

On a June evening in 1976, Senator Jim Buckley—William F. Buckley’s brother--won renomination to seek a second term, and Pat Moynihan won the Democrats’ Senate nomination.

At his headquarters, Jim said: “I congratulate PROFESSOR Moynihan and look forward to sunning against PROFESSOR Moynihan who will, I am sure, run a campaign worthy of a Harvard PROFESSOR.

Back at Pat’s headquarters, a journalist said: Pat, Jim is referring to you as “Professor Moynihan.” Pat said drolly: “Ah, the mudslinging has begun.”

This episode involved two of my friends. Jim Buckley recently celebrated his 100th birthday not far from where I live. Having Pat Moynihan as my friend was a highlight of my 53 years in Washington. I have mentioned this Buckley-Moynihan episode as a prelude to a confession.

In conformity to the rules of ruthless full disclosure, and in the spirit of today's confessional culture, I herewith acknowledge a dark secret: I once was a college professor.

As I ended my two years at Oxford, I was undecided as to whether I wanted to become an academic, as my father was, or a lawyer. So, I applied to a distinguished law school and to Princeton's philosophy PhD program.

I think I chose Princeton because it was midway between two National League baseball cities. Which gives you an idea of my academic seriousness.

But I want to establish a premise for my remarks tonight. I grew up around the campus a great Land Grant university, the University of Illinois. I have been privileged to receive degrees from two of the world's most esteemed universities. I believe that the great research universities are the finest ornaments of Western civilization.

They evolved, precariously, through 800 years of ecclesiastical and political thickets, fending off interference.

Their magnificent legacy can, however, be squandered in a generation. They can fall under the control of people unsympathetic, even hostile to, their noble and timeless mission of free and fearless inquiry and disputation.

And under the modern tenure system, this caste of hostile people can reproduce itself, reinforcing an authoritarian grip that cannot easily, if at all, be pried loose.

It is, therefore, urgent to think clearly about the intellectual sources of today's anti-intellectual distempers on campus.

And about the strange emergence of a large cohort of young people who are not only fragile and easily frightened, but are unashamedly so.

Even proudly so, advertising their susceptibility to being “triggered” by “micro-aggressions,” and by the trauma of encountering ideas they do not like.

Today, I want to acquaint them with two ideas they will not like. I will do so by explaining today’s campus turmoil with two hypotheses.

My first hypothesis is that the very idea of an open society is being rejected by people who think that such a society is a naïve—indeed, a perverse-- aspiration.

Such people are, whether they know it or not, inhabiting a dangerous, illiberal mental world that began to gain adherents two centuries ago.

My second hypothesis is that hostility to an open society appeals to people—particularly but not exclusively young people—who are haunted by an exaggerated sense of the harms from which they think they need protection.

It is because of my first hypothesis, to which I shall now turn, that such people feel constantly and permanently threatened—and justified in not tolerating those whose ideas and speech offend them.

So, to my first hypothesis.

Late in the 1940s, when American conservatism began to acquire intellectual heft, one of its canonical texts was Richard Weave's book "Ideas Have Consequences." Indeed they do. In fact, I believe that only ideas have large and lasting consequences. Today's tormented academia is the consequence of an idea.

The illiberalism permeating campuses, and engulfing some of them, is a 21st century echo of a 19th century development in political philosophy. This intellectual development was born as an explicit repudiation of the thinking of Thomas Jefferson, and hence of this nation's foundational principle.

The repudiated principle was—and is—the doctrine of natural rights.

Jefferson, in the common terminology of his day, said we are endowed by our creator with these rights. It is not, however, necessary to anchor the idea of natural rights in any theism.

Rather, it suffices to say that natural rights are those that have been found, by long historical experience, to be necessary for the flourishing of beings with our natures.

Natural rights define every person’s sovereignty. The most neglected work in the Declaration of Independence, is “secure.” Government, Jefferson wrote, is instituted to

“secure” natural rights. That is, natural rights precede, and exist independently of, government. As Georgetown law professor Randy Barnett tirelessly insists: First comes rights, then comes government.

Absent a doctrine of natural rights, rights are mere zones of sovereignty granted to individuals by the grace of government—and revocable by government.

President Calvin Coolidge spoke in Philadelphia during the 1926 celebration of the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. Coolidge said:

“About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful.”

Coolidge said: It is often asserted that new ideas have given us great advancements beyond the thinking of America's Founders. Not so, said Coolidge:

"If all men are created equal," Coolidge said, "that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final....No progress can be made beyond these propositions."

But what if there is no such thing as human nature? What if human nature is a fiction, a pre-modern superstition? What if human beings are merely creatures that take whatever shape is imposed on them by the promptings of the culture in which they are situated?

If so, then controlling the culture becomes imperative. And politics must saturate every nook and cranny of life. And this saturation means controlling what people say and hear and read and think and teach.

Shaping the consciousness of the people—purging the people of what Marxists call “false consciousness”—becomes the great, the encompassing political project.

Once curating consciousness becomes a political project, the jurisdiction of politics becomes enormous—indeed, illimitable.

And politics of consciousness promises such glittering possibilities that politics must not be circumscribed by any

limits on coercion. Particularly, any speech, any idea that contributes to false consciousness, must not be tolerated, lest progress be delayed.

So, censorship is, strictly speaking, progressive. And censorship becomes a categorical imperative when the duty to control culture is reinforced by a sense of crisis. Or, as is now constantly said, “existential crisis.”

The widespread suppression of anti-war speech during Woodrow Wilson’s “wartime fascism” was justified by equating dissent about World War One with treason threatening the nation’s life.

The “red scare” of the Palmer raids immediately after the war were fueled by continuing hysteria. As was the intolerance of dissent during the McCarthyite hysteria of the early Cold War.

Today, it is said that the “existential” crisis that justifies censorship is “systemic racism” or climate change. There will be future justifications of suppression; there always are urgent reasons given for being especially aggressive, and repressive, about keeping the culture on “the right side of history.”

Nineteenth century intellectuals who made fine-tuning everyone’s consciousness a political project also decided that

**history—History with a capital “H,” History as a proper noun—
is an autonomous thing, unfolding according to its own iron
laws.**

**These intellectuals said that a small clerisy of people like
them--people who understand History and want to be on “the
right side of history”—should govern.**

**The conception of History as an entity with a mind of its
own, as something to which intelligent people should defer
and conform, we can blame on Marx. Or we can blame Hegel
for Marx. But the man who was to wield this concept of History
as a history-making cudgel was Lenin.**

He defined the Communist Party as the “vanguard of the proletariat.” By the “vanguard” he meant the clear-sighted, thinking minority.

The party would be controlled by a cadre of advanced thinkers who are the repository of true consciousness, and diligent about stamping out false consciousness. In today’s China, which is a party-state, Marx explains nothing, Lenin explains everything.

The Leninist temptation—the totalitarian temptation-- comes in many flavors and intensities. But it always rests on a denial of human nature.

If there is no settled, fixed human nature-- if human beings are always and only creatures who are created by the marks made on them by the culture in which they are raised and live—then the stakes of politics are, always and everywhere, enormous.

They are, literally, everything—including the sort of beings that humans will be. And everything is, inevitably, politicized.

Everything: from work to leisure. What we read, what we eat, how we are entertained. And what is allowed to be said and read and thought and taught.

Ultimately, this idea is the source of totalitarianism—the totalizing of politics. Leon Trotsky understood this. He embraced Lenin’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” which he was certain would produce wonderful results.

Trotsky concluded his 1924 book “Literature and Revolution” with an ecstatic pean to a shimmering future. He said that under communism “man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become. More harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx.”

Well. Trotsky's auto-intoxication was laughable—but not funny. Scores of millions of people have died at the hands of people possessed, as Trotsky was, by the belief that human beings are mere creatures of culture, and hence are plastic to the firm touch of politics.

Again, the root of this evil of the idea that human beings are infinitely malleable because there is no human nature. That human beings are whatever the culture molds them to be.

People who believe this will naturally believe that politics can—and has a duty to—shape the culture, unimpeded by any limits on the power of the state. And they will believe that

censorship—the minute regulation of speech—must be the foundation of the state.

For people who believe, as Trotsky did, that the mission of politics is so God-like;

who believe that infinite progress is possible by pounding the public’s consciousness into a new shape congruent with the unfolding of History;

for people who believe this, no amount of coercion is unthinkable.

In fact, censorship and other coercions, in the name of idealistic intolerance, are a duty.

Which brings me my second hypothesis, which is this:

People who believe that culture determines the nature of everyone and everything,

and who therefore believe that politics must control culture—everything that is said and read and thought and taught,

such people believe that they are directly harmed by any speech and all ideas that retard progress, as they understand this.

So, they have what Jonathan Turley of George Washington University Law School calls a “license to silence.”

Such thinking is incompatible with the principle of an open society, as enunciated by John Stuart Mill in his essay “On Liberty.” Mill’s harm principle is this:

“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is...to prevent harm to others.”

Prof. Turley, writing in the Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy (“Harm and Hegemony: The Decline of Free Speech in the United States”), argues that Mill’s harm principle was intended to fend off, to stymie the enemies of free speech.

Now, however, in a perverse inversion, the harm principle is being used to empower those enemies, by this sinister reasoning:

They say that everything said or read or written or thought or taught effects the culture--the social system that envelopes, and shapes, everyone situated in it.

So, everything effects everyone's interests. So, anyone can claim to be harmed by anything said or read or written or thought or taught.

Hence unfettered discussion means that harm is potentially ubiquitous. Therefore everyone needs "safe

spaces” in which to shelter while the speech police extinguish harmful speech.

This mentality is, of course, the opposite of Jefferson’s tolerance regarding religious differences. As he famously said, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Jefferson’s laconic dismissal of the idea that he is harmed by diversity of opinion contrasts markedly with the prevailing view on campuses. There many people, young and not-so-young, cower and tremble in fear of intellectual pluralism.

I will leave it to others to explore the oddity that this is occurring simultaneously with campus “diversity” bureaucracies sprouting like invasive, fast-growing kudzu.

I have returned to where I began, to academia.

I began my remarks today by citing Pat Moynihan’s good-natured response to Jim Buckley’s good-natured teasing of Pat for being professor. I will close with an observation.

Beginning with the arrival of the Kennedy administration in 1961, Washington was, for a while, enamored of academic luminaries. Of whom there many: Moynihan himself, his Harvard colleagues John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger, the Rostow and Bundy brothers, Eric Goldman,

George Shultz, James Schlesinger, Henry Kissinger, Edward Levi, who left the presidency of the University of Chicago to become Gerald Ford's attorney general, and many more.

Today is different. There still are academics serving Washington, but eminent academics are no longer as coveted as they once were for the prestige they conferred as ornaments in several administrations.

Academia has squandered its prestige by seeming to adopt an adversarial stance toward American society. And toward its traditional values, including those affirmed by the First Amendment—which is first in the Bill of Rights for a reason.

Everything, from the pursuit of truth to the pursuit of happiness, depends on freedom of speech and inquiry. Especially on campuses. Especially by those who espouse ideas that challenge majority orthodoxies that, when unchallenged, become lazy and stale. And bullying.

So, a final word about majorities, and majority rule.

I grew up in Central Illinois, in the twin-cities of Champaign-Urbana, home of the University of Illinois. According to local lore, it was in the Champaign County courthouse in 1854 that a prosperous railroad lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, learned that Illinois'

Senator Steven Douglas had succeeded in passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Act was intended to solve the explosive problem of whether the territories that were not yet states would, or would not, allow slavery. Douglas' solution was "popular sovereignty in the territories. Let the people of the territories decide.

Douglas, and the many who supported him, said: Vote slavery up or vote slavery down—the outcome is, if not a matter of moral indifference, morally secondary. The important thing was that the principle of majority rule—the

principle that Douglas and many considered the essence of the American project—should prevail.

Lincoln’s ascent to greatness began with his instant, implacable, and canny opposition to such thinking. America, he said, is not about a process, majority rule. Rather, America is about a condition, liberty.

Lincoln did not say, but could have, that a written constitution is a counter-majoritarian instrument. It circumscribes the power—the sweep--of majorities.

The First Amendment says Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech. No law. No matter how many people might want one.

The First Amendment was produced by a Virginian (and, I say proudly, a Princetonian) James Madison. It was written to implement the natural rights philosophy that was given imperishable articulation by the founder of the University of Virginia.

So, it is altogether fitting and proper that, given impetus by the Jefferson Council, this university can spearhead a nationwide rebirth of freedom—the freedom that matters most, because all others depend on it: the freedom of speech.

For the privilege of speaking here at the Council's invitation, I thank it, and you.