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Guest column: Oregon trivializes Holocaust education



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In a world increasingly deluged by information, advocacy groups in the U.S. have been pressing for legislative mandates to compel teaching about the Holocaust in primary and secondary schools. In February, U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., reintroduced the long-stalled Never Again Education Act to make Holocaust teaching mandatory in all 50 states, up from the present 10. Oregon's Senate introduced legislation Senate Bill 664 to mandate Holocaust education the same month.

The Holocaust was one of the great evils of Western history. It is also the archetype of the concept of genocide. But despite good intentions, mandatory Holocaust education is a bad idea. It will trivialize the sacred memory of the Shoah and turn Oregon classrooms into partisan re-education camps where the term genocide is permissively applied to all sorts of social ills, real and imagined. Those who care about preserving the integrity of this grim memory should oppose SB 664.

The Holocaust is already found in most secondary school history curricula in the United States, Canada, Europe and Asia, with or without a mandate. The fact that many young people remain ignorant about it is true. But it is also true of many other seminal events or

discoveries in Western history: Magna Carta, World War I, penicillin. Even in places where mandates have existed for decades, such as Illinois, there is no evidence that mandates produce better learning outcomes.

The bigger problem is that mandates like SB 664 almost never confine themselves to the Holocaust. Indeed, one aim is to use education about the Holocaust to address all sorts of social ills, real and imagined, on the view that every injustice in society is a precursor to genocide. This is both empirically untrue as well as pedagogically dangerous. It results in Holocaust trivialization, which the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs defines as “a tool for some ideologically or politically motivated activists to metaphorically compare phenomena they oppose to the industrial-scale destruction of the Jews” in the Second World War.

In the contemporary lingo of many activists, “genocide” is used to describe everything from drinking coffee to living in a gated community. The Portland Association of Teachers, for instance, endorses a textbook that calls the United Nations-sanctioned First Gulf War, which restored Kuwait’s independence from attempted Iraqi annexation in 1991, an American genocide against the Iraqi people. The PAT is also active in an organization that promotes teaching about Palestine as genocide. The cruelest irony of this permissive abuse of Holocaust education would be anti-Israel advocacy.

Oregon’s bill goes beyond genocide to include mandatory instruction in “discrimination” as well as “prejudice, racism and stereotyping.” The result will be that teachers are given free rein to turn classrooms into partisan political re-education camps, all in the name of Holocaust education.

Recognizing the growing problem of misuse of Holocaust education, the United Nations educational and culture arm UNESCO in 2017 published a policy guide to help school districts. The guide is a counsel of despair because it shows that it is virtually impossible for a typical overworked school teacher to prevent such education from turning into intellectually shallow classroom activism for “social justice”.

The Oregon chapter of the National Association of Scholars, which I head, submitted testimony opposing SB 664. Unfortunately, not a single senator had the courage to slow this speeding train when it was passed on a fast track on March 12. The House is likely to rush it through too. Our students will suffer the consequences. We should be better stewards of the memory of the Holocaust.

— *Bruce Gilley is a professor of political science at Portland State University and president of the Oregon chapter of the National Association of Scholars.*