

## *Qui Custodiet Custodies?*

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The night of November 8, 1966, Maureen Reagan and I stepped into a corridor off the main ballroom of the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, embraced, and mutually exulted, “We have saved America!” That was the night of Ronald Reagan’s landslide election as governor of California. In that glorious moment Maureen and I were not boasting of our particular contributions—though we had both labored mightily toward the outcome—but rather basking in the inspiration Ronald Reagan provided, with due appreciation that his election meant something far more important than a new political administration in Sacramento, California. What we did not fully appreciate, however, was that Ronald Reagan had not arrived to save America, but to summon Americans to save themselves.

Nothing illustrates the importance of this aspect of Reagan’s victory so well as the events of May 15, 1969. That was the day of the People’s Park riots in Berkeley, California, successor to the “free speech” movement that had caused such turmoil at the University of California. As governor, Reagan had summoned the National Guard to quell the disturbance, the university not having heeded his prior challenges to take control of its mission and restore disciplined inquiry as its proper work. Whenever Reagan challenged the university during his campaign and tenure as governor, he was mistakenly understood in the popular press to be confronting the university and its administration under President Clark Kerr. In fact, Reagan’s message was aimed most directly at the faculty who were too

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placid about the unworthy compromises being made regarding the university's mission. Just as Reagan was summoning Americans to save their country, he was summoning faculty to save their life's work.

Since those days the country has responded well to Reagan's challenge to get serious about what it means to be Americans. While he might be said to have literally saved America through victory in the Cold War, the more important salvation was the resurgence within the culture of deep and widespread interest in our country's foundations. More than a few faculty, and far many more plain citizens, took up the work of getting to know America. And they did so by moving in the opposite direction from higher education. Instead of reviving the regime of disciplined inquiry as the university's reason for being, the university descended ever deeper into the morass of what eventually came to be known as "political correctness." The virtual disappearance of American history, politics, and civics in the curriculum is only the outward symbol of a deep dysfunction. To be sure, there have been significant responses to Reagan's challenge: the National Association of Scholars and its progeny (the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the Martin Center, etc.) most notable among them. But such finger-in-the-dike labors, while heroic, have not stemmed the PC flood.

One example of how the current in higher education was moving adversely to the currents in the culture occurred at Michigan State University (MSU) a decade ago. In a precursor to the Trump-storm playing out across campuses today, a spate of violent intimidation greeted a visit by Tom Tancredo, Republican Congressman of Colorado from 1999 to 2009. Rep. Tancredo had been invited to MSU by the campus Republican club to address the subject of immigration. What followed was a tumult that launched over a year-long period of recrimination—not against the violent intimidators but against the event sponsors! The student organizers and their faculty advisors were accused of creating an environment of harassment because they assembled to hear an address that offended some persons within and without the university community. MSU neither defended open academic inquiry in particular nor freedom of speech in general.

Even more alarming, the university accused a faculty advisor to the student Republican club—namely, the author of this essay—of the crimes of race, gender, and ethnic intimidation. What made this remarkable was that during this part of my tenure as a faculty advisor, which involved facilitation rather than decision making, I was more than eight hundred miles away on a year-long sabbatical and not involved in the club's planning for that year.

In company with my fellow faculty advisor I mounted a vigorous and ultimately successful defense, along the way shielding the students from persecution. But the experience nevertheless produced great loss, first of all in the enormous investment

of time wasted in answering spurious accusations, as well as in the damage inflicted on MSU's mission to sustain a commitment to open inquiry. University administration not only did not defend its mission but also failed even to articulate a reasonable defense against false accusations of "cultural privilege" that would directly contest and contradict that mission.

The significance of these observations in our present circumstances is to identify a need, the urgency of which has only intensified since Reagan first identified it, to recognize the culture-bearing function of higher education and to redirect it toward sustaining rather than undermining cultural health.

To those who believe that the university's mission is not to reinforce but to challenge culture, I offer the observation I have made elsewhere, following Edward Shils: "the universities have to a large extent supplanted the churches."<sup>1</sup> Because this remark elaborated Alexis de Tocqueville's argument, it was necessary that I add that Tocqueville

sought to convey by "habits of mind" a new and advanced understanding of terms of analysis central to our evolved political and moral universe. What this means for *any* analysis of higher education is that, in order to be appropriate to the task, such an analysis must undertake to identify the broader responsibilities of higher education, including its moral responsibilities, and

<sup>1</sup>W.B. Allen, "Founding Habits," Dr. William B. Allen, Presentations, 2, <http://williambarclayallen.com/presentations/FOUNDING%20HABITS.pdf>. In *Habits of Mind: Fostering Access and Excellence in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2003), Carol M. Allen and I take note of the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville, who spoke of "habits of mind" as having supplanted "habits of the heart" in shaping human moral experience. Despite his very clear formulation, commentators often seize upon the expression, "habits of the heart," as though Tocqueville had meant to recommend *feelings* as a paradigm for social interpretation. In fact, Tocqueville meant to describe a phenomenon that emerged with the democratic and anti-religious revolutions of the late eighteenth century—the emergence of the "intellectual" as the moral arbiter of society. Edward Shils, a fine reader of Tocqueville, conveyed the message as late as 1990:

The status of universities in society has also changed markedly and that has occurred partly in consequence of the triumphs of the Humboldtian idea of the university in the creation of new knowledge and in the education of young persons. From having been wards of a particular church, the universities have to a large extent supplanted the churches.

"The Idea of the University: Obstacles and Opportunities in Contemporary Society," in *The Calling of Education: "The Academic Ethic" and Other Essays on Higher Education*, ed. and intro. Steven Crosby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 237–38. Reprinted from *Minerva* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 301–13.

They were mainly the "intellectuals" who spawned the revolution in France in 1789, and they were the intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, increasingly and eventually almost exclusively operating from universities, who became the standards of moral and political judgment in a way that clergymen once had been. (Tocqueville's point was to demonstrate what had happened to the world that had been altered by the *écrivains*—the intellectuals—who had transformed the world in the eighteenth century by a revolution that altered not only politics but also the "entire moral and intellectual condition of a people." *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (1835), vol. 1 [Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981], chap. 9, sec. 4.)

not merely the personal opportunities it affords to students. For habits of mind will constitute our most decisive collective possession. This, we believe, is the deeper meaning of [Jacques] Maritain's observation that "the man of our civilization is the Christian man, more or less secularized."<sup>2</sup>

The university, accordingly, ought to be the cultural watchman, but is standing athwart cultural reinforcement. How deep is the problem? Consider that the "free speech" protests in Berkeley over fifty years ago contested the authority of the university to govern the expressive conduct of students. In doing so, the protest movement directly challenged the university's central function—to guide disciplined inquiry. In practice that means the university should make judgments of relevance and value regarding presentations to students and the appropriateness of lending institutional facilities to such purposes. To deny this duty—and it is a duty and not a right—is to deny the essential function of the university. Now this is not meant to convey that any university should directly control what students should say or do on their own dime. But we must remember that the People's Park protest originated in a seizure (they called it "expropriation") of university property by the protesters. In that case, the defense of "free speech" was literally a justification for theft!

Today, the heirs of "new Left" protesters actually govern the universities. In their turn, they seek to *reestablish* an absolute authority for university officials to govern expressive conduct in university programs and facilities. Do we not think that ironic? If so, we must think still more ironic the response of the present-day defenders of university authority who have employed the "free speech" of counter demonstration in order to deny a Charles Murray, an Ann Coulter, or other target of political correctness the opportunity to appear on campuses across the United States.

Science distinguishes between arguments of analysis and arguments of expression. The latter may well be the subjects of analysis and therefore properly presented in the context of higher education. But they have no claim to belong there other than as subjects of analysis. Defending them as "free speech" rather than as targets of analysis undercuts the work of definition—of distinguishing—at the heart of higher education.

The problem is evident: the "freedom of speech" defense for blacklisting speakers on campus is out of place. The problem with such prohibitions is that they are wrong, that they fail the test of intellectual rigor or integrity, not that they interfere with free speech. However, the defenders of the university's authority to permit or deny a platform stand on proper grounds, respecting university authority,

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Maritain's observation comes from Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (1943; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 6.

even when they stand falsely concerning the objectives they expect to further by this particular exercise of authority.

Consider, for example, the argument of Prof. Gabriel Rockhill at Villanova, who recently protested a Charles Murray appearance there, among other things:

[T]he consensual discourse on abstract rights persists in defending so-called free speech independently of context, as if rights somehow floated in a pure moral ether above and beyond the soiled political struggles of the here-and-now. It does not recognize, for instance, the crucially important fact that *the constitutional right to express one's views is not the right to have a university approve of them and provide a megaphone for them*. In other words, the right to have institutions of higher learning endorse and market your speech is most definitively *not* a constitutional right.<sup>3</sup> (emphases in original)

For Rockhill, this argument is necessary to resist a “reactionary, bigoted pseudo-science, which is bought and paid for by the corporate elite.” It is a necessary tool for the vanguard that will contest “fascism, racism, misogyny and economic oppression,” which is how he wrongly characterizes the work of Murray and others. At bottom, though, he appeals to the authority—and duty—of the university to stand for truth and against error.<sup>4</sup> What he fails to recognize is that the university fulfills this responsibility not by “proclaiming truth” but by guaranteeing academic freedom, which ought not to be confused with “free speech.”

The question for higher education, then, and the question for faculty in particular, is whether and how they will accept the summons to stand for the search for truth and against error. While this work must be performed with due sensitivity to criteria of investigation and proof and can by no means be accomplished by the so-called “consensus of scientific views,” and while it must be predicated on procedures of demonstration and refutation (that is, the open search for truth rather than closed claims of truth), it is nevertheless true that decisions must be made.

The only responsible locus of decision-making authority in these circumstances is with the faculty. But insofar as the faculty have been corrupted by the polemics of the era, and have themselves in the main been waging a war against the culture, it is daunting indeed to know where to turn.

President Trump has rejected “political correctness” as an insidious poison in the culture. In doing so, he has challenged us in the mode of Ronald Reagan to respond with specific action that will counteract the poison. I suggest courageous

<sup>3</sup>Gabriel Rockhill, “Free Speech Is Not the Issue; Intellectual Power Is,” *Counterpunch*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/04/05/free-speech-is-not-the-issue-intellectual-power-is/>.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

defense of open inquiry (not to be confused with mere “free speech”), coupled with a willingness to stand against the tide of opinion in the culture wars—above all, in the matter of identity politics. So long as identity politics prevails, there is every reason for the “vanguard” to expect decision-making to be concentrated in the hands of a favored few, set apart to protect the privileges of the few, namely, the favored groups. Control must be wrested from the few, while nevertheless honoring the humanity of all. Doing this begins by rejecting the politics of aspersion and summoning one and all to the redemptive work of flourishing by adherence to the standards of intellectual inquiry and analysis.

A case study in this dilemma is now underway at Harvey Mudd College in California (where I once taught), in which the college finds itself forced into choosing between maintaining rigorous standards of performance and maintaining gestures of diversity and inclusiveness—forced by protests into a two-day suspension of classes to engage in soul-searching over its alleged insensitivity to minority perspectives. This follows more than a decade of serious efforts to “diversify” the student body and the curriculum, deflecting from the primary mission of the college. It should be obvious there and everywhere that any sacrifice of rigor in the name of diversity amounts to a dehumanizing aspersion on the supposed beneficiaries as well as a betrayal of the institutional mission.

President Trump’s challenge calls on faculty to rise and stand for what they are worth, and faculty should call on students to rise and stand for what they are worth. Together they are the guardians of the guardians.