

Virginia Viewpoint

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Academic Freedom: A Time for Reform

By John Taylor

Summary

Significant numbers in the American professoriate are out of touch with reality and, more importantly, with the taxpayer. Are we obligated to keep these ideologues on the dole?

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Tenure keeps our universities from being able to intellectually retool themselves when schools of thought are found to be lacking, of little relevance, or silly.

In recent days the American public has expressed shock and outrage at comments made by members of our academic community concerning the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Consider:

- Seventy-six Berkeley professors were joined by one hundred other academics in placing an ad in the *New York Times* calling the U. S. war on terrorism “unacceptable.”
- The University of North Carolina Progressive Faculty Network held a “love-in” entitled “Understanding the Attack on America: An Alternative View.” At this event William Blum, author of *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower*, which had a truly impressive circulation among Mr. Blum’s immediate family, said, “If I were the President ... I would first apologize to all the widows and orphans, the tortured and the impoverished, and all the millions of other victims of American imperialism. I would then reduce the military budget by at least 90 percent and I would use the savings to pay reparations to our victims.”
- A Sacramento elementary school teacher burned an American flag in front of his sixth grade class.
- Richard Berthold, a history professor at the University of New Mexico, decided that he would use his fifteen minutes of fame by telling his class, “Anybody who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote.” When his remarks drew a reaction that he had not anticipated, Professor Berthold courageously blubbered that he could not be fired because that would “undermine academic freedom.”

First, these actions and remarks should not surprise anyone. Far from it. They represent a prevalent attitude on American campuses, including those that were once our most prestigious institutions of higher education.

For the last three decades, parents and taxpayers have paid ever-increasing amounts for the rising generation to be taught that all cultures are of equal merit; that values are merely social constructs; that morality is relative; that reason and truth are nothing more than tools used to perpetuate white male

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domination; and that America is racist, sexist, homophobic, and not nearly vegetarian enough.

Isn't it ironic that now this country must ask those same young people to fight and perhaps die to defend a culture that they have been taught is no better than any other; to fight and perhaps die to defend a "social construct" like freedom; to fight and perhaps die defending a democratic republic that they have been taught is morally equivalent to tyranny and terrorism; to fight and perhaps die defending a "living" Constitution whose meaning may change substantially before our soldiers are able to come home; to fight and perhaps die to preserve a country as dramatically flawed as America?

There is a glaring need in this country to revisit academic freedom and tenure. Professors, it was thought, needed the freedom to express themselves even when their thoughts and ideas might be new, unpopular, or outside the mainstream. However, just as freedom of speech allows one to speak but makes no imposition on anyone to listen, academic freedom should allow one to teach but make no imposition on the time, labor, or income of the taxpayer to financially support ideas to which he might be diametrically opposed. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "To compel a man to furnish funds for the propagation of ideas he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

The abolition of tenure would benefit not only the academy but also society at large. In the last two decades, entire schools of thought have come crashing down. Keynesianism, socialism, Marxism, and collectivism of all stripes have been discredited. That is not to say that these are not still the dominant philosophies on our college campuses. How could that be? Because tenure keeps our universities from being able to intellectually retool themselves when schools of thought are found to be lacking, of little relevance, or silly.

A second great benefit of abolishing tenure would be in placing former professors in jobs in which they could be productive and contribute to society. Within a matter of weeks after the abolition of tenure, the United States would have a fast-food workforce that would be the envy of the world. For the first time since Ray Kroc gloriously raised the Golden Arches, we could pull away from the drive-in window relatively confident that the right number of burgers had been put into the bag.

In an effort to help professors adjust to an uncertain future in my post-postmodern world, I would suggest that they just think of their salary and benefits as social constructs devoid of meaning outside the context of capitalism. Oh, and by the way, good luck with your grocer.

If we are going to war to defend our culture overseas, shouldn't we also be defending it at home from a professoriate that today is to the left even of Hollywood?

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