

**REVOLUTION IN FAIRFAX SCHOOLS:
“1776” DISCARDED**

By William Nicoson

The video “1776,” based on the 1972 musical recounting the drafting of our Declaration of Independence, has long been approved for use in Fairfax County middle schools to bring life to an historic event. It has offered students the opportunity to observe a vision of the great men of the time – among them John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin – and of the conflicts faced by delegates in declaring the freedom and independence of the colonies from Britain.

But the study of our revolution has met its own revolution in Fairfax schools. At the request of an anonymous middle school principal, Fairfax County’s social studies coordinator, Sara Shoob, has reviewed the “1776” video and ordered that it be stricken from the list of Approved Instructional Materials (“AIM”) in middle schools. A memo dated February 19 from Superintendent Daniel Domenech to School Board member Phillip Niedzielski-Eichner indicates that Ms. Shoob believed the video “did not strongly support the grade 8 Social Studies Program of Studies” and opined that “teachers have many other sources that could be used much more effectively...”

The memo rebuts the charge that Ms. Shoob’s objection was based on “sexual innuendo” but notes that “the movie does spend time on Jefferson’s relationship with his wife.”

This “innuendo” occurs after Jefferson complains that, closeted in Philadelphia, he hasn’t seen his wife in six months. Adams replies that Jefferson’s gifts as a writer are essential in composing the Declaration, then puts the question: “will you be a patriot...or a lover?”

Jefferson stays in Philadelphia but remarks that he “burns” for his wife in Virginia.

This dialogue, celebrating Jefferson’s love for his wife, was apparently brought to the attention of Ms. Shoob as “sexual innuendo” though of course the Domenech memo maintains that the video was removed from AIM because there were other “excellent” instructional materials.

That didn’t prevent The Washington Post from proclaiming, in a March 21 Metro story, that the “1776” video “has been banned in Fairfax County middle schools because of sexual innuendo in a conversation between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.”

If competing instructional materials were the real basis for removal of the video from AIM, it is curious that the Domenech memo cites not a single other text, video, or primary source regarded as “more efficient and accurate” than the discarded “1776.”

The last paragraph of the Domenech memo is apparently intended to stress the generous freedom

teachers enjoy in choosing instructional material: “school committees may review any video and continue to recommend it for use in their own schools. Teachers are always encouraged to select a variety of resources and to use short clips from videos...”

It’s true that John Adams was hardly the firebrand portrayed in “1776,” but the conflict over seminal issues facing the Continental Congress, such as slavery, is vividly brought to life. The video may lack the immediacy of the stage production by The Reston Players two seasons ago, but it catches and holds the attention of viewers far more intensely than any textbook.

The great advantage of a movie as instructional material is that it’s enjoyable. Having fun in school is a rare and memorable experience. We need more such experiences instead of less.

William Nicoson is a lawyer and author of a play about the Boston Massacre, “Counsellor Adams,” published online at playscripts.com. Sex is an issue in the play, not an innuendo.