The academic freedom battles of the 1970s reached a climax in the MACOS controversy that signaled the virtual end of the funding period for new social studies projects. Many conservatives and traditionalists who wanted the schools to transmit the “American way” perceived MACOS as a threat. MACOS, or Man: A Course of Study, was originally the brainchild of Harvard Anthropologists Douglas Oliver and Irven DeVore for a K-6 historical and evolutionary sequence of “The Human Past.” When the project was taken over by Jerome Bruner and the Harvard ESI staff in 1964, it limited its focus to the middle grades (4–6) and focused on the question, “What is human about human beings?” Reflecting DeVore’s influence, four organizing themes emerged, designed to help children understand culture: social organization, language, mythology, and technology. The themes were to dictate where postholes would be dug. In addition, “contrasts and models” were adopted as pedagogical approaches. Contrast was to come from exercises comparing the life cycles of fish and animals with the social behavior of humans, in this case, the Netsilik Eskimos. Dramatic and graphic scenes of Netsilik life were included, among them materials depicting senilicide and other taboos of mainstream US society. Bruner and colleagues were aware that the inclusion of graphic materials could precipitate controversy, but believed that the materials provided students with the opportunity for a powerful learning experience. Following field tests and much revision of the initial plans by a large and well-financed staff, the final package of materials included ninety-five teacher guides, thirty children’s booklets, sixteen records, five filmstrips, three games, fifty-four artifact cards, and various odds and ends. The package received numerous awards for its creativity and quality.¹
Despite the accolades, commercial publishers resisted such a logistically complex package, and the Education Development Center (EDC, formerly ESI) at Harvard funded its continued development and promotion using a total of $6.5 million in National Science Foundation (NSF) funds. By 1968, 6,000 students in 200 classrooms were using the program, and by late 1969, more than 1,000 classrooms were on board, success that led to a publishing contract with Curriculum Development Associates (CDA). Unfortunately, the program’s unbridled success was short-lived. MACOS was soon embroiled in a series of controversies that began not long after the published materials began to enter schools on a widespread basis.

Initial Confrontations

Lake City, Florida. The earliest local controversy over MACOS began in the fall of 1970 after a parent and fundamentalist minister in Lake City, Florida, whose daughter was using MACOS in a sixth grade class, requested a copy of the materials. After examining the materials, the minister denounced MACOS as “hippie-yippie philosophy” that was “sensual in philosophy” and linked it to “humanism, socialism, gun control, and evolution.” In Lake City, a rural north central Florida town of about 10,000, the charges resonated.

Shortly after the start of school in September 1970, Rev. Don Glenn of Montrose Baptist Church in Lake City requested and received copies of MACOS materials from his sixth-grade daughter’s social studies teacher at Niblack Elementary School. He subsequently discussed the course with teachers, learned that it was not on the state adopted list, and then proceeded to form a “study” group of “concerned citizens.” Glenn and his group, which allied itself with a group called Citizens for Moral Education (CME), began circulating petitions demanding that the course be dropped. Glenn, president of the local unit, charged that the course presented a “leftist, Godless approach that de bases traditional values.” At the school’s first PTA meeting of the year on November 4, Glenn rose and stated the group’s objections:

- The basic philosophy is humanistic. It leaves God out of it.
- It teaches evolution as a fact.
- It has a socialistic and sensual philosophy throughout its content.