
Steve Cohen's comment on, "Warriors Don't Fear Ideas," an article written by Jason Chen, Kristin Kavanaugh, and Michael Smith, was published online in the June 2025 issue of *Proceedings*, a magazine published by the U.S. Naval Institute. It also appears in the August 2025 issue (Vol. 151/8/1,470) of the magazine. It can be viewed at <https://www.pollockcohen.com/media/thought-leadership/2025-08-01-comment-warriors-don-t-fear-ideas>

Warriors Don't Fear Ideas

While banning 381 books from the Naval Academy library might be the single most nonsensical act by a Secretary of Defense in a generation, it is not the saddest part of the story. That dishonor is a toss-up between an Academy Superintendent who stayed silent in the face of a foolish and patently political order and whoever told the active-duty officer he could not put his name on the byline of the referenced *Proceedings* article. The Superintendent should have resigned in protest, and the commanding officer who censored the writer ought to be fired.

The themes covered by the offending books pulled from library shelves included race, gender, and sexuality. A book about the Holocaust seems to have made the list because it examined the particular impact on women. And the administration's desire to purge diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) from the military initially led to excesses such as taking down Pentagon web pages highlighting Black veterans such as baseball legend and civil rights leader Jackie Robinson; the Tuskegee Airmen; and images of women Marines. Most of those excesses have since been corrected, although some of the pictures of women have not been restored. Reportedly, most of the banned books have quietly been returned to the Academy library.

The Defense Secretary's bullying order was indefensible. The Secretary has done the unthinkable: inject politics into an institution that prided itself on being apolitical. It is not as if politics are not discussed at the Academy or in the fleet. They are, in late night bull sessions, in history and political science classes, and among friends in every conceivable venue where free people get to argue. But the Navy—and especially the Academy—must not be partisan. Members of the armed forces swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution, irrespective of the commander-in-chief's political

affiliation. This administration has ignored hundreds of years of tradition.

Sadly, the Superintendent facilitated this retreat despite being charged with the academic, physical, professional, and ethical preparation of the next generation of Navy and Marine Corps officers and leaders. That is no small responsibility. Yet, she agreed to obey a patently dumb-but-legal order. And then, just weeks later, she canceled a speech about Stoicism by Ryan Holiday, a podcaster who had given similar talks to the Brigade of Midshipmen in each of the previous four years.

Midshipmen are not too fragile to be exposed to outside thinking or controversial ideas. They certainly would not remain blissfully unaware of the book banning. Midshipmen, like most hard-working and ambitious college students, look to the adults around them as sources of knowledge, insight, experience, and hopefully wisdom. They see their teachers, coaches, advisors—and at the Academy, senior officers—as potential role models. Yet, the Superintendent sent the message that it is better to obey a legal but inane, and overtly political, order to protect one's career than speak truth to power.

Mr. Holiday's talk was going to focus on the late Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who spent seven years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and received the Medal of Honor for his remarkable behavior while a prisoner, despite suffering unspeakable torture. As a young naval officer, Stockdale's studies at Stanford University included Marxism—not critical analysis, but primary sources. He later recounted that these studies enabled him to argue knowledgeably with his captors. Something like that would have been a far more appropriate lesson for the Superintendent to have imparted than the one she did. She could likewise have invoked retired Marine General James Mattis, who resigned as Secretary of Defense rather than obey an order to carry out a policy he thought wrong.

As for whoever ordered the coauthor to remove his name from this article, the word that comes to mind is Quisling. For more than 150 years the mission of the Naval Institute has been to encourage sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and others to “dare to read, think, speak, and write” to promote the Sea Services and global security. To censor a well-articulated idea—however controversial—is a disservice



to the Navy and the nation. The disheartening results of the Naval Academy book ban of 2025 will reverberate for years.

—Steve Cohen, U.S. Naval Academy class of 1973

Editor’s Note: The original version of the referenced article appeared online in June 2025. It also appears [in this issue](#).

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