

# On Daring to Struggle

*Eugene D. Genovese*

George Orwell was right: Although all awards are created equal, some are more equal than others. This one I shall treasure. I know it has been extended to me less personally than as a representative of those who stared down threats of ostracism and worse to build The Historical Society in defense of academic freedom and academic standards. And here, let me pay tribute to the colleagues who preceded us by launching the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, and who thereby demonstrated that the cultural war, far from being over, had hardly begun, and that the barbarians need not win it.

The struggle to clean up our campuses is scoring impressive victories, for which we owe an inestimable debt to such outstanding leaders as Lynne Cheney, Alan Kors, Jerry Martin, and our own Steve Balch. But they are not miracle workers. They and their respective organizations can accomplish only so much. In truth, while we are winning important battles, it is not at all clear that we are winning the war. To begin with, critical departments and professional organizations, most notably those of English and history, remain in the hands of people who have no respect for academic freedom and are committed to the myth of America as a uniquely evil nation—or rather, a non-nation manipulated by an evil “White Power Structure.” And since departments and professional organizations are self-replenishing, they recruit the like-minded while they purge dissenters or, more cleverly, make sure dissenters never get jobs in the first place.

Still, when The Historical Society came on the scene, the pundits declared that we would recruit no more than a couple of hundred members, if that, and would fold quickly. Well, in a few short years, the society has recruited 1,500 members, is increasing steadily, and has demonstrated that it is here to stay. Meanwhile, the establishment organizations have lost about a third of their members. For a non-starter with no prospects, The Historical Society is giving the establishment fits. Most astonishing, it has done something few thought possible. It has rallied colleagues from every part of the political spectrum, from far Left to far Right—paleo- and neo-conservatives, liberals, Marx-

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ists, and socialists. Let it be noted: The committee that unanimously recommended Louis Ferleger as executive director included Gertrude Himmelfarb and Sean Wilentz, who, if I am not mistaken, are not political comrades. The basis for this ideologically diverse coalition has been a shared commitment to academic freedom, abhorrence of the indecencies that now mark everyday campus life, and revulsion at the politically driven imbecilities that are turning college curricula into a sick joke. And here we need to absorb the lesson: the totalitarian assault on our campuses does not divide Left from Right, although a deplorably large section of the Left has capitulated to it. It divides nihilists and totalitarians from those who believe that a campus ought to be a place to air differences in civil and mutually respectful debate. We gain nothing by pretending that those arrayed against us are decent people who are just not thinking straight. Decent people do not do what they do, and, since the radicals know they cannot prevail in open debate, they think perfectly straight when they silence opponents.

We remain on the defensive. Notwithstanding the good efforts of recent years, we have yet to rally the campuses and the American people generally. Indeed, we have allowed one atrocity to follow another. Academics have not been alone in this error. If anything, our most powerful corporations have set the pace. Consider, for example, the disgraceful acceptance of brainwashing as a standard technique for suppressing dissent. Accuse someone of racism or sexism or homophobia, and he is guilty as charged. And racism, sexism, and homophobia are whatever the powers-that-be say they are. Where, exactly, are these so-called hate crimes defined and by whom? Rarely do the accused have access to a bill of particulars. Rarely if ever, can they face and cross-examine their accusers. Rarely, that is, do they get due process. Instead, having been dubbed sick, they are turned over to highly paid sadists to be coerced and humiliated. The clever repackaging of this Maoist "reeducation" as "sensitivity training" takes care of everything.

Among the many outrages, none has overmatched those committed at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University, at which the administrations justified lynch law. Political factions declared certain student groups racist. Without bringing formal charges and conceding the right to due process, hoodlums burned their newspapers. Does anyone pretend that if the conservative students had guarded their newspapers, as they should have, they would not have suffered physical assault? These crimes have gone unpunished, and, indeed, the administrations virtually treated the perpetrators as heroes. In Sheldon Hackney's infamous declaration, there was right on both sides. That is, one side had the right to assert constitutional privileges, and the other had the right to use violence to prevent its doing so.

Both parties in Congress rewarded Dr. Hackney with control of the NEH and then failed to monitor his politicization of an office supposedly dedicated to the promotion of intellectual freedom, ideological diversity, and academic

standards. But then, both parties in Congress had already made their position clear when they rewarded Donna Shalala with control of the federal government's largest slush fund—the Donna Shalala who had established her credentials as high priestess of campus repression at the University of Wisconsin. Make no mistake: When Congress did that, it put the government's seal of approval on campus hooliganism and silenced the more timid dissenters. A few questions: Where were certain senators whom, for reasons that elude me, our own organizations congratulate for their occasional criticism of alleged excesses? Have those august Senators denounced the Shalalas and Hackneys? Have they offered the slightest support to Alan Kors and the handful of others who have done their best to resist the aggression? When called upon to vote on the confirmation of people who have carried the banner of the totalitarianism euphemistically called “political correctness,” did they vote what is supposed to be their conscience? More to the point, have the rest of us yet launched a national counter-attack to expose not only the Shalalas and Hackneys, but their congressional supporters in both parties?

As for the appropriate reply to the violence at Penn and Cornell, my mind goes back to the late 1940s at Brooklyn College, where I was a Communist Party spokesman, and to the late 1960s, when I was a professor at a university drenched in violence. At Brooklyn College, with a student body of 8,000, the Shachtmanites—as the most militant of the Trotskyists were known—did not nearly match our 200 party members and more than 500 fellow travelers, but they were strong enough to cause us endless trouble. Naturally, we hated these “social fascists” more than we hated the Right. Yet, we did not dream of seizing and burning their publications, nor did they dream of burning ours. I would like to say that this civility flowed from our good manners and superior morals—that, in contradistinction to today's radicals, our mammas brought us up right. Regrettably, the explanation lies elsewhere. Quite simply, each side knew that if it resorted to strong-arm tactics, unpleasant consequences would follow. Each side had its share of tough young men who—no one doubted—would return the blows with heavy interest.

In 1968, black students, primarily West Indians who were trying to establish revolutionary credentials at home, denounced a rightwing professor as a racist. The far-Left faction of the faculty, with which I was associated, initially moved to have the scoundrel hanged. Alas, it soon became clear that he was being framed. Recalling the Soviet show trials and our resolution never again to become complicit, we took firm measures to compel a frightened administration to take a hard line. To the disgust of guilt-tripping liberal colleagues for whom blacks could do no wrong, we won—although not before black and white radicals terrorized the campus and blew up the computer center. What needs to be remembered is that a small but determined section of the campus Left refused to pander to thugs, stared down the inevitable charges of racism, and broke decisively with its totalitarian legacy.

During the Vietnam War, campus radicals engaged in various forms of intimidation and especially took pleasure in invading and disrupting the classrooms of professors they disapproved of. Largely unnoticed, the radicals often directed their hardest blows against leftwing professors who committed the unpardonable sin of refusing to politicize their classrooms. Besides, however radical a professor might be, the odds were that he was not radical enough to suit pseudo-revolutionaries who were evading the draft and contemplating their futures on Wall Street. I cannot say that I was amused when, in 1968, the radicals decorated the campus with posters that contained my picture and a legend that read, "Eugene Genovese, Enemy of the People, Wanted Dead or Alive." Not to worry. I knew those chaps well, and they knew me. Not then and there, nor at any time on any other campus, did radical students invade my classroom or assault me or other leftwing professors who stood up to them. And we knew they would not. You see, the last few generations of revolutionary heroes, unlike their predecessors, have been distinguished primarily by their cowardice. There is no steel in those clenched fists they love to wave in people's faces. They strike only at those who lack the resources or the will to defend themselves. When they know that the "enemies of the people" have with them young men who are not to be trifled with, they limit themselves to an occasional display of bad manners.

What, then, is the principal lesson of those campus struggles? You do not put down campus hooligans—terrorists, really—by appeals for nonexistent legal protection; nor by letters to the *New York Times* and the prostituted media it epitomizes; nor by protests to administrators who go with the flow and would sell their mammas for cash money; nor by reliance on colleagues who are quaking in their boots. You do not concede one inch to intimidation, threats, coercion, and thinly disguised violence.

Today, too many defenders of academic freedom are cowering in the face of charges of McCarthyism and racism—charges leveled by people who themselves are outdoing the McCarthyites in the repression of dissent, and by protection racketeers who parade as civil-rights leaders. (Really, we are living in insane times, when, according to the media, Maxine Waters, Al Sharpton, and Kweisi Mfume qualify as civil rights leaders.) The cowering puzzles me. I have been called a racist since my teens and do not recall having lost a minute's sleep. For the appropriate reply, I refer you to the late Mike Quill, the boss of the Transport Workers' Union in New York. Let me paraphrase his reply to someone who called him a Communist: I'd rather be called a racist by a protection racketeer than be called a protection racketeer by a racist.

You will remember the Weathermen—those bourgeois savages who, wishing to kill their parents while living off them, dedicated themselves to revolutionary nihilism. Give credit where credit is due. In one way they proved themselves worthy of respect, for unlike the fakers we confront today, they were ready to risk their lives. And they were bright. They understood that the

radical Left consisted largely of *poseurs* and windbags. Accordingly, they denounced the pseudo-radicals as chatterers who were unwilling to take the risks necessary to sustain their rhetoric. The Weathermen set out to force people to choose sides on a terrain on which there would be no place to hide. And they raised a magnificent slogan, which, I respectfully suggest, we make our own and put to better use: "Dare to struggle! Dare to win!"

**The 2 February 2001 *Daily Evergreen*, in a sidebar on page 15, attributed the following thoughts on diversity to the minority affairs director of Associated Students of Washington State University:**

"This is diversity. It's not the words we stress, or the action item on agendas we mandate, but rather: it is the unity that a diverse student population brings."