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MYTHS AND FACTS: HOW REAL IS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS?

John K. Wilson†

I. INTRODUCTION

Political correctness, it seems, is a movement without followers. For something thought to dominate college campuses, it is strange that almost no one is willing to stand up and declare themselves "politically correct" or attack others for their "political incorrectness."

The debate over political correctness is not about whether it is a good or a bad thing. After all, who can be in favor of "leftist totalitarianism" or the "PC thought police?" In my mind, being asked "Are you in favor of political correctness?" is akin to being asked "Are you in favor of the conspiracy of Jewish bankers who run the world?" I am wholeheartedly opposed to conspiracies of Jewish bankers ruling the planet, but at the same time I strongly doubt that any of them exist, and I wonder about the motives of those who claim they do.

Thus, the question about political correctness must be an empirical one: does it exist, and to what extent does it threaten academic freedom? And this question must also be asked in context, since it would be biased to examine (as most critics of political correctness have done) only the left-wing threats to intellectual freedom. Do other forms of intolerance and censorship (which one might call "conservative correctness") exist, and to what extent do they threaten academic freedom?

Unfortunately, the empirical answers are not easy to get. There has been no reliable survey of faculty or students done to establish the extent of threats to academic freedom, as the Thielens and Lazarsfeld study provided of McCarthyism’s effect...

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on academia in the 1950s. Even if a survey were done, its results would be hard to believe because of the prevalence of the phrase "political correctness" and the ambiguity of its meaning. When Playboy magazine commissioned a survey in 1994 of college students, nearly 70% reported that they were "politically correct." Perhaps the most curious fact was that the responses were virtually the same for students of all political orientations, whether they identified themselves as conservative or liberal. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask what the students thought it meant to be "politically correct," but certainly two-thirds of college students do not regard themselves as totalitarian censors.

If one may hazard a guess, it seems likely that most students equate "politically correct" (PC) with a kind of exaggerated politeness: not using racial epithets, not making offensive comments to others, not telling derogatory jokes, et cetera. Whether PC politeness is a good or bad thing depends on the circumstances, but it is rather different from the kinds of incidents often reported as proof of "political correctness."

In fact, no survey can define the state of "political correctness" on college campuses if it is wholly subjective. Simply because a student claims to be a victim of PC, or imagines that he or she is silenced, does that constitute evidence of censorship? Even if the feeling of intimidation is subjectively real, we would not say that this is sufficient—a conservative student who claims to feel censored by a liberal professor must present some evidence that this is the case, particularly when articles and books about PC appear annually to convince these students that they are oppressed victims. The American Spectator once even created an "Amnesty in Academia" hotline to report "human rights violations" on campus, and the right-wing group Accuracy in Academia urges students to describe incidents of PC, and promises to report on biased left-wing views expressed by teachers in the classroom.

Because good surveys do not exist, the "debate" over political correctness has been based on anecdotes that are now familiar to almost everyone. In itself, the use of anecdotes is not an illegitimate form of argument. When no other evidence is

available, anecdotes are the best proof we have to examine. However, many of the anecdotes do not involve clear-cut examples of censorship, and some are badly distorted in the retelling. Anecdotizing is a practice often abused when some kinds of anecdotes (about "conservative correctness") are regularly omitted and broad generalizations are made from those few that are told.

The inconsistency of the attacks on political correctness is one of the most disturbing aspects of the current debate over the culture wars. The phony cry of "political correctness" is used by a conservative movement to demonize the academic Left and justify efforts to halt greater diversity in the curriculum, faculty, and student body.

The most substantial threat to freedom of thought in academia comes from "conservative correctness," which seeks to suppress radical ideas and impose greater control by alumni, legislators, and trustees over higher education.

The central dogma of the critics of political correctness holds that American universities today are dominated by the Left, that conservatives on campus are the victims of censorship, and that radicals—tenured or otherwise—are their oppressors. This is the myth of political correctness. What makes it a myth is the fact that reality on college campuses is quite different from what the critics have alleged. Not only are many of the anecdotes exaggerated or misrepresented, but many of the critics of PC support a far more dangerous threat to the ideals of academic freedom.

For too long, public discussion about cultural issues has been treated as a war rather than a debate. As a result, all sides have tended to ignore violations of academic freedom when the victims are their ideological opponents.

Political correctness has become a myth for many reasons, most notably the movement of conservative organizations and foundations who have funded research, spread information, and supported periodicals devoted to exposing and attacking, over and over again, the evils of political correctness.4

But perhaps the greatest reason why political correctness achieved such notoriety is the ounce of truth about it: for the

first time in the history of American higher education, conservatives are being officially penalized for their views. Never before, with some very few exceptions, have conservative students and faculty been targeted for punishment in ways that use official sanction. This very surprising fact may help explain why there has been such an imbalance in the media coverage of American colleges and universities. The suppression of conservatives is something new and dramatic; the suppression of leftists is old hat, and nobody cares much about it.

However, the reality is that "conservative correctness" on college campuses is a far greater danger than "political correctness"—and the solution to both is not tirades against the intellectual crimes of one's opponents, but a stronger and more consistent devotion to academic freedom.

II. HETEROSEXUAL CORRECTNESS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Perhaps no group is more persecuted on college campuses than gay, lesbian and bisexual faculty and students. Deprived of protection under the law, and banned by many colleges, gays and lesbians are still fighting for the right to equality. Many of the same people who condemn "political correctness" are silent about attacks on the rights of gay and lesbians, or are even leading the campaign for homophobia on campus. Peter LaBarbera, editor of Accuracy in Academia's Campus Report, for example, is also editor of the notoriously anti-gay newsletter, Lambda Report.

While fewer gays and lesbians are closeted than in the past and discrimination is less severe than it once was, coming out is still a risk to a teacher's career. Even scholarship on gay and lesbian issues faces barriers. In 1992, philosopher Richard Mohr had difficulty getting his book, Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies, published. Several university presses objected to the content of the book or the photographs of gay erotica. When Beacon Press finally published the book, it had trouble finding a printer willing to do the book. A similar problem faced Forbidden Passages, an anthology of gay and lesbian material censored by Canadian Customs officials published by Cleis Press, which had difficulty finding a printer or a distributor willing to

deal with the book.

Formal discrimination against gay and lesbian faculty has not yet been eliminated. At some religious institutions, simply talking about homosexuality with less than complete condemnation can be grounds for dismissal. Kenneth Gowdy was fired by Bethel College in Minnesota in May of 1992 after expressing his belief in the need for commitment in all sexual relationships, including homosexual ones, to a student in an informal conversation held in a hallway lounge. Gowdy noted, "I've never advocated homosexuality in any of my classes. I've never counseled any student to explore or continue a homosexual lifestyle." After, some students told Rev. John Piper, a former Bethel instructor, about the conversation. Piper cosponsored a resolution at the Baptist General Conference declaring that "those who believe that homosexual behavior is a Biblically acceptable lifestyle are not qualified to serve in the leadership of the conference or to teach in its educational institutions." Piper talked with Gowdy and then took his concerns to provost David Brandt, who fired Gowdy. Gowdy reports, "I was told that the school wouldn't have someone with my point of view on the staff. I was asked if I would change my point of view. I said that I wouldn't just to save my job."6

At Nyack College, English professor June Hagen was fired in 1993 after a student complained that she was "tolerating" homosexuality because of a button attached to her briefcase which declared "Support Gay Rights." A local pastor wrote to the college, "a professor who advocates 'gay/homosexual rights' has no place at Nyack College." Edna Bivens, chair of the Christian Coalition's Orange County branch, threatened to withdraw her daughter from Nyack if Hagen was not fired: "We don't pay this kind of money so that our daughter can sit and listen to this kind of liberal garbage." Administrators reminded Hagen of the school's policy on sexuality, which says that the college promotes a Biblical life-style that "precludes premarital and extramarital intercourse, homosexual practice, and other forms of sexual behavior incompatible with the conservative Christian life-style." Hagen declared that she was a "wholehearted supporter" of this statement and removed the button,

explaining that it represented only her concern about violence against homosexuals, not her acceptance of homosexual behavior. 7

Rexford Boda, the college’s president, interrogated Hagen and was satisfied with her answers, although he also asked about her membership in the American Civil Liberties Union and said, “in terms of your future I am wondering if the campus can tolerate a liberal Democrat.” Despite Boda’s support, Hagen was dismissed by the board of trustees without an explanation, three months after she removed the controversial button from her briefcase. And because President Boda had defended Hagen at a chapel service, he was also fired by the board of trustees. 8

At Elmira College in 1991, campus minister Lee Griffith was fired after writing an open letter to President Thomas Meier expressing concern about “gay-bashing” incidents on campus and urging the administration to enforce a faculty statement of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation. The administration responded by attacking Griffith for promoting his own “social action program” and firing him. The administration also retaliated against faculty members who criticized the college and led a vote of no confidence against the president, calling these actions “grave misconduct” and “tantamount to sabotage.” 9

But homophobia also persists at many secular colleges. In July 1994, openly lesbian poet Nuala Archer was removed as director of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center after she sponsored a national poetry contest for “all lesbian poets of color” that was funded by a $5,635 grant from the Women’s Community Foundation. Her critics claim the firing was due to her poor administration of the Poetry Center, which they called “a spectacular disaster.” But David Evert, an English professor on the Poetry Center committee noted, “My only concern was that the last thing we wanted was to have something coming out of [Cleveland State University] that was potentially controversial without some sort of warning. I had an image of the provost or the president opening the Plain Dealer one morning to read

about this.” Even if Archer’s administrative skills were questionable, the fear of something “controversial” clearly was a major factor in her dismissal.10

At the Montana College of Mineral Science and Technology, English professor Henry Gonshak proposed a summer course on “gay and lesbian studies.” A fundamentalist pastor in a local church wrote a letter to the newspaper protesting the class title. Although the pastor admitted he was “unclear” about the content of the class, he warned about “radical gay agendas” and urged readers to contact the college to oppose having their tax money “tossed away”—even though the summer course was financially self-supporting. Gonshak reports, “the alumni soon began besieging Tech administrators with letters and telephone calls. They threatened to withdraw thousands of dollars in contributions unless the class was dropped.” Gonshak noted that he would let students “express themselves and no one will be intimidated into not having their opinion,” and he even invited the pastor to make his views known in the class. Under pressure, Gonshak reluctantly agreed to drop the class, but then changed his mind and fought for its reinstatement; however, the college’s president refused to reauthorize it (fearing the alumni reaction) until Gonshak agreed to “repackage” the class under the new title of “Differing Views on Alternative Lifestyles.”11

III. UNUSUAL AND UNEXPECTED CENSORSHIP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

In October 1993, the Iowa Board of Regents imposed a policy on the University of Iowa requiring professors to warn students before any materials, “graphic, still photo, motion film form, or otherwise” are presented which include “explicit representations of human sexual acts that could reasonably be expected to be offensive to some students.” These students, the Board ruled, must be allowed to skip class without penalty and complete an alternative assignment, or drop the course without

10. *RCSU Professor Alleges Case of Poetic Injustice*, CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, Aug. 9, 1994, at 1B.

The policy was prompted by an optional film, "Taxi zum Klo" shown as part of the German Film and Video Series for German conversation classes in 1991 at the University of Iowa. The flier promoting the film included the disclaimer, "Don't come near this film if the world of homosexuality upsets you in any way." Although students in German conversation classes were told attendance was optional, Iowa President Hunter Rawlings quickly condemned the showing of the movie: "I find it difficult to believe that it was appropriate to use this film in this course, and I have conveyed this concern to the College of Liberal Arts." In response to the film, then-Board of Regents President Marvin Pomerantz said, "We hope we don't see this kind of thing again, and we're going to make sure everyone involved hears that from the regents." Pomerantz did not believe the instructors would be fired, but only because "it would be difficult to make the dismissals stick." But he declared, "There is some appropriate action that should be taken that is clear and decisive so that the faculty understands that, while we protect their rights and we stand for their rights, we don't tolerate bad judgment."\(^{13}\)

The University of Iowa tried to stop further showings of "Taxi zum Klo." The administration continued to refuse to allow permission for the movie to be shown, until a few hours before its screening on November 21, 1991, when the Iowa Attorney General informed the university that they had no legal authority to prevent it.\(^{14}\) After the controversy over "Taxi zum Klo," the Board of Regents ordered a policy developed for sexually explicit materials at all Iowa public universities. While faculty debated proposals for regulating the use of sexually explicit materials, two additional incidents led to reprimands of instructors at the University of Iowa.

In February of 1993, teaching assistant Megan O'Connell was reprimanded and ordered to apologize to students for


showing offensive material in a class and failing to inform students of their right to leave. An eight-minute video by Iowa City artist Franklin Evans which depicted two men engaged in oral sex was shown to her art colloquium of 150 students at the University of Iowa. The video consisted of a collage of images altered by various technical tricks, including three short segments totalling fifteen seconds that contained the offensive material. A first-year student who objected to the video called her mother, who attacked the video as “pornographic” and declared, “For a man to be having oral sex with another man is objectionable.” The student said, “To me, it wasn’t art at all because this guy was trying to push his way of life on other people. I don’t think that’s right, showing a sexual act in class and condoning it.” Former Board of Regents President Marvin Pomerantz warned in a board meeting: “Somebody is going to get fired around this university if they don’t follow the rules.”

In April of 1993, a teaching assistant (TA) for an “American Cultures” class was reprimanded for showing “Paris is Burning” to a class, even though the film about transvestites has no graphic sex scenes at all, and despite the fact that the TA had warned the class beforehand about its content. Nevertheless, three students complained to university officials about being shown a film on drag queens. Only when the TA fought back and protested the decision was a letter rescinding the reprimand put in his file. However, the original letter was not removed, and the retraction occurred only because the policies “were not readily available or widely known.”

After the University of Iowa (unlike other Iowa universities) failed to pass a sexually explicit materials policy that satisfied the Board of Regents, a policy was unilaterally imposed on it which required instructors to warn students of potentially offensive sexual materials and to consult with the offended students to offer alternative assignments or the option of dropping the course.

In 1994, the University of Iowa president imposed a “compromise” version of the rule requiring teachers “to give

15. Id. at 9-10; Mary Geraghty, TA Reprimanded after Showing Film, DAILY IOWAN, Sept. 20, 1993, at 1A.

students adequate indication of any unusual or unexpected class presentations or materials." While the new rule eliminated the specific attack on issues of sexuality, it broadened the policy to cover any material which any student might feel is "unusual or unexpected." There is little doubt that a chilling effect on discussions of sexuality, especially homosexuality, has been the result. 17

In December 1995, the Iowa Board of Regents voted seven to two to eliminate the "unusual or unexpected" clause. However, faculty are now required to "present the appropriate context for course content" and strictly prohibited from using materials that have "no pedagogical relationship to the subject matter of the course." The old language was dropped because it was "too hard to define," but the new language is no better. Now, instead of being required to warn students about offensive material, teachers are banned from using anything the Regents deem "pedagogically unrelated" to the course topic. Like the old ban, the new ban is an unnecessary restriction on academic freedom, which will have a chilling effect on what goes on in the classroom. 18

IV. CENSORSHIP OF STUDENT GROUPS

Students supporting gay and lesbian rights are also heavily regulated. In many cases, hatred of gays and lesbians takes the form of hate crimes. At Gordon College in Massachusetts, reported an article in Christianity Today, "an allegedly neo-Nazi student group was implicated in writing offensive graffiti, making threatening phone calls to homosexual sympathizers, and slashing the draped sweater of a woman who had written a public letter supportive of homosexuals." When the editor of the school newspaper wrote an editorial about gays on campus that asked "Can we love others as they are, not as we think they should be?", someone telephoned her and said, "Gays and people like you deserve to die." "Die Homos" graffiti also

17. Mark Siebert, Debates over U of I Policy Nearing End, DES MOINES REG., Jan. 15, 1994, at 3A; Jean Fallow, Unusual and Unexpected Censorship, DEMOCRATIC CULTURE (Teachers for a Democratic Culture, Evanston, IL), Spring 1994, at 6-7.
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appeared on a classroom door.19

Administrators at many religious and secular colleges encourage this hatred by banning all gay and lesbian student groups and in some cases by making homosexuality grounds for dismissal. In 1993, Gonzaga University trustees refused to recognize a gay and lesbian student group because of the university’s Catholic affiliation. Gonzaga president Bernard Coughlin declared, “such a movement clearly is a betrayal of the university’s tradition and mission.”20 In 1993, the student government at St. Johns University banned the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Alliance for being inconsistent with the institution’s religious values, a day after the student group returned from a national march on Washington for gay rights. The administration refused to overturn the decision. Gay and lesbian student groups have also been banned at Notre Dame, Boston College, and several other religious colleges.

In 1993, the student senate at Ohio Northern University voted to deny recognition to the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance. University officials said that they could do nothing to overturn the decision, which prevents the group from being covered by the university’s liability insurance, receiving school funding, or being listed in the student handbook. At North Idaho College in 1994, the student senate denied official recognition to the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Alliance because the student body president claimed that “a club based solely on sexual orientation is not needed on this campus.” The conservative newspaper Campus applauded the decision against “the arrogant organization,” although the university twice overruled the senate. In 1994, administrators at Stephen F. Austin State University overturned a student government’s decision to ban a gay and lesbian student group from campus and revoke funding of $108 per year. Bryan Simmons, president of Young Conservatives of Texas on campus, led the fight against certifying the organization: “a group that advocates breaking the law shouldn’t be getting student fees.”21

In 1991, Auburn's student government, under the advice of the conservative Rutherford Institute, refused to charter the Auburn Gay and Lesbian Alliance. After administrators approved the group under threat of an ACLU lawsuit, opponents gathered 21,000 signatures on a petition and Alabama politicians passed a law unanimously against using public funds or facilities to support a group that "promotes a lifestyle or actions" prohibited by state sodomy laws. Co-sponsor Rep. Mark Gaines declared, "If the charter of this group is allowed to stand, you've opened the door for organizations that promote bestiality and wife-swapping." In response, Auburn University requested all student groups to sign a promise not to encourage violations of the state's sodomy law. In 1996, Alabama's law was finally declared unconstitutional.

When gay and lesbian activities are supported at public universities, state legislators often intervene and threaten funding. In 1994, the University of Texas at Austin changed the funding for "Living with Pride" workshops for "gay, lesbian, and bisexual students questioning their sexual identity" under threats from state legislators. The $882 cost of workshops came out of private donations instead of using funds from the $47 fee for health services which would have represented 1.8 cents per student. Warren Chisum, president of the seventy-three legislator Texas Conservative Coalition, declared: "Had they not made the change, the funding arrangement could have jeopardized their credibility with the Legislature." Texas President Robert Berdahl approved the change to "avoid a controversy" and said, "We certainly do not want to offend people unnecessarily." The Young Conservatives of Texas and the American Family Association of Texas led the protest against the workshops.

Indiana University's plans to spend $50,000 on an Office of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Student Support Services were scrapped after Accuracy in Academia and conservatives on campus protested the move, a state legislator threatened to cut $500,000 from the university's budget, and a wealthy alumnus threatened to withhold a million dollar donation. Instead, the
support center will be renamed the Office of Student Ethics and Anti-Harassment, and will be funded by private donations.

At Kent State University, the College Republicans protested allowing a class on the sociology of gays and lesbians to be taught, arguing that offering such a class was tantamount to University sanctioning of the gay lifestyle. In 1993, before the course was ever taught, an Ohio state senator wrote to Kent State president Carol Cartwright, threatening to cut state funding if a gay studies class was permitted. The interference of state legislators in university affairs poses a dramatic threat to academic freedom, since in a time of tight budgets public colleges are heavily dependant on state funding. When this money is wielded to silence certain views, it is nothing but censorship.

Efforts by state legislators to intimidate public universities with the threat of budget cuts are a particularly effective form of censorship. These attempts to limit academic freedom are almost always directed at silencing leftist faculty, and even if they are not immediately successful, administrators often become wary of controversial ideas for fear of retaliation. In 1995, Cuban-American state legislators in Florida threatened to cut off funding to the University of Florida after two professors from the University of Havana were invited to a symposium on Caribbean economics. In December 1995, the University of Oklahoma Regents provided matching funds for a $500,000 endowed law chair in honor of Anita Hill for the study of sexual harassment and other women’s issues. In response, conservative state legislators threatened retaliation, comparing the chair to a “Jeffrey Dahmer Chair in the School of Cooking” and an “Adolf Hitler Chair for Creative Population Control.” Political activist E.Z. Million declared, “We’re going to do everything we can to punish the University of Oklahoma for this heinous act. We want the law school shut down.” Dean David Swank was forced out in 1993 for supporting Hill, and Oklahoma president Richard Van Horn resigned in 1993, reportedly because his


defense of the fund drive for the professorship offended important donors.26

In July 1995, California state senator Don Rogers, joined by several other politicians, demanded the firing of University of California at Santa Cruz Chancellor Karl Pister because he appointed Angela Davis to a presidential chair: “The appointment of such a person to this position — the highest honor that the university can bestow — clearly shows a lack of judgment and sensitivity that calls into question Pister’s continuing as head of the Santa Cruz campus.” Rogers declared, “I am appalled that Davis is a tenured professor at Santa Cruz.” The conservative California Republican Assembly Board passed a resolution to fire Pister and any others responsible for “this seditious act against the law-abiding taxpayers of California.”27

In fact, the presidential chair is not the highest honor bestowed by the University of California. Indeed, it is not really an honor, but a competition held to develop new programs, and Davis’ application was deemed the best out of eight applicants at Santa Cruz. State senator Bill Leonard (author of the Leonard Law used to strike down Stanford’s never-enforced “speech code”) condemned Davis as an “extremist” with a “reputation for racism, violence and communism” and demanded her removal from the presidential chair on the grounds that she is “the leftist equivalent” of “a grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.” Leonard also attacked “the insensitivity of the administration of [the University of California].” Another state senator told the university to let “decency” prevail by rescinding the award to a “counter culture castoff.”28

University of California chancellor Jack Peltason was interrogated by legislators who hinted that the university might suffer for its decision, as one representative noted: “We’re going to be appropriating money to you and [this] does raise questions about where you decide to put that money.” Peltason expressed disagreement with Davis’ views, but noted that the $75,000 grant over three years would be used to develop new ethnic studies courses for students, not to personally enrich Davis. As Peltason

put it, "a university cannot avoid making academic judgments because they are controversial." 29

Davis, who was fired by the University of California regents in 1969 for being a member of the Communist Party, said the new attacks are part of a "concerted assault against multicultural education." One Republican state representative acknowledged, "If we get into fooling around with academic freedom, we put the whole system in jeopardy because we turn into dictators ourselves." 30

When the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention held a federally-funded two-week summer institute in 1995, bringing together health workers to discuss education about tobacco, several state legislators were offended at the affront to corporate "good citizens" like the tobacco companies. State Representative Leo Daughtry, House majority leader and tobacco farm owner, explicitly threatened the university's funding if it permitted this federal grant to be accepted: "It's definitely going to affect the budget process." Democratic Congressman Charlie Rose called the university's president, asking him to rescind an invitation to FDA director David Kessler. Although the university stood up strongly for academic freedom and the controversy died down after Kessler could not attend the summer institute, the chilling effect on those who would challenge powerful corporations is clear. 31

This was not the only case of tobacco's political power over academic studies. In August 1995, the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee eliminated funds for a National Cancer Institute study of how campaign contributions from the tobacco industry influence public policy. Tobacco lobbyists objected to the study, and influenced Republican lawmakers to halt it. 32

V. THE RIGHT-WING ATTACKS ON THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS AND THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

For the first time in history, we have a national political movement which is successfully aiming to defund artists and scholars for explicitly ideological purposes. This threat to academic freedom is done in the name of curing political correctness, the bitter medicine that academia must take to purge its sick body of this evil.

The irony is that the Right is plotting the death of fundamentally conservative institutions. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), and similar government-funded agencies are not in any way controlled by the fringe Left. Rather, they have deeply traditional goals, in some cases shaped by previous ideological threats by the Right to their budgets. The NEA is devoted to supporting established artistic institutions and programs that bring culture to the masses. The NEH focuses on academic projects that offend no one, mostly preservation and publication of historical works. PBS offers nature programs, news shows and documentaries, and a large number of right-wing opinion shows.

The same politicians who condemn Hollywood and commercial television for its lack of values are eager to discard the government agencies that offer an antidote. The key value here is not a consistent commitment to education, but political opportunism of the lowest sort.

The NEA and the NEH are in the center of an ideological battleground. The endowments' defenders, who support it as a neutral way to increase public access to the arts and humanities, have been unable to compete with the critics who depict the NEA and NEH as handouts for porno queens, black gay men, and left-wing deconstructionists.

Senator Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.) admitted that the cuts are ideologically motivated: "the activities of the NEA and the NEH run against the sensitivities of many American taxpayers who are opposed to seeing their dollars fund projects that they
find objectionable."

Not only has the Republican-controlled Congress proposed a 40% cut in the NEH and the NEA, down to $99.5 million, but it acquiesced to the demands of Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) to impose censorship over the arts that the Justice Department says are blatantly unconstitutional. The NEA will be banned from supporting projects that "depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs" or that "denigrate the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion." Will any sexual imagery (such as Renaissance paintings) be banned? Will Satan worshippers (who form a "particular religion") be able to sue the NEA for any art that denigrates the devil? Content restrictions of any kind are an unacceptable limit on the freedom of artists, galleries, museums, and other institutions.

Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA) attempted to make the bill constitutional by adding a provision that "Nothing in this section shall be construed to affect in any way the freedom of any artist or performer to create any material or performance using funds which have not been made available under this act to the National Endowment for the Arts." Not only does this dismiss the freedom of artists and institutions who receive NEA grants, but it is also an obvious lie. Almost all NEA money goes to support art that is funded primarily from other sources. Any artist, gallery, or museum that receives even a small amount of money from the NEA must censor all of their art. Gorton also inserted a clause asserting that the endowment funds are a "scarce resource" and thus subject to the same regulations as radio and television airwaves.

The attacks on the NEA are well-known and predictable. Art offends and shocks in a way that no scholarly treatise can equal. But the assault on the NEH is something new. The NEH was once the darling of the conservatives under William Bennett and Lynne Cheney. George Will, who only a few years ago was praising the NEH as the best part of government and Cheney's role as "secretary of domestic defense," facing enemies more

“dangerous” than her husband did as Secretary of Defense, suddenly started condemning the NEH and new chairman Sheldon Hackney as the embodiment of evil in America. Cheney herself told Congress earlier this year that the NEH should be eliminated.

Senator Abraham noted that “the NEH’s projects may well be more insidious than the NEA’s, because they directly affect American education” — citing as an example the National History Standards, which were “so horrendous and anti-American that ninety-nine senators voted to denounce them.” When a well-designed set of history standards produced by a broad consensus can be smeared as leftist indoctrination, no intellectual work is safe from attack. The fact that the entire Senate opposed a set of standards that none of them had ever read is a disturbing indication of the future direction of intellectual debate.

No one can seriously imagine that the plans to eliminate the NEA and the NEH are prompted merely by the budget cutting bonanza sweeping over Washington (or at least the parts of it dealing with education and human welfare). Instead, conservatives like Lynne Cheney, secure in their right-wing think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, are now convinced that defending universities and similar cultural institutions is the best way to attack the Left.

It scarcely matters to them that many excellent projects — supporting artists and scholars from a wide range of perspectives — will be lost by the destruction of the NEH and the NEA. To the critics of the Left, it doesn’t matter whether students would learn better history, whether people would be exposed to fine art and intellectual discussions, whether libraries and galleries would be improved, whether scholarship would flourish, or whether better television would be available to all Americans. So long as the Left is punished and marginalized, the harm done to the rest of America is an acceptable casualty in the culture wars. Cheney and her allies believe that their views can be adequately financed by the Olin Foundation and similar entities. In their view, the less intellectual competition the better.


The conservatives in Congress are adamantly opposed to debating ideas. Senator John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) declared, "When we get into the area of challenging some of the fundamental values of American culture, we get ourselves in real trouble. If the definition of art means that it has to challenge and be offensive, then I think we are in a situation where, regardless of how minimal the endowment might be in regard to the Federal budget, its position is in serious jeopardy." 37

The Right views the abolition of the NEH and the NEA as a first step toward the suppressing of dissenting views in academia. At a Senate hearing, Walter Berns urged the elimination of the NEH: "It might be improper for the Senate of the United States to attempt to reform what's going on in the academy today. But you can do one thing: You can refuse to fund it." 38 Once deprived of funding, the theory goes, the Left will wither on the vine.

The National Association of Scholars declared that the NEH deserved heavy cuts because "the benefits of government support for the humanities are severely limited by the current state of scholarship." This "cutting-edge" scholarship allegedly "denies that there is common intellectual ground, rejects the notion of excellence, and disparages the achievements of the past."

But it is the NAS, not cutting-edge scholarship, that rejects the idea of excellence, since the NAS wants to eliminate grants for excellent scholarship if it is critical of the past or dissents from the intellectual ground presupposed by the NAS. Scholarly editions, museum collections, libraries, archival cataloguing, and preservation are all important projects which have been heavily supported by the NEH, but to say that these should mark the limits of the humanities is false. It is the refusal to fund controversial or challenging ideas that reflects the true "anti-intellectual" bias.

No government agency should be immune from oversight or budget cuts. But the attacks on the NEA and NEH have never been about efficiency, waste, or serving the common good. Instead, these agencies are being destroyed for explicitly ideological reasons, because the entire artistic community and all

of academia are perceived as too liberal. When budget cuts are aimed at increasing ideological sway over scholars and artists, it is nothing but an attempt at thought control.

VI. THE ISTOOK GAG RULES

Congressional attempts at censorship are not limited to the NEA and the NEH. Representative Istook (R-NY) has been seeking to ban federal grants to any nonprofit group (but not any corporations) which uses more than 5% of their own funds for “political advocacy.” According to Istook, it doesn’t matter if the grants are used for completely legitimate purposes: “each federal dollar received by a grantee frees up more private dollars for political advocacy, thereby leading to a growing amount of indirect government support for political advocacy.” Political advocacy includes not only lobbying, but any stands taken on a public issue as well as public interest litigation against government agencies.39

Earlier in 1995, Istook lost in his attempt to impose a Campus Gag Rule which would cut off all federal funds to any college that allowed money from student fees to support “any organization or group that is engaged in lobbying or seeking to influence public policy or political activity.” The fact that an imposition on academic freedom of this degree was contemplated by Congress shows how extreme the attacks on academia are. To blackmail all colleges into banning funding for any group involved in discussing a “political” issue is a level of censorship against higher education that far exceeds anything ever done before.

Istook’s reasoning behind his Nonprofit Gag Rule mirrors the attacks on the NEA and the NEH. Since these agencies are hopelessly politicized by an academic and artistic elite, any money used to support their activities (even if legitimate) amounts to a subsidy for their left-wing political agenda.

The hypocrisy of attacking PC while defending laws to restrict free speech on campuses was perhaps most clearly shown

39. The Istook Gag Rules, DEMOCRATIC CULTURE (Teachers for a Democratic Culture, Evanston, IL), Fall 1995, at 10. However, Istook does not spend all of his trying to silence liberal opponents. An Istook amendment used $5 million of the NEH cuts to increase funding for the Department of Energy’s oil technology research and development program. Id.
by the recent passage of the Communications Decency Act. Although it was met with strong protests from civil libertarians like the ACLU, conservative opponents of political correctness were almost universally silent, despite the fact that the Decency Act rips a hole in the First Amendment ten times wider than any speech code ever did.

VII. THE POWER OF ALUMNI

As institutions like the NEA and NEH are eliminated, and universities find themselves subject to severe budget cuts, conservatives hope that financial pressures will lead colleges to give in to the ideological demands of alumni donors, foundations, and corporations. Lynne Cheney herself led the formation in 1995 of the National Alumni Forum (NAF), along with former Colorado Governor Dick Lamm, Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), Senator Hank Brown (R-Col), Jerry Martin, Irving Kristol, Martin Peretz, and Judge Laurence Silberman. The Washington Times reported that NAF’s goal is “to organize the alumni for the purpose of exerting pressure on the colleges to curtail Political Correctness.”

According to Newt Gingrich in To Renew America, “What is amazing is the overwhelming meekness of the alumni in accepting this hijacking of their alma mater,” where their money is “used to subsidize bizarre and destructive visions of reality.” Believing that alumni and trustees (with their more conservative values) should control universities, Cheney and friends want to use their economic and political power over universities to enforce a new dogmatism in the name of “preserving academic values.” Senators Hank Brown and Joseph Lieberman, while claiming that the NAF is “dedicated to academic freedom and excellence,” complain that “the rules protecting academic freedom insulate the academy from outside pressures.” These outside pressures, from alumni, trustees, and legislators, are precisely what conservatives want to create.

NAF president Jerry Martin claims that “professors reign as absolute sovereigns over academic issues,” and he urges alumni

41. NEWT GINGRICH, TO RENEW AMERICA 221 (1995).
to help de-throne them. 43 But alumni are hardly powerless, and in fact pose a major threat to academic freedom when they are organized to force colleges to follow a particular ideology.

In 1993 at Converse College in South Carolina, conservative alumnae and trustees helped force out President Ellen Wood Hall who was deemed to be too liberal. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute newspaper, Campus, reported, “Hall’s radical feminist agenda has included a watering down of the curriculum, the formation of a lesbian support group, and inviting Molly Yard to campus.” Homophobia was behind much of the criticism, as alumnae complained of a “lesbian problem” because two years earlier some students had met with counselors to talk about lesbianism; Hall’s dean of students was dismissed for being “intemperate” when arguing with an alumna who wanted to ban lesbians from the school.

According to Hall, “I was attacked for no reason other than being female. I was criticized about my clothes and lack of personal beauty.” However, her opponents maintain that they pushed to have her fired because of her liberalism, not just her personal appearance. Hall recognized Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday as a holiday, supported efforts to add Latin American and African studies to the curriculum, and allowed men on campus four days a week instead of three. Alumnae cited a student trip to New York City to work in Harlem soup kitchens, and worried that Hall and her husband, who teaches at a college thirty-five miles away, only spent weekends together. If this is how the National Alumni Forum wants to influence colleges, by having “liberal” presidents fired under alumni pressure, it shows a serious threat to academic freedom. 44

Political pressure of this kind is exactly what the National Alumni Forum wants. As Lynne Cheney observes, “It comes down to the question of who owns the university.” 45 Believing that the soul of a university is something that wealthy alumni can purchase by their donations, the National Alumni Forum and similar alumni pressure groups formed by conservative organiza-

tions directly threaten academic freedom even while they claim to be protecting it.

It is not hard to reach the conclusion that the National Alumni Forum wants greater alumni control over higher education primarily because Cheney and her allies believe that wealthy alumni will have more conservative goals than most faculty. But should a few rich alumni (or a political organization purporting to represent alumni interests) be allowed to impose their vision of education on American colleges and universities without criticism?

In fact, many alumni object to the lack of diversity among students, faculty, and administrators, want to see more multiculturalism in the curriculum, and deplore the failure of many colleges to confront harassment and discrimination on campus. Most alumni want to see academic values and academic freedom protected without approving of the National Alumni Forum’s conservative agenda.

Certainly, alumni have a role to play in critiquing their colleges and in shaping academic programs by their donations. But they should not try to be puppeteers who manipulate college policies with demands for ideological control while they dangle donations in front of administrators too timid to resist them. The ideas of alumni should be welcomed and taken seriously. But when these ideas are imposed by financial threats, they represent a danger to academic freedom rather than a defense of it.

The formation of NAF coincided with a national controversy at Yale University. The story, as Newt Gingrich tells it, is this: "Yale University recently had to return $20 million to oil tycoon Lee Bass because after several years the university could not get the faculty to agree to teach Western Civilization." In fact, nothing like this PC fantasy ever happened.

According to the National Alumni Forum, Lee Bass withdrew his $20 million gift to Yale University "after it became clear that his wishes would not be followed." In fact, the gift was returned only after Bass demanded a right to veto faculty appointed to the program whose views he opposed. Rather than

46. In 1993, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute started its "Winds of Freedom" movement to oppose speech codes, multiculturalism, and gay student groups.
47. GINGRICH, supra note 41, at 220.
criticizing this appalling abuse of the donation process, the National Alumni Forum presents Bass as a victim of political correctness, quoting Camille Paglia’s claim that “they were dragging their feet because of the content” and New York Post columnist Hilton Kramer’s declaration that “tenured left-wing advocates of a multiculturalist anti-Western political agenda” were in “open warfare against the creation of the course.”

However, this was not a case of “Political Correctness 1, Education 0,” as the National Alumni Forum claimed, nor did Camille Paglia or Hilton Kramer know what they were talking about. As David Karp noted in the Washington Post, the delays in implementing the Western Culture course had nothing to do with leftist faculty opposing the proposal.

Yale’s efforts to start a Western Civilization course were delayed by administrators’ efforts to use the money to offset faculty cuts in the budget. But Light and Truth, a conservative student publication funded by the right-wing Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), ran a story by Pat Collins accusing left-wing professors of sabotaging the project. According to Collins, “President Levin obviously made the determination that it was better to be loved by the left wing of his faculty than by his alumni donors.”

T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr., president of ISI, flew to Texas in an effort to convince Bass to withdraw his donation in order to punish Yale. Although Yale promised to implement the program as Bass originally conceived it, Cribb convinced Bass to demand the right to veto any professors hired for the program. Faced with a donor insisting on ideological control over the Western Civilization program, Yale chose to return the money rather than allow academic freedom to be jeopardized. Other alumni donors were inspired to withdraw their gifts, and according to Cribb, “The cost of Yale’s behavior is now estimated to be several times the original Bass gift of $20 million.”

Yale and other universities now know that they will be punished, and harmed financially, if they fail to implement a conservative agenda.

Lynne Cheney declared about the Bass donation, “It is sad to see politics play any role in deciding what educational opportunities will be available to students.” It is indeed sad to
see politics playing a major role in the attempts to intimidate and malign Yale University. It is sad to see that conservatives would kill a Western Culture program—blaming its death on the Left—and deprive students of the chance to study the West for the sake of gaining more fodder in a propaganda culture war.

Like many anecdotes about "political correctness," the Lee Bass gift to Yale was far different than it was reported in the media. What at first appeared to be—and in the minds of most people, remains—a story about leftist intolerance, was in reality a story about the influence of the Right on college campuses and the threat to academic freedom posed by the combination of big money and conservative ideology.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Academic freedom is in a troubled state today, under attack on many fronts. The widely publicized critiques of "political correctness" have drawn considerable attention to the leftist threats to free expression. But the crusade against "PC" has obscured many other hazards to academic freedom in America today which come from right-wing sources. This "conservative correctness" poses a danger which is all too often overlooked.

While it is important to point out the intolerance on the Left, a sense of perspective is in order about where the greatest threats to academic freedom come from. Nearly every mainstream newspaper and magazine in America has published an editorial or lead article condemning political correctness. But most of them have been silent about the conservative attack on higher education, or have even praised it as part of the war against PC. The fight in defense of academic freedom must be bipartisan, but unfortunately there have been few principled defenses of academic freedom.

While the political correctness "debates" raged, almost no one realized how federal and state governments were drastically cutting student aid and university funding, reducing educational opportunities for disadvantaged Americans. The attack on "PC" has played at least a small role in the ease with which conservatives had pushed through the de-funding of higher education.

In recent years, the most powerful threat to academic freedom has come from a growing movement for greater government control over higher education. During a period of tight budgets, colleges and universities as well as government
agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities are being targeted for ideologically-motivated cuts.

The recent attacks on tenure are a disturbing threat to academic freedom, since they would leave faculty vulnerable to dismissal based on their beliefs and deprive them of the security needed to make controversial arguments. But we should never think of academic freedom as something limited to tenured faculty. Academic freedom must also encompass assistant professors seeking tenure, instructors and graduate assistants who have no secure jobs, administrators, and even students. Otherwise, the idea of academic freedom will reduced to mere job security, and not a protection for the freest expression of diverse views in the university.

The core value of academic freedom is not procedural rights. Academic freedom is the protection of intellectual diversity. Academic freedom declares that dissent shall not be punished, whether in the form of public speeches or ideas expressed in a classroom. Neither firing nor reprimands nor bad grades should be imposed upon an individual simply because of their political views. Academic freedom is not something that is earned: one need not prove oneself a genius before being given the freedom to think and speak. Rather, academic freedom is the very foundation of intellectual life at a university.

Academic freedom is an ideal we must pursue constantly, and never quite fully achieve. It is a mistake to believe that academic freedom is fully protected anywhere. There are orthodoxies everywhere: A student who feels silenced in a classroom, a professor who is not hired because colleagues believe her research deals with an unimportant topic, a graduate student told to pursue a less controversial dissertation proposal.

The concept of academic freedom is a minefield of contradictions and dilemmas. The open expression of opposing views inevitably creates conflicts that cannot be fully resolved. A professor who discusses her views in a classroom and challenges what students say may find that some students try to simply parrot her beliefs. But the expression of ideas is an inevitable and essential part of higher education; to urge silence by a professor for the sake of preventing "advocacy" will not stop students from detecting an ideology, and instead will limit the open expression of these views. The best a teacher can do is to
encourage dissent whenever possible, make sure that students are rewarded and not punished for disagreeing, and honestly try to achieve an ideal of academic freedom.

The assault on academic freedom comes at a time when many conservative intellectuals reject the very notion of academic freedom or restrict it so narrowly that it ceases to be a meaningful protection of free expression. Gertrude Himmelfarb writes in Commentary50, "Originally intended to protect professors in their scholarly pursuit of truth within the university, while ensuring their political rights as citizens outside the university, the doctrine is now invoked to allow professors to express their political views in the classroom, without regard for either scholarship or truth." But how can professors pursue the truth if they know Himmelfarb and her allies are monitoring their political views? What one professor considers a truth informed by scholarship, Himmelfarb might dismiss because she disagrees politically with it.

What guardians of the academy are going to define what the truth is and how far a professor is allowed to stray from it? Can we trust anyone to define and enforce these proposed ideological limits on free speech in the classroom? It is always tempting to imagine that we are above bias and ideology, and to convince ourselves that we know the final truth. But we must resist the idea that it is possible to restrict the academic freedom of those we dislike without damaging the principle of academic freedom for everyone.
