

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Confessions of a Culture Warrior

Sanford Pinsker

When a friend learned that I was thinking about accepting a position with the National Association of Scholars (NAS), he hauled me aside and filled my ear with well-meaning advice: Was I fully aware of the consequences such a decision would likely have on my career? Not only would my day-to-day life on the campus where I teach turn ugly, but editors would no longer be interested in my services as a reviewer or scholar-critic. In a word, I'd be *sunk*.

Nor were these cautions sufficient. Didn't I know, he went on, that the NAS was a bunch of reactionaries? How could somebody with my liberal credentials put himself in bed with such unsavory company? I hadn't heard such arguments since my mother warned me against playing with Timmy Krushinski, a fourteen-year-old who had an enviable bank shot and the ability to get his hands on cigarettes. "Hang around with bums," my mother insisted, "and you become a bum."

After a year as editor of *Academic Questions*, I am happy to report that I have not become a bum and that my career continues moving along quite nicely, thank you. In short, none—absolutely none—of the dire predictions my friend forecast have come true. Granted, some of my colleagues are probably less than thrilled that I have "gone public" about my educational conservatism, and many others are not likely to vote for me in the unlikely event that I am nominated for important faculty committees. But I don't think that the NAS has much to do with this. I was "damaged goods" from the day, some years ago, when I raised some pointed questions about the proposed women's studies program that struck me as much longer on identity politics and consciousness-raising than on academic rigor. At the time, the same well-meaning friend thought I should have dummied up, largely because when such matters have gone through the byzantine network of committee deliberation, it is too late to raise questions—much less objections—from the faculty floor. The deal, he counseled, was done, the die already cast. Didn't I know that I would only make a fool of myself by trying to play the spoiler?

In a narrow sense, he was, of course, right. Who wants to vote against something so self-evidently "with-it" as women's studies? And more important, who

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with even a modicum of political savvy would rise to speak in opposition? I would, and did—which cast me in certain scenarios as a misogynist and in others as a man of courage. Both camps are dead wrong, and neither much matters; I spoke my mind because I think that is what one should do and because I had sufficient reason to feel that the cause of liberal learning was being deflected toward thinly disguised political agendas.

Since becoming involved with *Academic Questions*, I get heart-cracking letters from people who have been wounded, sometimes deeply, by the PC wars, and I have had to balance my better luck against their misfortune. It is one thing to feel, as I do, that candor can cost one dearly in, say, North Korea or Cuba but scarcely at all in a democratic country such as ours, and quite another to know with some specificity just how vicious cultural warfare can be. Small wonder, then, that I confess to being rather conflicted about what to call those willing to speak their minds at faculty meetings. At a time when courage is in short supply (one could argue, of course, that thus was it ever in academe), I am not so cavalier about those willing to put peer popularity—and often much, much more—on the line. By contrast, I am not conflicted about academic cowardice because its signs are easier to read. When the times require one to stand tall, the academic coward refuses to hear, to see, and, most of all, to speak.

Nonetheless, as I ruminate about the costs of cultural engagement, it is not with visions either of courage or cowardice dancing round my head. Rather, what I worry about is how much truth there might be to the claim that those in the NAS are simply mirror images of those on the other side of the ongoing national debate about what constitutes liberal learning at its richest and best. The accusation has been around so long that it now approaches something akin to the Orwellian Big Lie. All one need do is agree that “everything is political” and any subsequent discussion—whether about the books we read or the students we teach—turns the marketplace of ideas into an ideological shouting match. But what if one declines to accept the invitation to think of reality as a “social construction” or continues to regard one’s students as *more* than the sum of their identity politics? Spinach, as a famous *New Yorker* cartoon once put it, is still spinach no matter how much folks insist otherwise. The same thing is true of bad ideas, however gussied up with cutting edge terminology. And when the cartoon reads, “And I say the hell with it!” what we have is a lighthearted version of something George Orwell said more seriously: “It is the first duty of intelligent men to restate the obvious.”

Which brings me to some “costs” of cultural conflict that I *do* find unacceptable. The first is closeness, a condition that Allan Bloom explored in his wake-up call about moral relativism titled *The Closing of the American Mind*. What I worry about, however, is quite another version, one that represents a refusal to consider seriously the best arguments offered up by our antagonists. I wonder: How many professors who follow the world through the pages

of *The Nation* or *The New York Review of Books*, also subscribe to *Commentary* and *National Review*? And how many professors who read *Commentary* also bother to read *The Nation*? My sense is precious few, although all of them probably tell their students to collect evidence across the spectrum of any issue before coming to an independent decision. My worry is that a certitude that never questions itself, one that dismisses books or articles by the opposition without the hard work of reading them, constitutes disturbing evidence of a narrowing mind. The same thing, I might add, is true for those unwilling to engage in the necessary business of self-criticism. Does this mean that we should let antagonists off the intellectual hook? Hardly. But it does mean that the constant rethinking of positions—those that have earned our sympathy as well as those that have not—remains an essential ingredient of the intellectual life. To forget this in the heat of impassioned debate is to make us less able as teachers, citizens, and human beings.

The other cost too great to bear is incivility. Granted, none of us are angels, and surely there are moments when assaults against the tradition of liberal learning require a firm, uncompromising defense. But ad hominem attacks have no part in this effort. Indeed, when I hear charges that there isn't a dime's worth of difference between the NAS and those we oppose, my response is to offer up copies of *Academic Questions* as Exhibit A. It is possible, after all, to conduct an academic disagreement without becoming disagreeable. This is what a clear-eyed reading of the articles and reviews in our pages reveals. No doubt those who prefer their demons inviolate will disagree, but, if evidence continues to matter, the record of our deed and word ought to stand for something. That tradition must continue, however much one is tempted—sometimes sorely tempted—to return insult with insult, incivility with yet more incivility.

Far better to raise probing questions whenever a threadbare assertion threatens to become an unassailable shibboleth. It is also far more effective because one need not be a political innocent to believe that the best arguments ultimately triumph. Only the cynical bank on carrying the day by intimidation and name calling. Those with a genuine case to make know that shouting does nothing to improve its validity and, indeed, may have everything to do with making their position appear unappealing, even downright suspicious, to the majority of faculty members content to sit on the sidelines.

To abandon one's intellectual curiosity and inherent sense of decency on behalf of the "good fight"—however noble, however *right*—is simply too high a cost. All the other small-c costs are bearable, perhaps even necessary. In any case, the palpable gains outweigh them, not only for the individual involved but also for those who deserve the same chance at the rich education we had.