

Point of View

Purging PC... Making the

"L-word" clean again

by Ray Wilson

It caused considerable pain at Smith College. In the past year that venerable neighboring institution suddenly found itself in a slew of national magazine and newspaper articles, and only in a *Playboy* pictorial was the exposure even intended as flattering. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial labeled Smith as "a hub of political correctness". "PC", as it has come to be known, was the topic in all but the bunny book, and does not refer to the state of being correct, but rather to a state of deluded arrogance. "PC-ers", a.k.a the "PC-police" are those who enforce their view of "correctness" on others, not through persuasion, but through intimidation, censorship of alternative ideas, and downright lies.

I share Smith's agony, for the anti-PC movement is personally painful, exposing excesses of the political left--my philosophical home as a long time liberal who even gave one of his kids the middle name, "Kennedy". I am too committed to the principles of liberalism--freedom, diversity, progress, tolerance--to back-off from the label I've cherished just because it is now the "L-word." I am also too committed to the principle of truth to delude myself into believing the anti-PC-ers are wrong.

In the '50s, we called the orthodox enforcers, "witch-hunters"; they were right-wing, wrecking careers and lives, straightjacketing the exchange of ideas with labels like "unamerican" and "commie", and spreading the lie of foreign agents behind every bush. Today, the enforcers are on the left with a new name -- "PC-police"-- and their major weapon-labels are "racist", "sexist", "homophobic", "eurocentric", and "classist". In scores of docu-

mented cases, such labels were used to persecute people who are as anti-racist, anti-sexist, etc., as any PC-er, but who dared to question some element of PC dogma or, worse, uncover data which did not support some PC-declared truth.

The dirty-word applied to those who challenge PC itself, along with all of the above, is "conservative". Anyone who opposed the House Unamerican Activities Committee was a commie; and anyone who opposes PC is a "conservative". To be sure, conservative opportunists happily use PC in their liberal-bashing, taking the advantage handed them by PC-ers who wear the "liberal" label without understanding the word. Those opposing PC include life-long liberals-- pro-social program, left-wing democrats. We oppose PC for the same reasons that decent conservatives disavow the Ku Klux Klan: it is morally wrong and an intellectual embarrassment!

PC is real-life present-day oppression; the anti-PC movement is a liberal rejection of mob mentality. We had become a well-intentioned lynch-mob, fifties right-wing style, guilty of the very sins we condemn, as in the case of the now-famous "-ism" list that put Smith on the hotseat. That list of definitions, published by a Smith administrative office, included "racism", "sexism", and "classism" among several other PC-banned "-isms." These three definitions were structured to be practically applicable, respectively, only to whites, males, or upper-class members; and that makes the list itself racist, sexist, and classist by any unbiased definition of the terms.

During the Gulf War, the Amherst area and the University became internationally known for anti-war sentiment (my son doing volunteer work in Africa read about it). *Collegian* and *Voice* articles, editorials, op-ed columns, and letters, reflected almost exclusively anti-war positions.

A *Collegian* editorial (February 14) explained that the admitted one-sidedness merely reflected every indication the paper had of general student opinion. While the editorial was heading to print, a scientific survey was establishing that 84% of students supported the war, and only 7% opposed it! Virtually everybody here believed anti-war sentiment was in the majority. Those really in the majority thought they were in the minority for, on today's campus, those who think they're in the minority keep their mouths shut!

To be sure, the majority did hold to their own opinions, despite the propaganda, because the war issue was clear cut in most eyes, against an obvious evil. Still, no one questioned the most insane claims of the anti-war fringe (like carpet bombing of Jordanians and Palestinians), or raised an eyebrow when a front-page *Collegian* photo of less than 500 antiwar protestors was captioned as "over one thousand". Where PC reigns, questions are not asked; and questions, as well as challenges to standing opinion, are the heart of both education and the ideals of liberalism! When it comes to issues less clear than armed warfare against maniacal evil, "correct" is something that is dictated, not discovered, and in the absence of alternatives, it is believed. Education gives way to indoctrination.

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As a UMass grad student today, who was an undergraduate here in both the early and late '60s, I offer a unique then-and-now perspective. At first glance, there appears to be a lot more diversity today--but it is all on the surface, in skin tone and international accent. Of course, multiculturalism does add to the intellectual diversity of the University; thank goodness, for it is at least being imported where it is certainly not cultivated.

If there is anywhere near the intellectual diversity of the '60s, it is not reflected in open discussion among students, in the campus media, or in the so-called representative bodies. Activists control those things and the PC atmosphere gives license to use them to promote personal advocacies. Thus, while students privately supported the war and their country, the student media, government, and labor unions publicly denounced both, and *in the students' name!* (And some wonder why the rest of the state doesn't rush to defend higher education against budget cuts). Standing up to the PC cops, is a losing proposition for most. Some do, of course, but those not driven into silence by PC epithets respond in kind, spawning hate rallies between the polarized extremes. Polarization dissuades rather than encourages discussion even among sensible people; so the most innocent questioning of "conventional wisdom" is simply dismissed (Ironically, within their own power domain, PC-ers expose themselves as instinctively conservative). In today's politically correct University, intellectual diversity is subtracted from, never added to, its final product.

One Boston journalist defender of PC implied that it was at, worst, understandable excess in the pursuit of virtue. The idea echoes ultra-conservative Barry Goldwater's 1964 defense of "extremism in the cause of liberty". There is nothing virtuous about the extremes of intimidation, untruth, and thought-control. Among liberals, PC is an aberration; it is illiberal and invites the conservative charge of fascism. There is no such thing as liberal fascism, for liberalism is its philosophical antithesis. Left-wing fascism, on the other hand, is another critter, for on the left, hiding among the liberals, are the PC-ers. L-word or not, I never lost pride in being a liberal; liberals didn't make "liberal" a dirty-word; PC-ers did, and they ain't liberal.