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**COMMENTARY: THE ACADEMIC
BILL OF (CONSERVATIVES') RIGHTS**

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COMMENTARY: THE ACADEMIC BILL OF (CONSERVATIVES') RIGHTS

For years the political right has pushed an educational agenda aimed at bringing us back to the good old days of the little red schoolhouse when only the elite went to college. Relentless in their efforts to turn back the clock, the far right is now trying to convince state legislators to privatize their big public university systems; and let's not ignore the president's assault on Pell grants, the key financial aid program for needy students. I discussed these in previous commentaries.

But some members of the extreme right are no longer satisfied with going back to the good old days of the little red schoolhouse. They want to return to those even better days of McCarthyism so they can dictate what is taught in the classroom and who teaches it.

Sounds scary, doesn't it? That's why they've packaged their ideas in a noble sounding title: the Academic Bill of Rights, sometimes called the Student Bill of Rights. Forget the nice label. Let me tell you what this stealth attack is really all about.

The Academic Bill of Rights is the brainchild of David Horowitz, a former radical leftist who has abandoned his leftist roots for the extreme political right. Horowitz believes that the university has become a nesting place for the left. Professors who

do not agree with leftist ideas, he claims, are unlikely to find employment in institutions of higher learning. Worse yet, according to Horowitz, not only do faculty screen out conservative job applicants, they also recruit innocent students to their cause and punish those who have the audacity to take opposing political views.

In other words, the Academic Bill of Rights is based on the assumption—and I emphasize the word assumption because proof is lacking—that academics don't behave professionally. Most are nothing but ideologues who ruthlessly impose their views on naive students and disparage any scholar or publication with whom they disagree, he claims.

The data Horowitz uses to support this contention is based on voter registrations of faculty at

a handful of elite institutions indicating that Democrats far outnumber Republicans in the social sciences and humanities. Tying this to unsubstantiated complaints posted on e-mail list services by conservative students, he concludes that all Democrats are radicals who push their political agenda in the classroom. Needless to say, he also sidesteps the fact that institutions have procedures for students to challenge abusive faculty.

So how does Horowitz propose to resolve what he sees as the problem? Simple.

Forgetting that some Republicans are liberal and many Democrats conservative, he wants colleges and universities to hire more Republicans to balance out the Democrats. Horowitz calls this “intellectual diversity.”

His goal of intellectual diversity directly contradicts the principle of ideological neutrality in the classroom, the bedrock of his Academic Bill of Rights. If professors should keep their politics out of the classroom, as Horowitz argues, why should a dearth of Republicans in the classroom matter? It only matters if you’re a conservative who wants to use the classroom as a platform for preaching your conservative ideology, which is precisely what they want to do.

Here we get to the distinction between academic freedom and the Academic Bill of Rights. Academic freedom is all about an autonomous faculty engaged in the pursuit of truth, a process of questioning and searching for answers.

Compare that to Horowitz’s goal of preaching doctrine as truth.

There are many other things wrong with Horowitz’s Academic Bill of Rights. Among the more obvious: If our colleges and universities are the breeding ground for leftist ideologues, where did the conservatives who are ruling our country come from? How about Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, to name the more obvious suspects.

And what about the proliferation of right-wing think tanks such as the Manhattan Institute, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institute, and so on almost *ad infinitum*? The preponderance of scholars at these institutions were trained at American colleges and universities. How did they all manage to escape the clutches of all their radical left-wing professors?

Hey, wasn’t Newt Gingrich a history professor before writing the Contract with America?

Forget the catchy title. The Academic Bill of Rights is nothing more than a quota system for political extremists so they can deliver their right-wing political sermons in the classroom. In case you think this version of McCarthyism has no place in the United States, think again. Several state legislatures are actually considering a bill to implement it. Closer to home, right here in New York state, SUNY Trustee Candace de Russy recently asked the SUNY Board of Trustees to adopt the Academic Bill of Rights.

But this is just the start. Legislative enactment of the Academic Bill of Rights is beside the point. Horowitz’s real goal is to scare college administrators and faculty so they are less likely to raise tough questions or discuss controversial issues in the classroom. And that’s exactly what’s happening.

Horowitz’s goal of ‘intellectual diversity’ contradicts the principle of ideological neutrality in the classroom, the bedrock of his Academic Bill of Rights.

SOURCES

AAUP Statement on The Academic Bill of Rights

AFT Resolution on the Academic Bill of Rights