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11-15-04: Historians/History

Professor Garry Wills ... Heal Thyself!

By Sheldon M. Stern

Mr. Stern, historian at the Kennedy Library from 1977 to 1999, is the author of Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings (2003) and The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis (January 2005) in the Stanford University Press Nuclear Age Series.

As one of over 57 million Kerry voters, I was deeply disappointed by the outcome of the presidential election. It seemed perfectly clear to me that George W. Bush's record in foreign and domestic affairs did not merit a second term.

However, Professor Garry Wills went much further, warning in an 11/4 *New York Times* op-ed ([abridged version here at HNN](#)) that Bush's victory (with 51 percent of the popular vote and 286 electoral votes) represented nothing less than "the day the Enlightenment went out" in the United States. Wills, a distinguished historian, argued that the "fundamentalism of the American electorate" had repudiated core Enlightenment values such as critical intelligence and tolerance. Where else, he asked, do we find such single-minded and intolerant contempt for diverse ideas? Wills answered his own question by comparing what he calls the "fundamentalist zeal" of Bush voters to the Jihad mindset of Al Qaeda and the religious extremists in the Muslim world. (Wills's comparison appears in the original op-ed but not in the shortened *HNN* version.)

However, I would suggest that the professor can find a striking example of contempt for Enlightenment values in his own academic backyard. The three branches of the federal government are now undeniably dominated by conservatives. But, liberals are still unquestionably in control of one key area of American life: the shaping of education in our colleges and universities. It seems entirely reasonable to ask whether Wills's profession has been in the front lines in protecting Enlightenment values in higher education? The answer, alas, is a resounding and indisputable no!

The study of history, one of the most important elements in promoting an understanding of our Enlightenment heritage, is no longer considered essential in most American colleges and universities. By the 1990s, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reports, even at the most "elite" institutions of American higher education, U.S. history is no longer required and it is now commonplace for students to graduate without ever studying their own national past. Most American professors seem oblivious to the civic implications of this widespread historical ignorance among their students. As David McCullough summed it up, after decades of teaching and speaking regularly at American colleges and universities, "I think we are raising a generation of young Americans who are, to a very large degree, historically illiterate." The late Christopher Lasch also warned that historical ignorance undermines the connection to our democratic heritage among the presumably "educated" elite. American higher education, he declared, has all but abandoned a commitment to "encourage passionate commitment to democracy."

Even more to the point, American colleges and universities have actually become bulwarks of anti-Enlightenment values. All across the nation, in the name of diversity and multiculturalism, faculty and administrators have adopted arbitrary, repressive, and unconstitutional speech codes that promote intolerance and the suppression of diverse

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ideas. If anyone doubts that this is the case, just spend some time on the website of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE): www.thefire.org and www.speechcodes.org. As Alan Kors and Harvey Silverglate of FIRE have concluded, diversity, as currently defined by the reigning ideologues on American college campuses, means “the appreciation, celebration, and study of those people who think exactly as they do...” Multiculturalism has “remarkably narrow limits—race, gender, ‘oppressed’ ethnicity, and sexual preference... The academic use of the terms ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ has become a politicized perversion of language.” College and university administrators and faculty, in short, have suppressed free speech and enforced a rigid politically correct orthodoxy at precisely the same time that they have embraced “diversity.” Sadly, this academic elite seems incapable of recognizing the link between their own anti-Enlightenment ideology and intolerance and the alienation of middle America from the great traditions of American progressivism and liberalism.

If Professor Wills and American academics are worried about the decline of Enlightenment values among the American electorate, perhaps they should start by reinvigorating the study of American history and democracy and protecting the principles that matter most in a university and in a free society—genuine diversity of opinion, thought, perspective and ideas. Professor, heal thyself!

HNN Underwriter

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 - [Re: Historical Literacy: Wrong Audience](#) by Richard Henry Morgan (November 15, 2004 at 10:01 AM)
 - [my faint remembrance](#) by Sheldon M. Stern (November 15, 2004 at 10:42 AM)

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