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The Culture Wars and the Universities

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss some aspects of the contemporary cultural discourse – a climate of opinion that, in my judgment, poses a serious threat to the universities and to traditional academic values. Historically, the universities have been in the business of discovering, creating and disseminating new knowledge. During the past-decade, however, higher education has come under increasing attack from a small group of self-appointed guardians of truth, tradition, purity and virtue. The universities are now at the center of a series of culture wars that threaten to undermine and cripple the work that we do in the creation, discovery and dissemination of knowledge.

The most recent blast in the culture wars came just a few weeks ago in the form of the annual report of the National Endowment for the Humanities. In this report, titled “Telling the Truth,” NEH director Lynne Cheney zealously contended that the universities have been politicized and that academic freedom has been suppressed on the campus by a new left-liberal political orthodoxy. Cheney argued that university professors, especially those in the humanities, have abandoned objectivity, brought political agendas into the classroom and muzzled ideologically inconvenient thought. They have given up on “telling the truth,” Cheney wrote. At the same time, the argument continued, studies of race, ethnicity, gender, class and power have pushed our traditional western heritage out of the curriculum.

These bold and unsubstantiated assertions are more than a bit disingenuous, especially coming as they do from one of the most politicized federal agencies in Washington. The unhappy truth is that the NEH has politicized the research-grant process in the humanities. Race, gender, feminism, pluralism, multiculturalism, post modernism, structuralism, deconstructionism, even plain social history are nasty, negative buzz words at the NEH. Through its grant-review process and through its official policy statements, such as the recent annual report, the NEH has sought to suppress differing or dissenting viewpoints and discourage, even discredit, research in new and emerging humanities or interdisciplinary fields.

The NEH report assumed that there is an already known and identifiable body of truth, that it is embedded in our traditional history, literature, and culture, that we all know what it is, and that this is what the universities should be teaching. This version of “telling the truth” leaves little room for discussion, debate, dissent, new ideas or differing interpretations of history, literature, art or whatever. It provides no encouragement for free inquiry, for fresh thinking, for new discovery or for pushing out the boundaries of received wisdom in new directions. This kind of “truth” is for people with closed minds, for true believers, for the politically correct of the radical right.

Unfortunately, the recent NEH report is only the latest example of this sort of university bashing. The attack on the universities began in a big way with the 1987 publication of the late Allan Bloom’s book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. An obscure philosopher and classicist at the University of Chicago, Bloom blasted the universities for abandoning the great classic books of Western culture and selling out to new intellectual trends and fads, especially in the humanities and social sciences. For good measure, Bloom also trashed the business schools – the MBA, he said, was “a great disaster” for the university curriculum. The natural sciences were in better shape, but there too he had serious questions about the ethical use of scientific research. Behind it all – the political and cultural movements of the 1960s, which were mostly to blame for the intellectual corruption of university life. Only the teaching of traditional values and “the Great Books,” only perusing the “truth” (his word) as reflected in those classics, could achieve the broad goals of liberal education. The true believers loved it, and Bloom’s book shot to the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list and sold more than one million copies. Given its stuffy content and writing style and its inordinate length, it is hard to believe that that many people actually read the entire book. In the context of our contemporary culture wars, however, *The Closing of the American Mind* appears today as cranky, patronizing, belligerent, reactionary, a right-wing intellectual tract. Ironically, given its title, Bloom’s book promoted an intellectual retreat to already established knowledge that was safe, reliable and non-threatening, but discouraged new methodologies, new research, new inquiry, new discovery, new ways of thinking.

About the same time, a University of Virginia English professor, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., published a book titled *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which reemphasized the idea that Americans needed what he called a “broadly shared background knowledge.” According to Professor Hirsch, this desirable shared traditional knowledge consisted of 5,000 “essential names, phrases, dates and concepts.” This is the same Professor Hirsch, by the way, who in a follow-up book, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, reported that Jacksonville was the capital of Florida. So much for telling the truth! There is nothing wrong with a shared body of knowledge, to

be sure, but who decides what gets on that list of prescribed information?

Unfortunately, the idea that there are exactly 5,000 bits of information that underlie a common American culture and that should be taught to everyone turns the education process into a game of "Jeopardy" or "Trivial Pursuit." More insidiously, it encourages the belief that this is all that we need to know in order to claim to be educated. Some critics have even proposed a "multi-cultural literacy" list to compensate for Hirsch's alleged male and European bias. Others suggested that the "transmission" of traditional knowledge contradicted the very concept of education, which demanded "a grappling by individuals with what they encounter." Like Allan Bloom's book, *Cultural Literacy* emphasized traditional knowledge, but it also had the effect of discouraging critical analysis, new thinking, new conceptualization and new discovery.

Bloom and Hirsch reached a wide popular audience, and they softened up the universities for the sucker punch delivered in 1988 by a journalist, Charles J. Sykes, in his notorious attack on higher education, a book called *ProfScam*. Sykes portrayed the professoriate as "a profession run amok and without responsibility to students, society or learning." This combative book, loaded with anecdotal evidence, twisted analysis and nasty innuendo, attributed virtually all of the problems of the universities to "renegade professors" and their bizarre academic culture. The professors were overpaid and underworked; they had abandoned "the intellectual tradition of Western civilization"; they taught badly, performed trivial research and in general presided over an entire system of educational mediocrity. The book is full of reckless assertions, such as the ludicrous statement that professors "control everything that matters in the universities."

What university, I wonder, was he thinking about? Obviously, Sykes has never visited the Florida State University System, where virtually all of the important decisions about higher education are made in the state Legislature and the Board of Regents office. The thought police of the radical right liked this book a lot; I have it on very good authority that every member of the Florida state Legislature received a gratuitous copy of *ProfScam*.

ProfScam unleashed a veritable cottage industry of books bashing the universities. Sykes himself followed up *ProfScam* with a second book in 1990, *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education*. Roger Kimball, an editor and writer, weighed in with *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted our Higher Education* (1990). The similarity in subtitles was matched by a similarity in polemical content. These lines of attack have been duplicated in four other recent books: Page Smith's *Killing the Spirit* (1990), Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991), Martin Anderson's *Imposters in the Temple* (1992) and Richard M. Huber's *How Professors Play the Cat Guarding the Cream* (1992), as well as in a

few other works.

The methodology used in this motley collection of contentious, university-bashing books is remarkably similar. The authors generally seize upon one or two seemingly outrageous examples – an offensive book, a few articles with offbeat titles, a few strange weird research grants, some professors with unorthodox views, a few interviews with embittered faculty or unhappy students, a few bonehead administrative policies or decisions – and then they extrapolate from these examples to condemn the entire American university system.

This is how the intellectual smear tactic works: In *ProfScam*, Charles Sykes devotes one brief chapter – he calls it a “sidebar” – to my own discipline – history. History, he writes, “has been particularly vulnerable to the onslaught of profthink.” For his single example of this trend, he cites a 1974 book on American slavery, *Time on the Cross*, written by two economic historians who marshaled statistics from the records of several plantations to demonstrate that slavery was a benign institution in which slaves were well-fed, not overworked and rarely whipped. *Time on the Cross* had a brief moment in the sun, to be sure; it was even reviewed in *Time* magazine (a rarity, I might add, for a scholarly book), but within two years other scholars had completely discredited the research, the methodology and the conclusions of that book. We have our graduate students read *Time on the Cross* as an example of bad history, of what not to do. Yet, writing more than a dozen years later, Sykes used this discredited book to trash the entire historical profession and, by extension, the universities. His “sidebar” on history had no room for the truly remarkable research and writing currently being produced by American historians, not only in more traditional fields such as political, diplomatic and military history, but in formerly neglected areas such as urban history, labor history, women’s history, family history, African-American history, immigration and ethnic history, intellectual history, cultural history, environmental history, sports history and the history of technology, to name just a few fields where the frontiers of knowledge are being explored and pushed out by today’s historians. In fact, Sykes, the polemicist, was not interested in an objective survey of the historical profession or any other academic discipline, but only in presenting subjective “evidence” – and I use that term loosely – to support his anti-intellectual diatribe.

ProfScam and the other cultural attacks on the universities I mentioned have emerged out of a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in American history. In his 1963 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, historian Richard Hofstadter laid out the full dimensions of this deeply embedded and disturbing pattern of our national character and history – a pattern that historically incorporated such elements as nativism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, religious fundamentalism, isolationism,

anti-communism, and white supremacist and race-hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Several scholars, notably Ellen Schrecker and Sigmund Diamond, have written recent books detailing the vicious, red-baiting attacks on the universities and their professors during the early years of the Cold War, when McCarthyism was riding high. The thought police of the early 1950s even included university administrators and college presidents, some of whom caved in much too easily to the right-wing political assault on academic freedom. As Hofstadter noted, those assaults on intellectuals and the universities stemmed from deep popular suspicions of the academic world and from the disturbing freedom of intellectuals to challenge, question and confront established authority and received wisdom. Throughout modern American history, the radical right-wing's "paranoid political style," as Hofstadter labeled it, found an easy and popular target in the universities. The contemporary culture wars are simply the most recent expression of the paranoid style and the anti-intellectual tradition.

The culture wars, it might be noted, have now extended beyond the universities to the larger society. The battles over the family, gender, art, education, law and politics have become, sociologist James Davidson Hunter has written, integral aspects of "the struggle to define America." The National Endowment for the Arts, for instance, the NEH companion agency, has become politicized and supported censorship of nontraditional expression in the arts. Censorship in schools and public libraries is on the upsurge; classic literature by William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, J. D. Salinger, Ray Bradbury and Bernard Malamud, among others, has now been banned by modern-day inquisitors, and even *Snow White* – imagine, *Snow White* – has turned up as an offensive and dangerously un-American piece of literature on the censors' list in Jacksonville. The public schools themselves are now under siege, and the political agenda of the radical right supports a voucher system for private schools and even the privatization of public schools. The growing ethnic and cultural diversity of the United States has stimulated new forms of nativism – anti-Asian, anti-Hispanic, anti-immigrant and the like – pervasive attitudes in some places that have also spawned the "official English" campaigns in many states, including Florida. Multiculturalism has become a dangerous threat to defenders of traditionalism; the study of how America is changing has become a subversive activity to those on the paranoid right. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, moreover, has been reporting on new expressions of white racism on the campus, as well as gay-bashing and anti-feminism, and attacks on equal opportunity policies and affirmative action. The recent political flap over "Murphy Brown" and so-called "family values" simply demonstrates how the culture wars have carried over into other dimensions of the knowledge industry and the mass media.

The contemporary cultural wars have serious implications for the universities. The polemical-attacks from the new radical right have softened up the universities, made

them more vulnerable to political intrusion and intervention. In Washington, in the House of Representatives, the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families recently held hearings on college education, an investigation initially prompted by the rapid rise of tuition and other college costs. But the hearing soon turned into another round of university bashing by a couple of disaffected former university administrators. The big problem, they asserted, was the faculty: professors were spending too little time teaching and too much time reading professional journals, consulting with their colleagues and thinking! Imagine that. What a terrible indictment of the universities – too much thinking going on in the halls of academe. At this writing, it is not exactly clear what Congress will do about this problem.

Let's shift our gaze down to the state level, in Florida and elsewhere, where the trashing of the universities has been even more common. Consider this headline from the *Miami Herald* of March 23, 1992: "Faculty Workload Called Drag on Budget." One needs no great insight to imagine the line of argument in the Legislature behind that headline. This audience, in fact, needs no lecture on the long history of political interference in Florida's state universities – and on the distressing consequences of that pattern of political intervention. The most fundamental problem in the Florida State University System is not the faculty, or the teaching workload, or the phony distinction now being drawn between teaching and research. The fundamental problem lies in the outrageous fact that Florida is near or at the bottom of the list of all 50 states in per-capita support of higher education. No amount of university-bashing by the radical right will change that stark reality. Nevertheless, the culture wars attacking professors and their academic work does tend to throw up a smoke screen, masking the desperate need for new funding to support education in this state. These issues have even greater salience at FAU, if, as President Catanese has announced, the university will double in size to 30,000 students by the year 2000 – only eight years off. Are we planning to double the size of the faculty in the next eight years, or double the work load of current faculty? And who will decide these issues?

I have tried to suggest that the culture wars swirling around the universities have made them vulnerable to political intervention. The universities have been especially weakened because the academic defense has been so anemic. Where are the academic leaders, the chancellors, college presidents, provosts and deans, who are speaking up in defense of the universities, of traditional academic values and independent inquiry? Where are the books and articles, the speeches and public statements, challenging the right-wing polemicists and publicists? Unfortunately, they appear to be few and far between; in fact, university leadership nationwide seems to have been cowed into complete silence. Let me say in conclusion that the university community must become much more vigorous in defense of traditional academic values, more protective of

academic teacher-scholars, more vigilant in the defense of academic freedom and integrity. By necessity, this is a task that every member of the university community must undertake, but I believe it is especially incumbent upon university leaders to assume this task in interpreting the academic mission to the public and to the political decision makers. The truth-tellers and the thought police and the close-minded polemicists of the radical right cannot be permitted to shape the future of the universities. In the midst of the raging cultural wars of our time, the universities must be defended as free, open and unfettered centers for the discovery, creation and dissemination of knowledge. They must remain, in the largest sense, places where faculty and students alike, and in every discipline, remember the past, understand the present, and imagine the future. Thank you very much.