

P.C. LEFT, P.C. RIGHT

BY THOMAS W. HAZLETT

A veritable Inquisition now reigns on the American college campus. The criminal proceedings begin with the accusation ("You called her a girl, you pig!"), and the Ministry of Information swings into action. This is often an official board, controlled by a lynch mob armed with bull horns. The defendant is not Mirandized, and the presumption is guilt by reason of insanity.

In a flash, a People's Tribunal is convened; no mucking about with due-process technicalities here. The charges are read aloud, and it's straight to the verdict: Guilty! Sexist! Racist! Homophobic Vermin! Then the inevitable sentence to a re-education seminar. There, the social deviant will confess to his sins. (Oops! I left out *her* sins! Guilty!) Self-criticism is the cleanser, public humiliation the rinse.

These kangaroo courts have caught the attention of our social-crime beat reporters. The major news organizations are onto the more bizarre aspects of the anti-intellectualism now available in sound-bite format, and they have shocked millions of unindicted American co-conspirators with actual trial testimony.

What is troubling me about the reaction to the McCarthyism of the left is...the McCarthyism of the right. While the P.C. craze has infected the campus with style-conscious zombies who believe that thinking is a boring substitute for the latest in ecologically chic buttonwear, right-wingers have slipped into the campus masquerade as phony civil libertarians. The clothes don't fit, and they're tripping all over those shoes.

Alas, there is no constituency for *truth*. I hate to bring it up, but the T-word was kind of the idea behind the university to begin with. While the corporation is a slave to profit, the government to politics, television to ratings, and the church to dogma, the scholar was set up in business to pursue unbridled factology. OK, it sounds a little goofy. But that was the plan: the university as an academic oasis

where neither the constraints of practicality, nor of popularity, nor of orthodoxy would prevail, thus allowing scope for intelligent reflection, calculated experiment, and rigorous debate. From this richly fertilized soil, useful discoveries might blossom.

But to the right, "free speech" becomes "communist agitation" the instant conservatives snag 50.1 percent of the Inquisition Board slots. The only time you'll see Jesse Helms in the same zip code with the Bill of Rights is at an NRA rally. Accuracy in Media's Reed Irvine, outraged over liberal media bias, prays for the Fairness Doctrine (abolished in 1987) to be born again, ready to vanquish those pinkos at CBS. Only minutes after George Bush railed against P.C.-ness at the University of Michigan, he was rushed to the hospital with an irregular heartbeat; could his sudden twist from a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning have induced the vapors?

The reflexes of the right are all against free inquiry, and the campus P.C. debate produced exactly the knee jerk the doctor expected. In authoring the Collegiate Speech Protection Act of 1991, Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) seeks to ban speech codes at private colleges. Hyde is to conservative activists what Paula Abdul is to teenage boys with a glandular imbalance. But the idea of regulating universities that regulate speech—on the grounds that private schools cannot be trusted to regulate themselves—flips the Constitution on its head and spins it 180 degrees. Schools are supposed to set standards, not the federal government; how many billion decibels would these right-wingers scream (without the ACLU, which endorses Hyde's bill) if the federal government swooped in to strip private *high schools* of their ability to regulate language, dress, and behavior?

The problem is not that schools are setting standards, but that they are setting

such ridiculous ones. UCLA should be more open and tolerant than, say, the Glendale Galleria or LAX. "Offensive speech," contraband on some 200-plus colleges with codes, should be carefully steered right into the arena of Higher Learning, center court. That is exactly where it should compete, and where its audience should assemble. As the famous Marxian historian Eugene Genovese recently wrote: "Any professor who, subject to the restraints of common sense and common decency, does not seize every opportunity to offend the sensibilities of his students is insulting and cheating them, and is no college professor at all."

The campus as truth-seeking oasis is not the vision of right-wing ideologues. Their intellectual mothers rooted hard for Senator Joe, and their kissin' cousins yet spy on leftish professors, pressing their classroom evidence of subversion not for honest challenge but for political expulsion. Free speech is today their agenda, but it is not their cause.

Such disingenuousness is dry timber for the P.C. fires, as the battle is reduced to a raw power struggle trampling the scholarly canon. It is hence fortuitous that liberals are increasingly selected as defendants in P.C. prosecutions. While the attack seems motivated by practical considerations (limiting the hunt to right-wingers leaves loads of excess capacity in the P.C. holding cells), it has forced the issue. Now the university's liberals have both opportunity and motive...to be liberal. They should heed Genovese's call "for honorable men and women [to] defeat terrorism by unleashing counterterrorism against cowardly administrators and their complicit faculty."

It would be nice if they hurried. It is not quite yet midnight at the oasis.

Contributing Editor Thomas W. Hazlett teaches economics at the University of California, Davis.

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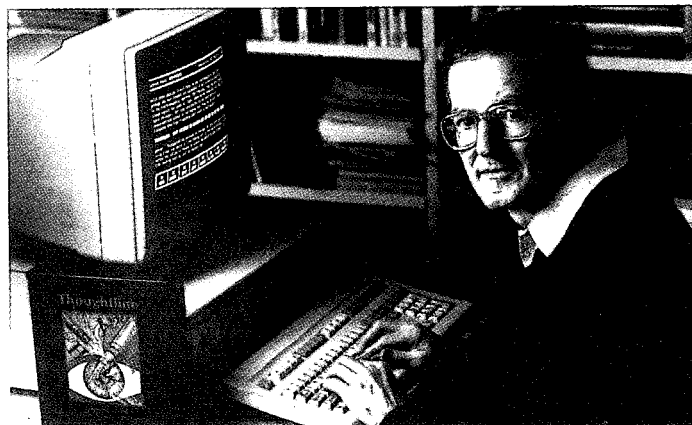
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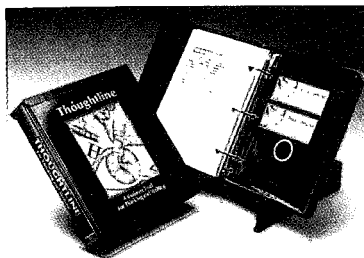
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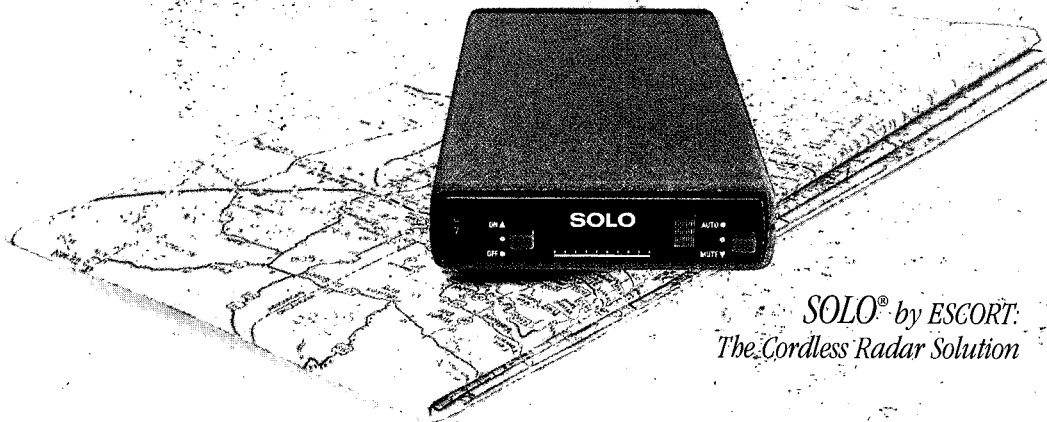
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