

Letters

To the Editor:

Mark Bauerlein's fine article "The Few, the Proud, the Profs" in your Spring 2021 issue certainly hit home for me. I was an English major in the late 1960s and early 1970s at Kenyon where I studied with the remnant of the New Critics. It could not have been a better experience. Then it was off to the University of Toronto for my MA in English and what I had hoped would be a career in academia.

There I was introduced to the invasion from France where we were told of the importance of deMan, Foucault, Derrida, et al. It was hard enough to parse through the unreadable, jargon-filled prose, let alone to find something there worth knowing. I guess I lacked those peculiar "smarts" mentioned by Mr. Bauerlein that are so valued in the academy. It was clear to me over the course of my time at Toronto what was coming to most English Departments, and that the barbarians were at the gates. I was awarded my MA. I then eagerly left both the program and the profession. It was off to law school and a course of study and career that I could at least justify.

I now have grandkids and we talk about what they might be doing in the future for high school and college. I deeply regret telling them that they have only a few schools worth attending for liberal arts, and that they are better off sticking with the STEM fields, economics, or business. Nothing saddens me more than knowing what the liberal arts can be and what it is no longer. No wonder students are bailing out of liberal arts. The professoriate has only themselves to blame, which, of course, they will never do.

Henry Wickham
Columbus, OH

To the Editor:

Prof. Glynn Custred has shown in a book review and an article in *Academic Questions* how the problems of the mass media and of higher education are very much alike. Both enterprises are committed to seeking the truth, yet the manner and means, not to mention the goal itself, are essentially controversial.

That is, however clear it may be that the search for truth in the political and academic realms defines, and must define, their work, history reveals both how far practice has deviated from theory, and how forces both inside and outside of them have bred genuine confusion.

The book by Mark Levin which Prof. Custred reviewed jolts the readers with its counterintuitive title: *Unfreedom of the Press*. (“That’s Right, I Said It!,” Spring 2021). How can our mass media not be free given their independence of government control? That’s a fair question which, surprisingly neither of these gentlemen discuss to the extent it deserves. While both Levin and Custred more than take note of the role of the American founding, they discuss far more the various periods and modes of journalism which have shaped it since. Yet Levin’s book title points to the paradox that the press is not suffering from repression but rather utter alienation from the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” which he believes undergird it. The largely unexamined question is, what accounts for the various historical distractions?

I’m not suggesting that the press’s deviation from its founding-era goal of appealing to reason and holding governments, political parties, and other institutions accountable is surprising. Men are no more angels in journalism than they are in government and politics, to paraphrase James Madison in *The Federalist* No. 51. Flesh-and-blood human beings cover the news and comment about it, however much more noble a calling its practitioners regard it than that of politicians.

History doesn’t just happen, however much it surprises us. The exigencies of winning independence, forming a government and operating it, depending on political parties or becoming independent of them, appealing to popular sentiment, falling prey to ideology—these are human causes and concerns and not mere historical periods. All of them are open to question for their claims to excellence and social benefit. Journalists are as much social and political animals as the rest of mankind, ever in need of clarity about how to do their work well. There may not be great reason to be wildly optimistic about this, but neither is there cause for utter despair.

The striking similarity of academic developments in the plus one-thousand-year history of the university (“From Bologna to Zoom: The Evolution of the University,” Spring 2021), though more detached than journalism from politics, nevertheless must always be mindful of and discerning of politics, lest it fall prey to the worst forms of it, as in 1920s Germany and much of the

Western world currently. It is amazing to me that the much-maligned medieval European world should birth the sustained and protected search for truth. We are indebted to Prof. Custred for bringing to our attention scholarship concerning the astonishing appearance of universities in Italy, France, Spain and Germany, forcing us to reconsider to some degree modern denunciations of “monkish ignorance.”

Of course, as a human enterprise, higher or liberal education is as much subject to corruption and misdirection as any other. Thus, its various historical phases have their human causes no less than those of modern journalism. The influence of church and state on the universities is notable, and no less that of prominent persons within them. Evidently, it is always a struggle to keep scholarship free of malicious influences from whatever source. Again, to err—not to mention, oppress—is human—all-too-human. One can imagine a book about higher education today with the challenging title of “Unacademic Freedom,” indicating that the professoriate, like journalists, have lost their sense of direction.

A young Abraham Lincoln warned of the threat to political freedom from “men of towering genius” who would overthrow republics as readily as America’s founders established one. The academic world, no less than the journalistic, indeed all of what these days must be called high culture to distinguish it from pop culture, has often thrown up rebels who have sought to redefine philosophy, science, art, literature, and music in order to blot out the reputations of their illustrious predecessors. In doing so, they have—too often—undermined the freedom of serious scholars who honestly search for the truth rather than celebrity or fame.

When Winston Churchill urged citizens to “Study history! Study history!” his object was to encourage “studiers” to learn lessons from it, not merely to catalogue it. Neither Levin nor Custred fall into that error, as their well-grounded concern about the trends in journalism and academia make clear. My purpose here is to suggest that Aristotle’s inquiry into the *telos* of human endeavors sheds far more light on their tasks and challenges than historical accounts; indeed, it can only enrich them.

Richard H. Reeb Jr.
Helendale, CA

To the Editor:

The recent issue of *Academic Questions* was a “breath of fresh air,” with one exception. It is comforting to read articles which discuss openly issues which cannot get an airing in any mainstream media—so much for free speech these days. However, I was surprised to see an article by Daniel Pipes. He is the founder of Campus Watch (see article in Wikipedia), an organization that exists to track any criticism of Israel on college campuses. It urges students to submit reports on individual professors who may be critical of Israel. He is not an objective judge (as much as that is possible in political science!) of anything in the Middle East.

In my opinion, including his article on Assad in Syria (“Getting Bashar al-Assad Very Wrong,” Spring 2021) was certainly not in keeping with the sterling quality of all the other articles in the recent issue.

Keep up the good work!

Bill Nadeau
San Diego, CA

Daniel Pipes Responds:

I can’t figure out if Bill Nadeau’s complaint about my article, “Getting Bashar al-Assad Very Wrong” is serious or comedic. Here are my reasons to think Mr. Nadeau wishes to be funny:

1. Citing Wikipedia as a source. Relying on its biased entries to learn about Campus Watch rather than the Campus Watch website leads him to draw factually incorrect conclusions about it. (Israel is not our focus and we do not urge tattling on professors critical of Israel.)
2. Implying I am a political scientist. (I am a historian.)
3. Not specifying a single wrong fact, faulty opinion, or anything else deficient in my article.
4. Offering no critique of my work while deeming me as “not an objective judge . . . of anything in the Middle East.”
5. Defending Bashar al-Assad, a thug who is arguably the world’s worst living mass murderer.

Daniel Pipes
Philadelphia, PA