

Right-Wing Pressure in Academia

Exclusive: The American Right has gained substantial control of U.S. media but academia remains a juicy target as a vulnerable, last bastion of liberal thought and rationality, thus a key battlefield in the “culture wars,” writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

In 1951, at the height of Sen. Joe McCarthy’s hunt for disloyal Americans, William F. Buckley wrote a polemic against liberal education entitled *God and Man at Yale*, accusing Yale instructors of advocating collectivism and undermining Christianity.

Buckley was relatively unknown at the time, but his book contained a foreword by the famous journalist John Chamberlain, who had worked for the *New York Times* and *Life* and was undergoing a political shift to libertarian and conservative causes.

In 1951, Chamberlain worked at the *Wall Street Journal* and agreed with Buckley that teaching Keynesian economics was somehow collectivist. Buckley always maintained that *God and Man at Yale* was successful because of Chamberlain’s name.

Although the book did not do what the author wanted it to do get the alumni at Yale to constrain liberal ideas in the classroom it did help launch Buckley’s career, which included the publishing of the influential conservative magazine *National Review* and starting his famous interview show *Firing Line*.

Buckley and the book’s influence also made the college campus a latent target of the growing Right in America, which did not like the leftist activism exhibited in academia in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1991, Dinesh D’Souza, another ambitious but relatively unknown conservative author, decided to again take aim at the perceived leftward-leaning ideas and pedagogy on college campuses. D’Souza was born in India, coming to America as an exchange student and attending Dartmouth. He was taken under the wing of charismatic professor Jeffrey Hart, a senior editor for *National Review* and the two founded something called *Dartmouth Review*.

The idea was to find ways to offend every liberal tenet possible. Therefore, they did an interview with a former KKK member, accompanied by a staged photo of a black man being lynched. They wrote a critique of affirmative action in *Ebonics*. They published the names of members of the Gay Student Alliance.

D'Souza got the attention he was looking for and a friendship with the aging Buckley. D'Souza then joined the Reagan administration and later landed a position at the American Enterprise Institute, the wealthy conservative think tank. It was from that perch that he wrote *Illiberal Education* in 1991.

It was the smash success of this book, more than anything else, that coined the term "political correctness." In other words, D'Souza argued, liberals had dominated the college campus for so long that their style and structure of thinking was undermining academic standards and chilling the exchange of ideas. The book was marketed so well that it received prominent mention in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Republic* and even the *New York Review of Books*.

But D'Souza gave himself away with his next book, called *The End of Racism*, where he argued that American slavery was not really based on race. Further, that if we were going to contemplate owing blacks reparations for slavery, then what did blacks owe America for abolishing the institution?

Not even Andrew Sullivan at *The New Republic* could swallow that one. Two African-American colleagues at AEI resigned in protest over the book.

Predictably, after 9/11, D'Souza wrote a book called *The Enemy at Home*, blaming the attacks on the Twin Towers on people like Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton and a culture that produced feminism and gay rights, illustrated by works like *The Vagina Monologues* and *Brokeback Mountain*.

Inspired by D'Souza

But other like-minded individuals were inspired by D'Souza's assault on the perceived liberal bent of American academia. In 2011, Marquette Associate Professor John McAdams began to complain on his blog about an upcoming campus production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

In a style similar to D'Souza, McAdams also began targeting specific individuals who supposedly represented these liberal offenses. One was former Marquette graduate teaching assistant Cheryl Abbate, a feminist and a defender of gay rights. In 2014, McAdams transformed a private conversation between Abbate and a student over whether it was appropriate in her philosophy class to question gay rights into a national furor across the powerful right-wing media, including talk radio and major publishing sites.

Before long, Abbate was inundated with hate mail, such as:

"This ignorant liberal bitch needs me in her class for an hour. When I 'm done with her she'll have a full understanding of the abhorrent behavior of queers, lesbos, and transgender freaks."

“Fuck you Cheryl. I have a Master’s degree and I am a veteran of the military and I did not give you freedom to spew your hatred for straight folks. I do not like fags and lesbos so again Fuck You. We will not be silenced anymore, by any one including your dumbass. Go to Hell! Don’t you just love Freedom of Speech Bitch.”

“You are on the wrong side of ethics, history and life. Your life is hurtful to other cultures and all genders. You must cease hurting others. You must undo the terrible wrong committed when you were born. Your mother failed to make the right choice. You must abort yourself for the glory of inclusiveness and tolerance.”

Abbate got scores of these types of emails. As word spread to the far-reaches of the right-wing blogosphere, she began to be attacked in neo-Nazi forums and other extremist sites. Some encouraged violence against her, including rape and murder. From a chain thread on a right-wing web site:

“I hope the ideologically unhinged harpy cheryl abbate gets raped and murdered.”

“And rape would be poetic justice for the fag enabler cheryl abbate.”

The situation got so bad that, as a Marquette official later revealed, the university had to supply Abbate with a security guard to get to and from her classes. After over a month of this, quite justifiably, she and the university felt her health and well-being were in danger. In December 2014, Abbate left Marquette to take a teaching job elsewhere.

What did Cheryl Abbate do to warrant such a virulent campaign against her? In many ways, this episode can be seen as a triumph of the five-decade crusade on the Right to monitor, check and circumscribe the concept of liberal education. The anti-liberal strategy envisioned by William F. Buckley and advanced by Dinesh D’Souza had gone operational. Liberal professors would no longer just be criticized; they would be physically threatened and hounded out of their jobs. But what had Abbate done to deserve her fate?

Unexpected Boomerang

In January, Dean Richard Holz of Marquette sent McAdams a 15-page letter, summarizing the controversy and informing McAdams that his behavior also would not be cost free, that the university was moving to revoke his tenure and terminate his services as an instructor in the political science department. The Holz letter was by far the longest and most detailed version of the events that took place two months earlier and had spilled over onto Fox News and into magazine articles in *The New Republic* and *Atlantic Monthly*.

On Nov. 9, 2014, at his blog *Marquette Warrior*, McAdams described an incident in a philosophy class in which Abbate was attempting to deal with the Justice as Fairness concept of John Rawls, which includes his Equal Liberty principle, which states that the rights of minority groups should not be restricted. According to McAdams, Abbate listed some issues that could be impacted by Rawls's overall theory. One was gay rights. McAdams wrote: "She [Abbate] then airily said that 'everybody agrees on this, and there is no need to discuss it.'"

After class a student – whom McAdams only listed as someone he knew – approached Abbate and said she should not have dismissed any discussion of gay rights, since he was opposed to them and wished to debate the issue. According to McAdams, Abbate told the student that some opinions were not appropriate in class, like "racist opinions, sexist opinions."

When the student said "it was his right as an American citizen to make arguments against gay marriage," Abbate replied that "you don't have the right in this class to make homophobic comments." After further discussion, the conversation concluded with Abbate stating, "In this class, homophobic comments, racist comments, will not be tolerated." She then invited him to drop the class.

McAdams printed Abbate's name, but he did not print the student's name. Further, in describing the student as someone he knew, McAdams was being less than candid. He was the student's faculty adviser, which is how he got access to the information. McAdams tried to conceal this fact throughout the incident. When he printed the Holz letter on his site, he redacted that piece of information twice.

As McAdams described on his blog, the student after his confrontation with Abbate went to Marquette administrators who, according to McAdams, "pretty much blew off the issue." He concluded that, "Thus the student is dropping the class, and will have to take another Philosophy class in the future." Clearly, in McAdams' eyes, the nameless student was a victim of a relentlessly liberal academia, one which tries to stifle free speech and was held hostage by the concept of "political correctness."

Except that the professor left out one other important point from his blog. In fact, some would call it the crucial point in the whole affair: The student was flunking the class, something which, as the student's faculty adviser, McAdams had to have known. In fact, Dean Holz rebuked McAdams for his "false" presentation of this aspect of the controversy, writing:

"the student told the University three days after withdrawing that he had done so because he was getting an 'F' at mid-term. He further specifically agreed

that his grade fairly reflected his performance. And had nothing to do with his political or personal beliefs.”

Avoiding an F?

This was an important point because you could deduce from it that the student deliberately provoked the incident in order to transfer out of the class and into another in order to avoid the failing grade. And, this is what the student tried to do. In a conference with assistant chair and chair of the department of philosophy, respectively Drs. Snow and Luft, he asked to be transferred to a different section in order not to get a fail in the class.

Snow told the student that it was too late to transfer since it was past the mid-term and he had already gotten a fail on his record. She then asked him a quite natural follow-up question it that was why he wanted to transfer, to avoid a failing grade. As Dean Holz describes it, “The student said he was insulted by that question.” Snow replied that transferring to avoid a fail is a quite common occurrence.

But there was one other interesting piece of information that came out of this meeting. The student was asked if he had taped his after-class discussion with Abbate. He said that he had not, but that was another falsehood.

In other words, McAdams’s blog entries were not meant as an even-handed description of the event but rather to create a cause cœlbre against “political correctness,” as here personified by a young woman, Abbate, who McAdams wrote in a Nov. 9 summary of the episode, was doing what was “typical among liberals now. Opinions with which they disagree are not merely wrong but are deemed ‘offensive’ and need to be shut up.”

To drive home the point, McAdams quoted neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer on “political correctness.” And he gave us the national opinion-writer at his most hyperbolically self-righteous, calling such attitudes towards debate “totalitarian,” adding: “It declares certain controversies over, and visits serious consequences, from social ostracism to vocational defenestration, upon those who refuse to be silenced.”

In speaking of gay marriage, Krauthammer wrote, “To oppose it is nothing but bigotry, akin to racism. Opponents are to be similarly marginalized and shunned, destroyed personally and professionally.” Through his careers as a polemicist, however, Krauthammer has not been averse to silencing, marginalizing, shunning and professionally destroying people who have dared to deviate from neoconservative orthodoxy. Nor would there be much support for people who argued in favor of many other forms of bigotry, but discrimination against gays was

treated as an open issue.

There is little doubt that – at least at first – McAdams succeeded in carrying the fight to Abbate, making her out to be the villain and the anti-gay student the victim. His narrative was picked up by commenters.

“Being forced to drop Phil 104 in November is a huge burden on the student,” one wrote. “That she would make that remark about dropping the class is despicable. She should be fired.”

One Marquette alumnus wrote, “Unless this university rights itself soon, there is no way I’m sending my children to MU.”

Another comment urged the anonymous student to take his case to a “legal entity which shares the student’s, my, and most of the country’s standpoint on the subject [of gay marriage].” The correspondent added, “Please can you provide an e-mail address for the person at the university who we should contact to express our outrage at this disgraceful behavior by an instructor who should be looking for alternative employment by now.”

Mounting Threats

But this was just the beginning of a campaign of calumny and physical threats against graduate student Abbate. The case became red meat for the right-wing blogosphere and talk radio. Soon, heavyweights Rush Limbaugh and Dennis Praeger were weighing in as the attacks on Abbate grew exponentially in intensity.

Eventually, however, more sober voices began questioning the outrage. In the Nov. 19 issue of *Inside Higher Education*, other professors began to object to what McAdams had done to the graduate assistant. Dr. John Protevi of Louisiana State University and formerly of Loyola University of Chicago wrote to Marquette and said that this was no way to treat a graduate assistant.

But the person who did the most to help Abbate was Justin Weinberg, an Associate Professor at South Carolina. He runs the philosophy blog spot called *Daily Nous*. He delivered several posts that were much more evenhanded as to what had actually occurred. He was the first to point out that Marquette has very strong rules against harassment based on color, race, gender and sexual orientation. It was his blog entry on Nov. 18 that began to turn the issue around and place it in a more complete context.

It was very likely as a result of Weinberg’s work that former associates of Abbate’s from the University of Colorado decided to offer her a spot in their Ph. D. philosophy program. Because of her rather precarious situation, Abbate was granted an admission through an expedited process and she happily accepted.

After Abbate left in mid-December, McAdams was suspended from Marquette with pay. An investigation ensued. On Dec. 17, a story appeared on his suspension in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. McAdams complained that he was “being treated like a potential terrorist.” When the inquiry lasted into January, McAdams’s spring classes were canceled. When Dean Holz alerted him to the review being made of his career, he spent him a copy of Marquette’s harassment policy, the one that Weinberg had already mentioned. McAdams shrugged this off, saying it was silly to think that his blogging constituted harassment.

Seeking Support

When he was banned from campus, McAdams took to broadcast media to appeal for support from his conservative audience and try to define the controversy as an infringement on his right to free speech. He said Marquette suspended him because of a post on his blog. He also expanded his attack on Abbate, referencing an article that she had written about the prevalence of rape in Western culture, calling Abbate a hard-core feminist who harbored “sexist antipathy toward males.”

In other words, McAdams was aiming for a twofer with his right-wing base, calling out a “radical feminist” while also playing the political correctness card.

Abbate responded to the reference to her rape article by asking what that had to do with a classroom discussion of John Rawls’s theory of justice? She added:

“Either John McAdams believes that the fact that I once blogged about a feminist response to rape culture is somehow relevant to how I handled a discussion with a student about John Rawls’ theory of justice, or else he intentionally referenced this blog post to fuel the fire of those followers who foster misogynist sentiments.”

But as Justin Weinberg pointed out on his *Daily Nous* blog, this really was not even about the issue of political correctness. The topic was John Rawls’s overall theory of justice, regarding how justice has to be applied fairly to all people and all groups in a society. Abbate was only eliciting examples of such groups. She was not entertaining a debate about things like racism or gay rights in her class. She was using the collection of examples as a jumping off point to discuss Rawls’s theory, not as an invitation to debate whether whites are superior to other races or whether heterosexuality should enjoy legal advantages. For the purpose of the philosophical discussion about Rawls, the specific examples of discrimination were not the point.

But McAdams still has his supporters. In the Feb. 9 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*,

Conor Friedersdorf began his article with this sentence: “Professor John McAdams is being stripped of tenure by Marquette University for writing a blog post that administrators characterize as inaccurate and irresponsible.”

But that statement was not accurate in that McAdams actually had waged a campaign against Abbate, including at least ten blog posts over several weeks. He also went on radio talk shows to expand the audience for his attacks on the teaching assistant. The later effort to minimize the campaign as simply “one post on my blog” became the diversion that he deployed in the friendly confines of a Fox News interview.

Further, as Dean Holz made clear in his letter, his review and his decision to revoke tenure was not simply the result of the Abbate affair. In the letter, Holz noted that, “Based upon your years of internet postings, you knew or should have known that your story would result in vulgar, vile and threatening communications to Ms. Abbate. Instead of recognizing Ms. Abbate as a person to be treated respectfully and with dignity, you used her as a tool to further your agenda. ”

Holz continued in this vein by writing “You have been asked, advised, and warned on multiple prior occasions not to publicize student’s names in connection with your blog posts.” Holz then went back to 2008 to name two instances where McAdams had deliberately named two females because he opposed policies and presentations they had made. Holz said McAdams admitted back then that this was a matter of concern. But, with graduate student Abbate, he continued to name names in public, seven years later.

Pattern of Behavior

This was the specific reason that Holz gave for not choosing a lesser form of discipline. He wrote that he had no confidence, based in McAdams’s past record, that he would alter his behavior. He noted that McAdams seemed proud of what he did to Abbate. As Holz noted, there were other avenues that McAdams could have taken if he had a genuine complaint about Abbate, such as going to her superiors.

As Holz writes in the conclusion to his letter, McAdams will have due process under Marquette’s administrative procedure for dismissal. He can file an objection and then have conferences and a hearing.

But to return to Friedersdorf’s *Atlantic* article, the author urged other academics to come to McAdams’s aid since this act had made tenure meaningless. But McAdams’s behavior was highly unusual if not unique, at least in my three-decade experience in academia. I cannot recall any case that even comes close.

Culture of Hate

Through his exaggerated blog posts, McAdams had created a threatening environment for a young woman who faced hate speech about violence and possibly rape. McAdams was also well aware of the likely effect of his accusations against Abbate. The United States has become a very polarized nation with constant pressure from the Right for its supporters to wage "culture wars" in fighting back against liberals, black activists, the "gay agenda," and what Rush Limbaugh calls "feminazis."

This culture of hate has led to real violence, including the murders of James Byrd, a black man, in Jasper, Texas, and Matt Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming.

And, the Right's howls of protest regarding McAdams's tenure also ring hollow in that an entirely different position is taken when an academic makes unpopular statements against, say, U.S. foreign policy. For instance, Ward Churchill was a professor of ethnic studies at Colorado University from 1990 to 2007 who was a genuine scholar, writing or editing nearly 20 books and several important journal articles used by other academics.

Churchill wrote about the FBI war against leftist groups in the 1960s, e.g. ,*The FBI's War against the Black Panther Party, Agents of Repression*, and *The COINTELPRO Papers*. He also wrote extensively about the genocide against the American Indians, becoming one of the foremost authorities on that subject. He was chairman of his department and popular with his students.

However, in 2007, Churchill had his tenure revoked and was terminated because he wrote that the 9/11 attacks in 2001 were the result of American foreign policy. He compared the CIA, FBI and Wall Street employees in the Twin Towers to "little Eichmanns," a reference to Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which depicted former Nazi Adolf Eichmann as a simple technocrat working in an evil system.

Four years later, the essay became a cause célèbre on the Right when Bill O'Reilly and Fox News objected to Churchill's invitation to speak at Hamilton College in New York. O'Reilly's campaign produced violent threats against Churchill and a flood of angry e-mails to Hamilton, which canceled the event. Churchill resigned his department chair, but that was not enough to appease Colorado's political establishment. An investigation was instigated of his voluminous writings, leading to accusations of academic flaws. He was then fired on grounds of plagiarism and using dubious sources.

Or take the case of Norman Finkelstein, a professor at DePaul who was applying

for tenure. Both his department and his college voted overwhelmingly to grant him tenure, but celebrity attorney Alan Dershowitz launched a campaign against Finkelstein, who had criticized Dershowitz's book, *The Case for Israel*. With Finkelstein deemed "anti-Israel," DePaul reversed its internal mechanisms and bowed to external pressure. Finkelstein was denied tenure.

The cases of Churchill and Finkelstein were much clearer threats to academic freedom because both dealt with important public issues, not a personal attack on a vulnerable colleague. But neither case prompted much outrage from major U.S. publications, demonstrating how successful William F. Buckley and Dinesh D'Souza have been in creating a climate that objects to "political correctness" only if it causes trouble for someone on the Right.

Full Disclosure: For a number of years McAdams taught a class on the John F. Kennedy assassination at Marquette, a topic that I have also worked on extensively. My writings have cited McAdams, and I debated him on the Black Op Radio program out of Vancouver.

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