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A Book Review by Harry Oppenheimer

# *A Curriculum of Fear:* *Homeland Security in U.S. Public Schools* by Nicole Nguyen

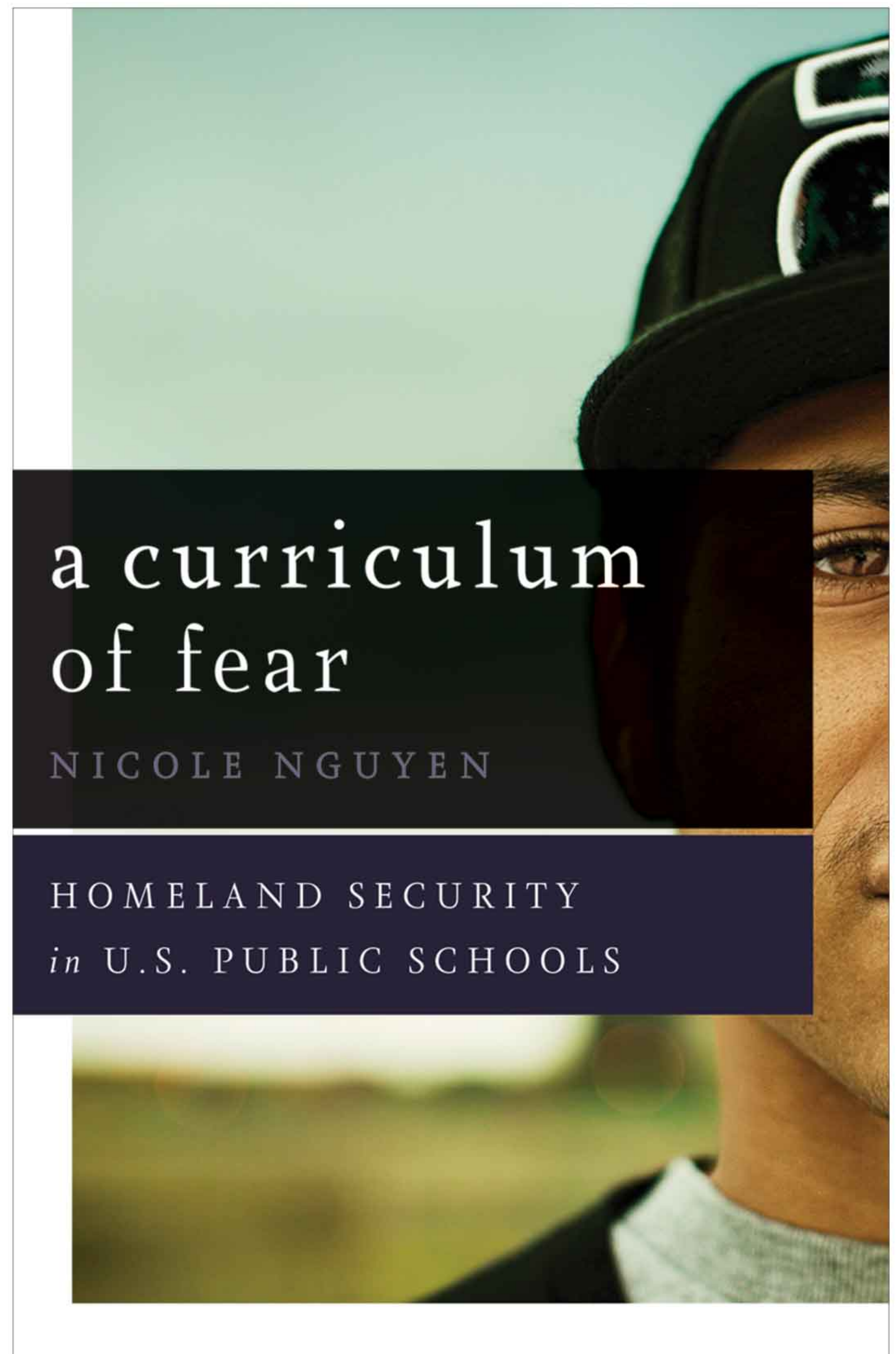
Book Review by Harry Oppenheimer

Nicole Nguyen's *A Curriculum of Fear: Homeland Security in U.S. Public Schools* presents an ethnography of Milton High School (a pseudonym), which, when presented with dwindling resources, a reputation for disciplinary issues, and poor marks, made a Faustian bargain with the national security apparatus. The book was meticulously researched, with rich detail on social and environmental forces at play in its educational context. However, the author's own political and normative biases will leave many readers frustrated that the book's presentation does not live up to its content.

Milton was once the picture of a struggling school in urban America, but its administrators had one major resource: its location on the grounds of a military base in the middle of the DC–Maryland intelligence corridor. For a group of 100–200 students a year, Milton's charter program oriented all school activities towards vocational programs in national security, counterterrorism, and law enforcement.

The book's most cogent passages occur when the author strips away her critical lens and focuses on the daily life in the school. Students discuss their hopes of landing a job in cyber security, the NSA, or an internship at Northrop Grumman. Lesson plans incorporate activities regarding insider threats, cyber threats, terrorist threats, school shootings, dirty bombs, biological weapons, and other forms of violence. One teacher describes how the plague could be incorporated into a lesson plan on *Romeo and Juliet*, which would allow teachers to “go talk about the plague and what it means, how it happens, why it's still a threat and if you did it for one or two days and that ties in the homeland security. That's how it works”.<sup>1</sup> The final third of the book brings this daily experience to life in a chilling manner.

The author is correct to write that, “while Milton students learned that terrorists maintained no political grievances and no rational tactics, they also studied how the problem of terrorism could be assessed through rational calculations (like Mr. Vitale's risk formula) and managed through speculative assumptions”.<sup>2</sup> National



security is a nuanced field, and approaches that ignore the cultural and socioeconomic elements of issues such as terrorism have failed both scholars and the American public alike. The ways that Milton students learn about national security are not the way in which it would be taught in a university setting.

On top of the author's powerful and troubling narrative is a thick layer of her own political and normative viewpoints. Nearly everything in Milton High symbolizes the constant pressure of homeland security and the militarization of schools. One passage describes a student's camouflaged Air Jordans, which elicited the author's “startled shock at this militarized footwear”.<sup>3</sup> The na-

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tional security industry “spreads its tentacles across the United States and even beyond its borders”.<sup>4</sup> She notes that the “JROTC officers who walked through Milton’s hallways with an air of importance”.<sup>5</sup> The author hides her normative agenda from participants, explicitly invoking the covert methods of journalist Jerry Thompson, who infiltrated the KKK; Jackie Orr, who exposed issues in the pharmaceutical industry; or Timothy Diamond, who shed light on the abuses in mental health care.<sup>6</sup>

There is a tension on the surface of the book that the author recognizes but does not engage with in a serious way. The author premises her book on the belief that the militarization of schools is wrong and that Milton is part of a program to subjugate “nondominant youth”.<sup>7</sup> However, halfway through the book, she admits that the students are active in lessons and their education, and she herself *enjoyed* participating in the site-visits and school activities that focus on national security. She both praises teachers and administrators for their commitment to their students and castigates them for creating a program that “taught, enforced, and regulated militarized gender norms”.<sup>8</sup> If Milton’s curriculum engages students and helps them learn, are we prepared to dismantle it for normative concerns? Alternative models for vocational schools are ignored in the book, and only considered at the end.

The irony of the book may be that the greatest fear the author describes does not come from the children, but rather the author herself. Greater familiarity with military topics and culture probably could have assuaged these fears. She heavily cites work within her own discipline of critical sociology, doubts whether David Petraeus should be teaching (he earned a PhD from Princeton), and fails to recognize the great diversity within the military and national security communities. This is part of a larger issue in America: the civil–military

members of Congress. Today that number is 18 percent. A Pew poll indicated that 76 percent of those over 65 have an immediate family member who served in the military, while only 33 percent for those aged 18–29. This divide is not explored in the book.

There are alternative methodologies that the author might have brought in to make her message clearer or dig deeper. A comparative approach could have helped readers to understand whether the trend she elucidates is actually surprising. Is this militarization a uniquely American phenomenon? How does a comparable school operate without such a program? Could the parents have helped her understand how students carry the heavy topics discussed in school? How does the United States create a realistic understanding of the threat landscape without engendering an environment of fear?

The most troubling elements of Milton are not the militarized footwear, crass teenage jokes, or even the concept of a national security magnet school. Rather, they are the execution of such a program, how violence becomes perfectly normal for these students, and how complicated issues are unexplored for the sake of simplification. The issue is not militarism itself, but facile understanding of the issues at hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Nguyen, *A Curriculum of Fear: Homeland Security in the U.S. Public Schools* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Nguyen, 181.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyen, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen, 55-56.

<sup>7</sup> Nguyen, 241.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen, 171.

## Harry Oppenheimer

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