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POINT OF VIEW

Free Speech and an Orthodoxy of Dissent

By STANLEY KURTZ

Difficult as it may be to acknowledge in this time of national trial, we ourselves must shoulder a good deal of responsibility for the recent attacks. I'm not talking about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I refer, rather, to the attacks on professors who have been censured by administrators, deluged with hate mail, or otherwise intimidated for claiming that the United States is to blame for the terrorist assaults. In large measure, responsibility for the tattered condition of our campus culture of free speech must be assigned to the very professoriate that now seeks the shelter of that tradition's tolerance.

Most of the criticism leveled at professors in the wake of the September 11 attacks has come not from other faculty members, but from students, administrators, and media commentators. Among faculty members themselves, there has been little real debate on the causes of this war. That fact, more than any other, explains why recent condemnations of professorial opinion have sometimes gone so far as to challenge or contravene our traditions of free speech. If the professoriate was diverse enough to allow for an authentic debate over the causes of the war; if our tradition of free speech had not for years been under challenge as a mere cover for the oppressive power of the social elites; if we had not been so recently subjected to codes, written and unwritten, in which sensitivity trumped free speech; then we would now have far less to fear from the pent-up anger of students, administrators, or the public over controversial comments about the war.

For a generation, the classic liberal rationale for free speech, articulated by thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, has taken a beating on our college campuses. It was once believed that the best way to separate a strong idea from a weak one was to encourage a clash of views. It was also argued that protecting everyone's speech was the only way to preserve our rights for those times when we ourselves might be in the minority. Then came the sea change.

I remember the moment in the early '80s when the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, was shouted down during a speech on the Berkeley campus. After that incident, the faculty split between those who defended classic notions of free speech and younger radicals who insisted that free-speech rights were simply a cover for power. Oppressors, they argued, have no free-speech rights. In the decades since, through the work of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Catharine MacKinnon, those views have been widely taught on our college campuses. Yet now that left-leaning faculty members find themselves subject to the anger of an aroused public on the matter of the war on terrorism, we hear cries for the preservation of free speech.

In the classic liberal view, the best remedy for foolish or abhorrent speech is more speech. But there's more at stake than the intellectual gain that comes from pressing a questionable argument with a better one. The very existence of openly expressed divergences of opinion helps protect against reprisals and violence. Those who are not themselves silenced need not silence others. That is why it is so important to have what we now sadly lack: a faculty diverse enough to stage an authentic debate on the causes of the war.

The first significant campus controversy in the wake of the September 11 attacks came at Yale, where, in a column in the *Yale Daily News*, Donald Kagan, a professor of classics and history, excoriated a panel discussion on terrorism that had been held a few days before. Kagan objected not only to the blame-the-victim tenor of the six panelists' remarks about the causes of the September 11 attacks, but also to the uniformity of their views. Had it been impossible to find a professor who saw things differently, Kagan asked, or had it simply been deemed undesirable?

It may not be altogether impossible to find faculty members who hold views on terrorism more in tune with those of the American public, but when it comes to humanities and social-science faculties, hawks are unquestionably on the endangered-species list. That fact does much to explain the intensity of the public response to the comments of left-leaning professors about September 11. Students, and the public at large, no longer believe that the academy is capable of providing the country with a balanced assessment of our national dilemma.

Consider George Wright, a professor of political science at California State University at Chico, who has received e-mails with threatening subject headings, like "Dead Man Walking," as a result of remarks he made to a crowd of students in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Wright called the events of September 11 "a crime against humanity," but went on to accuse the Bush administration of wanting to militarize the Middle East, colonize the Arab world, and gain access to oil for the Bush family.

The threats against Wright are appalling and unforgivable. But what would the response have been to a serious debate between Wright and a political-science professor with more-conservative views? It's embarrassing that those sorts of clashes are staged with regularity on, say, the Fox News Channel but only with rarity on our college campuses. A genuine debate would have made students who disagreed with Wright feel more spoken for, and would probably have forced the faculty combatants to tone down their rhetoric.

Of course, a fierce critic of administration policy has every right to speak on his own, and to deploy whatever sort of rhetoric he chooses. Manuel Esteban, president of Chico State, defended Wright's decision to speak but criticized his timing and his judgment. Wright replied that a college education isn't supposed to be about making sure that students don't feel bad. True enough. But why, then, for decades, have we been promulgating speech codes based on that very proposition? Is it any wonder that our students are unable to tolerate sharply expressed or unpleasant thoughts, after we have catered to student sensitivity for years?

The calls for campus free speech continue to ignore the fact that our intellectually and politically one-sided campus climate has contributed to the problem. A recent article in *The Christian Science Monitor* spoke of the conflict between "'my country love it or leave it' fervor" and "free speech and broad intellectual inquiry into the root causes of September 11." The implication is that an inquiry into the root causes of the terror will end up saddling the United States with responsibility for the attacks. But that reflects only one intellectual position.

Scholars like the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis and the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington -- old lions of a passing generation of scholars -- argue that the root causes of the terror have more to do with the difficulties of harmonizing

Islamic culture with modernity than with any alleged transgressions of U.S. foreign policy. But Lewis's and Huntington's work on Islamic fundamentalism, although considered prophetic by many commentators in light of the attacks and their aftermath, has generally been dismissed within the academy as essentializing and neo-imperialist. Were a younger generation of successors in place in the academy and available to debate the scholarly critics of U.S. foreign policy, we would be hearing far less about threats to campus free speech and far more about the intellectual issues at stake in this war.

Left-leaning faculty members at many universities are finding that large numbers of students are now actively sympathetic to outside critics of the academy and hostile to their professors. What's more, the world is watching in a way that it never has before. The public may not have cared much about obscure disputes over literary theory or the composition of the canon, but it has very definite ideas about the September 11 attacks, and it takes commentary on those events very seriously. So now the same professors who have long been critics of the liberal tradition of free speech are forced to rely on what remains of it. And many of them are afraid.

Some incidents give genuine cause for concern. A professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who called the American flag a "symbol of terrorism and death and fear and destruction and oppression" was deluged with harassing calls and e-mails after critics published her home and e-mail addresses on the Internet. However disturbing her comments, such attempts at intimidation are outrageous.

Other incidents have been more ambiguous. The trustees of the City University of New York, for example, considered issuing a condemnation of some professors who criticized U.S. foreign policy at a teach-in. Trustees have free-speech rights, too, of course, but when an administration attacks utterances by its own professors, there is a danger of creating a chilling climate for speech. Chancellor Matthew Goldstein handled the matter better by combining an expression of his disapproval of the professors' remarks with a clear affirmation of their right to speak.

The ethos of campus free speech must be carefully guarded during this difficult period. Harassment, retaliation, and intimidation must be condemned, even as forceful criticism is

permitted and encouraged. But a serious solution requires recognition of the one-sided intellectual climate of the contemporary academy. Ironically, a decades-long effort to achieve diversity on our campuses has left them more intellectually and politically uniform than ever. In the name of representing marginalized points of view, we have created an orthodoxy of dissent.

If the country decides that our colleges and universities have nothing to offer in this time of crisis beyond one-sided analyses supporting a distinctly minority viewpoint, then not only will our ethos of free speech be threatened, but the academy itself may be caught up in a crisis of legitimacy. If the radical professoriate wants its rights of free speech respected, it will need to relearn the meaning of the freedom it is asking for, and readmit to the academy thoughtful representatives of the very ideas it has heretofore excluded.

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