

CAL THOMAS

Courting pedophile approval ratings?

The Justice Department has persuaded the Supreme Court to consider redefining child pornography in a case involving a man convicted two years ago of possessing videotapes of scantily clothed children.

The man, Steven A. Knox of State College, Pa., argued that the videotapes were not pornographic because no genitals were displayed, although children in provocative poses were depicted and the camera focused on the girls' genital areas for prolonged periods.

The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia upheld the conviction, agreeing with a definition of pornography established during the Reagan administration that said it is not necessary for a child to be nude in order for child pornography laws to be violated.

Enter the Clinton Justice Department, which wants to liberalize the definition of child pornography. For what purpose? Is there a groundswell of public opinion favoring the sexual exploitation of children?

Sen. William Roth, Delaware Republican, called the redefinition of child pornography by the Clinton administration a favor to "pornographers and pedophiles at the expense of the young, innocent and vulnerable." Mr. Roth chaired hearings in 1985 on the relationship between child pornography and pedophiles that led to legislation outlawing ads for child pornography and expanded the Mann Act to protect young boys as well as young girls. He has written Attorney General Janet Reno pro-

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testing her department's action and contending it will "legalize a substantial amount of child pornography in this country." The letter was signed by several Republican and Democratic senators.

One would think that a self-styled champion of children and opponent of child abuse like Janet Reno would be the first to oppose a relaxation of laws enacted to provide protection for children against sexual predators.

In the Justice Department's first brief last March, the acting solicitor general described the tapes this way: "The tapes showed various females between the ages of 10 and 17 dressed in bathing suits, leotards, underwear and similar attire. The children struck provocative poses, apparently at the direction of someone off camera. The camera would typically zoom in on the children's pubic and genital areas and display a closeup of that area for an extended time. The tapes themselves and the promotional materials ... showed that the tapes were designed to pander to pedophiles."

An advertising catalogue that accompanied the tapes and presented at Knox's trial described some of the scenes: "bathing suits on girls as young as 15 that are so revealing it's almost like seeing them naked (some say even better)."

In urging the Supreme Court to set aside the conviction, Solicitor General Drew S. Days III argued that the 1984 statute requires that "the material include a visible depiction of the genitals ... [and] that it must depict a child lasciviously engaging in sexual conduct [as distinguished from lasciviousness on the part of the photographer or consumer]."

But Patrick Trueman, a former member of the Reagan and Bush administrations' pornography unit at the Justice Department, says the "lascivious" language in the statute refers to the viewer, not to the conduct of the child. He contends that children can be engaged in activity that, to them, seems harmless, but is a turn-on for the pedophile.

If this redefinition of child pornography is allowed to stand, the message will go out that the war against such filth is over. Groups like the North American Man Boy Love Association will enjoy new freedoms, to say nothing of plenty of new material.

If the Justice Department will not hold the line against some of the slimiest people among us — child pornographers and pedophiles — Congress must clarify the statute so that not even the Clinton administration will fail to get the message.

Cal Thomas is a nationally syndicated columnist.

COMMENTARY