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By

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Seven years ago, as Newt Gingrich and his gang rushed headlong into what soon proved to be a hilariously short-lived "revolution," yours truly begged to differ. In this space I argued that "conservatism" in America had evolved from Abraham Lincoln's succinct definition -- "adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried" -- into a new radicalism obsessed with taxes and "big government," a "revolution" characterized by "avarice, jingoism, intolerance, boosterism, moral relativism, religiosity and just plain meanness."

The "revolution" is ended, but the nastiness lingers. However staunchly and responsibly the current "conservative" administration may be prosecuting the war on terrorism, on the home front it is the same old same old: madly lobbying for an "economic stimulus" bill that is nothing except a Christmas tree laden with goodies for bloated corporations and individuals, harassing the innocent in pursuit of the guilty, tabling the civil liberties of the many to punish the few. It's an ugly sight, and for those of us who fancy ourselves conservatives in the, uh, conservative sense of the term, an embarrassment.

Yet there is one place in American life where conservatism still means what it is meant to, and it is the unlikeliest place imaginable. In response to the tidal wave of leftist insanity that has washed over the professoriat for the past three decades, a movement is taking shape to defend the campuses against the many dreadful developments that wave has brought: the politicization of the arts and humanities, the abandonment of

the core curriculum, the suppression of dissent against leftist orthodoxy, political correctness in all its insidious and destructive forms.

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A couple of weeks ago I took note of the admirable work being done by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which has been monitoring violations of free-speech rights that have been committed on the campuses since Sept. 11, mostly against faculty and students who have had the effrontery to speak out against terrorism and in favor of the military action in Afghanistan. Now comes the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) with a report called "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It," which proves to be even more encyclopedic than FIRE's various accounts of the free-speech scandals.

ACTA was founded six years ago by Lynne Cheney, who now serves as its chairman emeritus. This is both good and bad: Good because Cheney is smart, principled, articulate and courageous, bad because Cheney's strong ties to the Republican Party and the right make her a lightning rod for the academic left. It reflexively dismisses ACTA as a front for Cheney and her allegedly right-wing agenda, which means that the serious issues she and her colleagues raise -- usually in measured, balanced language, with respect for opposing views -- are rarely given fair consideration on the campuses. It is a safe bet that few there will bring open minds to ACTA's most recent report, which says among other things:

"Although most faculty presumably shared America's horror and condemnation of the terrorist attacks, some did not. And while professors should be passionately defended in their right to academic freedom, that does not exempt them from criticism. The fact remains that academe is the only sector of American society that is distinctly divided in its response. Indeed, expressions of pervasive moral relativism are a staple of academic life in this country and an apparent symptom of an educational system which has increasingly suggested that Western civilization is the primary source of the world's ills -- even though it gave us the ideals of democracy, human rights, individual liberty and mutual tolerance."

It was ACTA, you may recall, that nearly two years ago issued "Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century," in which it was conclusively demonstrated that the most prestigious colleges and universities in the country -- among them Amherst, Brown, Duke, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, Rice, Stanford, Vassar and Yale -- do not require undergraduates to study history or Western civilization. It is possible, the report documented in chilling detail, to receive a diploma from these and many other major institutions without knowing basics of American history, i.e., that it was George Washington, not Ulysses S. Grant, who led Revolutionary forces at the Battle of Yorktown.

The report got a lot of attention when it was released in February 2000, no doubt because we bubbleheaded journalists cannot resist news bites such as that one or the many others the report offered. Everyone was duly scandalized and no one did anything, almost certainly because the primary aim of undergraduate education is now to rake in tuition and fees, which means it is to the colleges' advantage to placate and amuse students rather than challenge them intellectually.

Yet despite this and other daunting obstacles, the movement against ideology and complacency on campus steadily gains in membership and momentum. Among the most important organizations fighting the good fight are the American Academy for Liberal Education, the Association for Core Texts and Courses, the Historical Society, the Association for Art History, the Foundation for Academic Standards and Tradition and -- perhaps preeminently -- the National Association of Scholars. All have Web sites, links to which are provided by ACTA at www.goacta.org. All in their different ways share ACTA's commitment "to support liberal arts education, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives a philosophically-balanced, open-minded, high-quality education at an affordable price." Now get this: There are on campus many people, many in positions of great influence, who are *against* all that.

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