POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND BEYOND

Remarks by

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Thanks for all your help.

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It's a great pleasure to be here with you today. I know that with a group as knowledgeable as this one I do not have to begin in the way I often do: that is, by explaining what the humanities are. There is confusion on this point, as my mail frequently makes clear. I received a letter not long ago addressed to the Natural Endowment for the Humanities--a mistake that has a certain woodsy charm about it. My favorite misaddressed piece of mail, though, was a card sent to me recently at the National Endowment for the Amenities.

That is an interesting slip, partly because of the truth it reveals. There is pleasure connected with the humanities. Through the ages, history, literature, and philosophy have been sources of immense satisfaction. Long ago, St. Augustine observed that the only reason to philosophize was in order to be happy.

But the humanities, particularly in Western civilization, have also been contentious; and that has certainly been the case in recent years. Today I want to talk about some of the reasons for this contentiousness, focusing particularly on "political correctness," or "p.c.," as it's sometimes called.

Political correctness typically involves faculty members trying to impose their views on others, and the results can be funny--particularly when the forces of political correctness try to identify ever new forms of offense. At a recent conference at Yale, for example, a distinguished professor of literature suggested that limiting the humanities to the study of humankind was a form of "speciesism." Now, this concept attracted my attention, and so I tried to find other examples of it. Speciesists, I have learned, are people who refer to their dogs and cats as "pets"--a term much too condescending to be politically correct. Or the speciesist is the person who talks about "wild" animals, when the proper description is "free-roaming."

Smith College did its part to add to the English language when it recently warned the incoming class to beware not only of classism and ethnocentrism, but also of "lookism," a form of oppression that involves putting too much stock in personal appearance. John Leo, a wonderful columnist for U.S. News and World Report, suggested not long ago that this new vocabulary--and the sensibility it reflects--is going to require us to rename some of the old classics. Beauty and the Beast, for example, is hopelessly incorrect, with part of the title too concerned with female appearance and the other part putting animals in a negative light. A politically correct

title for Beauty and the Beast, Leo suggests, might be something like . . . A Lookism Survivor and a Free-roaming Fellow Mammal.

I'm not sure it will sell.

Political correctness does invite parody, but there is a serious aspect to it as well, and I thought I'd begin talking about that today by telling a story. It begins in the spring of 1990 when the English Department at the University of Texas at Austin decided to revise its freshman composition program. Henceforth English 306, the required composition course taken by some 3000 freshmen, would focus on race and gender; and all classes would use the same text, an anthology called Racism and Sexism.

This book--the central required text for every section of freshman English--begins by defining racism as something only white people can be guilty of, and it tells students that sexism is unique to men. It goes on to portray the United States as a society so profoundly racist and sexist as to make a mockery of all our notions of liberty and justice. There are no comparisons with other cultures offered, no context to show how American ideals and practices actually stand up against those of the rest of the world--or the rest of history. The overwhelming impression that this textbook leaves is that every

injustice of race or gender that human beings ever visited upon one another happened first and worst in this country. And the only way we can redeem ourselves, the textbook tells us, is to change fundamentally the way we produce and distribute wealth. Abandon capitalism, in other words.

Now, one might well think that the decision to focus English 306 on Racism and Sexism would cause some debate. For one thing, English 306 is a course intended to teach students how to write. Will they be better writers when they have stopped referring to poor people and instead speak of the "economically exploited," as one essay in the book instructs them to do? Will they become better writers from reading sentences such as the following?

> Demagogic conservative imagery is built on the loss associated with the decline in family life.

When you see demagogic and conservative lined up together like this, you sense a certain political inclination; but there's not much here by way of clear meaning--and shouldn't textbooks used in composition classes provide, above all, examples of clear expression?

Some people in the English Department did object to the plans to revise course 306, but they had little effect, until

finally, Alan Gribben, a noted scholar of American literature, decided to go public. He sent letters to newspapers around the state, and citizens began to express their opinions about the English 306 revision. Fifty-six faculty members from across the university signed a "Statement of Academic Concern." The revised course was revised again so that English 306 would include a broader array of subjects, a diversity of viewpoints, and extensive instruction on how to analyze, argue, and write.

But Alan Gribben was unable to take much pleasure in this victory. He found himself vilified at campus rallies. He was the victim of hate mail, rumors, and anonymous late-night phone calls denouncing him as racist. Most members of the English Department stopped speaking to him, and they certainly didn't send graduate students his way or put him on departmental committees. Finally, in the spring of this year, he announced his intention to leave Texas, where he had been for seventeen years, and move to Montgomery, Alabama, where he will teach at a branch of Auburn University. "If I continued to live here," he told a newspaper in Texas, "I'd have to live under siege."

Several aspects of this story make it an almost classic example of what is happening on many campuses today. There is, first of all, the idea underlying the English 306 reform that it is perfectly all right--even desirable--to use the classroom and the curriculum for political purpose. This would once have

been regarded as unethical. It was once thought that teachers who used the classroom to advance a political agenda were betraying their professional responsibilities. But on many campuses now faculty members have taken the political transformation of their students as a mission. They believe deeply in the radical critique offered by books like Racism and Sexism and see themselves furthering the cause of social justice by using the classroom and the curriculum to advance their views, and they go about their mission openly--indeed, proudly. "I teach in the Ivy League," a Princeton professor recently told the New York Times, "in order to have direct access to the minds of the children of the ruling classes."

This approach to the classroom and the curriculum is one of the sources of controversy in the humanities today. There are people, myself among them, who object to making teaching and learning into the handmaidens of politics. Students ought to hear the good as well as the bad about our society, know about our triumphs as well as our failures. There ought to be an attempt to get at the complex truth of our experience rather than imposing a singleminded, political interpretation on it. Yes, there has been oppression, but the history of Western civilization in the United States is also marked by the discovery and blossoming of remarkable concepts: individual rights, democracy, the rule of law. In 1989, before Tiananmen Square, the distinguished Chinese dissident Fang Li Zhi put it

this way: "What we are calling for is extremely basic," he said, "namely, freedom of speech, press, assembly and travel. Concepts of human rights and democracy," he went on, "the founding principles of the U.S. government, are a legacy [of the West] to the world."

These ideas are no small gift to have brought to humankind. They are gifts of such worth that people go into exile for them and into prison. They are gifts of such great worth that people die for them, as they did in Tiananmen Square, as they have done in Vilnius and Riga--and Moscow.

I think of it as my great good fortune that I have opportunities to speak for the freedoms we enjoy. The case for them is so strong that it is immensely gratifying to make. It is not only my right but my pleasure to dissent from university officials who decide, as officials at the University of Maryland did during the Persian Gulf War, that students cannot display the American flag. It might offend someone, they said; and they relented only after students called in the media. It is not only my right but my pleasure to dissent from university officials who decide, as administrators at Rice University in Texas did, that students could not tie yellow ribbons to trees in the main academic quadrangle.

But I also recognize that I am able to express myself so freely because I am neither part of a university nor do I long for a university career. The views I hold represent dissent from the orthodoxy that reigns on our campuses, and such dissent is not very well tolerated there. That's the most significant part of Alan Gribben's story. He disagreed, and he was driven from the university.

About the time Gribben was resigning, I received in the mail a copy of the minutes of a University of Texas English department faculty meeting. The person who sent them to me was appalled at talk that had gone on in the meeting of "flushing out" other opponents of the revised English 306 syllabus. This student recognized the signs of the new McCarthyism, and he was afraid of becoming himself a victim of it. "Please let me remain anonymous," he wrote. "If it came out that I had written to you--or to someone else similarly disreputable--I wouldn't be [here] for long."

The new McCarthyism--like the old--often works its way by name-calling. People aren't labeled "communist" now, but "racist." Harvard professor Stephen Thernstrom found himself denounced that way. His offenses included using the word <u>Oriental</u> to describe the religion of 19th century Asian immigrants and assigning students to read an article that questioned affirmative action. New York University professor

Carol Iannone found herself called racist for writing an article in which she said that certain literary prizes have been awarded on the basis of race rather than literary merit. She was not the first to make such an assertion. Two of the five judges on the National Book Award fiction panel had said the same thing. Nevertheless, Carol Iannone was said to be racist.

Using this word so loosely and carelessly hurts the people who are smeared by it. And in the end it hurts all of us by cheapening the concept of racism. A word that can mean almost anything, eventually comes to mean almost nothing, and we are encouraged to overlook how reprehensible true racism really is.

Sexual harassment is a phrase that has been similarly misused. In the politically correct world of the post-modern campus, it can, apparently, mean almost anything. At the University of Minnesota not long ago six members of the Scandinavian Studies Department were charged with sexual harassment by a group of graduate students. The complaint provided a long list of the professorial activities that had led to the charge: not greeting a student in a friendly enough manner, for example. Not teaching in a sensitive enough way. Not having read a certain novel. The charges against the professors were finally dropped, but not until the faculty

members had incurred considerable expense and suffered deep, personal pain. One professor reported that it cost him $2,000 to have a lawyer draft a response to the complaint. Another confessed that he wept when the charges were finally dropped.

Yale's Benno Schmidt, one of the few university presidents to speak out forcefully about what is happening in so many colleges and universities today, has declared: "The most serious problems of freedom of expression in our society . . . exist on our campuses." And one of the most important consequences of this freedom's being suppressed is the chilling effect that results, the silencing of discussion about important issues. Stephen Thernstrom, the Harvard professor I told you about earlier, decided to quit teaching the course about American immigrants that had resulted in his being called racist. In order to protect himself, he decided, he would have to record all his classes, record conversations with students, too, perhaps, so that no one could take his remarks out of context. Better, he concluded, to discontinue the course. Reynolds Farley, a distinguished demographer and scholar of race relations, made a similar decision when students in a course he was teaching at the University of Michigan accused him of racial insensitivity. If reading from Malcolm X's autobiography that portion in which Malcolm X describes himself as a pimp and thief--if reading from that was enough to bring

charges of racism down upon himself, Farley decided, there was simply no way he could continue to teach the course.

On crucial issues, faculty members are silent. Perhaps apathy plays some part, but concern for reputation, concern for professional well-being--these, I suspect, play a role as well. The University of California at Berkeley has adopted an ethnic studies requirement to go into effect this fall. Now, this requirement was a major step for the university. There are no other required courses, and so instituting one represents a sharp break with practice. But on this crucial matter, only one-fifth of the eligible faculty members voted. The measure passed narrowly and it seems reasonable to suspect that among the 1,500 or so faculty members who didn't vote were some who had doubts. What is the purpose of the ethnic studies requirement? Is it a response to political pressure? Are curricular requirements now to be set by interest groups who lobby for them? If, on the other hand, the aim is educational, then aren't there other courses that should be required? Perhaps a course in American history, one that would stress the democratic values we share and thus provide balance to the ethnic studies approach, which emphasizes differences that set us apart. Perhaps a course in world history that would prepare students for the decades ahead in which people of all countries and continents are going to be increasingly interdependent. Shouldn't a foreign language be required? If the goal is

really to understand people different from ourselves, isn't foreign language study the most effective route? Surely among the 80 percent of faculty who didn't vote were some who had such questions, but the atmosphere on our campuses today doesn't encourage questions. And expressing doubts can be costly.

This is true not only of large universities, but of some smaller institutions too. Professor Christina Sommers of Clark University has been interviewing faculty and students across the country, and she has particularly striking interviews from Wooster College in Wooster, Ohio, a school near Cleveland that enrolls 1800 students. At Wooster, the textbook Racism and Sexism--the textbook that the University of Texas finally rejected--is required reading for all freshmen. Or freshpersons, I should say. The term freshman is forbidden at Wooster. If you use it, one student warned professor Sommers, you could be taken before the Judiciary Board.

Another student described the seminar required of all first year students. "Difference, Power, and Discrimination," it is called, with the subtitle "Perspectives on Race, Gender, Class, and Culture." According to the student, the seminar resembled "a reeducation camp" more than a "university program." "Now we know," he said, "that when we read the Declaration of Independence that it's not about equality and

inalienable rights--but it is a sexist document written by white male elites."

Faculty, who are evaluated on their "gender sensitivity," said they are afraid to speak out. According to one, to do so would be "suicidal." Another said, "I am getting old and tired and I do not want to get fired. Until there is an atmosphere of tolerance, I do not want to go on the record." Promised anonymity, he noted, "What you have here, on the one hand, are a lot of students and faculty who are very skeptical, but they are afraid to voice their reservations."

When political correctness steps off campus, the results can be instructive. In Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Institution recently put together a show called "The West as America." Its purpose was to show that westward expansion in this country was not an heroic effort, worthy of our awe, but that it was instead one more tale--in a long, sad string of such tales--of white, male, capitalist oppression. The exhibit deconstructed paintings by Bingham and Farney and Stanley and Remington so that viewers could perceive the race and class conflict and the economic exploitation that they are really about. Frederick Remington's "Fight for the Water Hole," the exhibit explained, is, despite the fact that it shows five cowboys defending a water hole in the middle of the desert, not really about anything so simple as a battle over a desert water

hole. Instead, it is <u>really</u> about the anxieties of Eastern industrialists who found themselves challenged by the foreign laborers they had imported to work in their mills and factories.

So heavy-handedly p.c. was "The West as America" that it created a firestorm. Historian Daniel Boorstin declared it "a perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit." A critic for the <u>Washington Post</u> said "it effectively trashes not only the integrity of the art it presents, but most of our national history as well." The Smithsonian, to its credit, organized forums on the exhibit where its main tenets could continue to be challenged.

Which is exactly as it should be. The point of opposing political correctness is not to silence those who advance it, but to open their views to challenge and debate. This often happens when p.c. enters the larger world, but it will not happen on our campuses, I fear, unless those of us who live in the larger world help it to happen. People who care about higher education in this country ought to inform themselves about what is happening on campuses and to work whenever it is in their power to nurture free expression there. When it is time for us to help our children choose a college, we should ask hard questions about which campuses not only allow but encourage a diversity of opinion. When it comes time for us to

make contributions as alumni, we should ask how well the college we attended is doing at making sure all sides are heard. Those who serve on boards of trustees should encourage discussion of free speech itself. Does political correctness reign on this campus? That's a topic that should provide lively debate--though not if it's done as the University of Michigan plans to do it. A conference is being held there called "The PC Frame-Up: What's Behind the Attack?"--which hardly seems a formulation likely to encourage debate. And let me add an ironic footnote here. I couldn't help but notice that on the same page of the Chronicle of Higher Education which announced the Michigan conference--the conference that will prove that p.c. does not exist--on the same page there was a story about Reagan appointee Linda Chavez being disinvited from a speech she was scheduled to make at Arizona State University. It seems that minority students there had decided her views were politically unacceptable.

The New York Times today reports on its front page about a group, mostly English professors, who are uniting to prove that political correctness is nothing more than the product of overheated conservative imaginations. But they are going to have a very hard time maintaining that view. There are too many examples of p.c. at work, powerful examples like that of Alan Gribben. And there are people from across the political spectrum--not just conservatives but liberals as well--coming

together now to defend free speech on our campuses: people like Duke University's James David Barber, a former president of Amnesty International; Emory's Elizabeth Fox Genovese who heads the Women's Institute there; Berkeley's John Searle; Harvard's David Riesman; Yale's Benno Schmidt--none of whom do I suspect of being registered Republicans.

All of these people know the stakes are high. All of them know the issue here is whether the rising generation of Americans will come to understand what free inquiry is--and how it can sometimes be hard--and how it is always necessary if truth and justice are to have a chance.

These are no small matters--and I greatly appreciate your interest in them.

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