, in a public statement two months ago, complained of harassment by parents, and asked the school board not to permit attacks against specific teachers made by parents at public board meetings. (The board eventually complied.) “Fear is our constant companion,” the teachers said.

Soon after the statement was issued, some leaders of the Teachers Association received anonymous threatening notes in the mail; and the president got a phone call telling her to look out her front window—her pet poodle, still alive, was hanging head down from a tree. “Next time,” said the voice on the phone, “it will be your children.”

—RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Mr. Margolis is a freelance who frequently writes about education.