

Dec. 8

The Culture Wars of 2005

The conservative journal *The New Criterion* is the last place you'd expect to find any gratitude for Ward Churchill. But writing there this summer, Roger Kimball found a "bright side" to the controversial University of Colorado professor: He brought more scrutiny to higher education.

In an essay called "Retaking the University: A Battle Plan," Kimball writes that "one of the chief tasks for critics of what has happened to academic life in this country is to show the extent to which Ward Churchill" is not unusual, but is "the predictable result of institutions that have gradually abandoned their commitment to education for the sake of radical posturing."

The public revulsion to Churchill's statements — especially his comparison of those who died in the World Trade Center on 9/11 to "little Eichmanns" — is "good news," Kimball writes, in that it suggests that higher education "may be about to change."

Kimball isn't the only one who thinks that the battles in academe over the last year may add up to something far more significant than the question of whether Churchill can hang on to his tenure, whether a new course on intelligent design is ever offered at the University of Kansas, or whether universities hire more conservatives.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a group that pushes for a traditional curriculum, says that she believes we are "either approaching or at a tipping point" in terms of public attitudes about higher education, adding that "in looking at the issues of concern to us, we're seeing a real response and receptivity unlike any I've seen before."

From a different perspective, Cary Nelson, the Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says he sees "an emerging discomfort with faculty free speech," especially on issues related to Iraq, terrorism and certain other topics. He thinks that the issues on which academics are finding themselves on the defensive today are much more combustible politically than the issues for which conservatives attacked academe in previous rounds of culture wars.

"The culture wars of the '80s were really a kind of backwater. How much Shakespeare was or was not being taught wasn't a big issue to an awful lot of Americans, so a lot of the culture wars were really

just an amusing bit of public entertainment," he says.

Now, with colleges being criticized for the views of Ward Churchill (whose views aren't exactly mainstream even among the more liberal parts of academe), for dissent on Iraq, for defending evolution, the issues being talked about are much more central to many more people. "I really fear tolerance for free speech and criticism is going to decline rapidly," he says.

Alan I. Leshner, chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says that at no point in his adult lifetime has he seen attacks on science, and on the universities that perform science, that are as serious as those today. While modern American history has had plenty of "blips" in the relationship between science and religion, there is a "substantial tension" today that is dangerous, Leshner says.

Welcome to the culture wars of 2005, where most of the fighting has not been about great books or even multiculturalism, but about politics, terrorism, war and peace, religion, God and evolution.

To recap some of the greatest hits.... [The Churchill furor](#) started in January. Even though he has been a regular on the campus speaking circuit for years, some critics of a planned talk at Hamilton College circulated copies of one of his more inflammatory essays and all of the sudden everyone knew about him. The Hamilton center that invited Churchill has now [lost most of its budget authority](#) and Churchill faces [an investigation in Colorado](#) that may cost him his tenure — not for his statements, but for alleged research misconduct that he denies.

As the Churchill controversy grew, three social scientists released a study [charging that academics leaned far to the left](#) and that conservatives and Christians had a hard time being hired as professors. That study was promptly disputed by other scholars, who said it was simplistic and part of a [well financed conservative campaign to discredit academe](#).

The debates over Ward Churchill and professors' political leanings were a great platform for David Horowitz, the '60s radical-turned-conservative activist, who won hearings, a (non binding and watered down) [place](#) in the current versions of the Higher Education Act, and a few [legislative victories](#) for his "Academic Bill of Rights," which he said protected students, and which many faculty members said was designed to take away their freedom of expression. Horowitz told anyone who would listen about cases in which students were punished for, to cite one of his favorite examples, defending President Bush — although some of his examples [didn't exactly check out](#).

As the year went on, [Christian schools sued the University of California](#) for not counting high school courses based on creationism or intelligent design as biology, the university's [Berkeley campus was sued](#) because it maintains a Web site to help teachers understand evolution, the University of Kansas found itself first announcing and then [withdrawing a course](#) on intelligent design amid criticism about a professor who mocked fundamentalists and Roman Catholics, and many Dartmouth College students were offended by [a convocation speech about Jesus](#).

As 2005 drew to a close, a professor sued Indiana University of Pennsylvania after he was denied

tenure, he says, for [maintaining a death count](#) on the war in Iraq, and an adjunct quit suddenly at Warren County Community College, in New Jersey, amid [a flap over harsh anti-war statements](#) he made in an e-mail message to a student.

So how do all of these incidents — and numerous others — define the culture wars of 2005?

Gregory S. Jay, director of the Cultures and Communities Program at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, says that he believes the last big round of the culture wars about higher education raged in the 1980s and early '90s — when critics like William Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney regularly gave talks blasting colleges for their curriculums. "I think that attempt by conservatives ended in part because of the structural protections that many academics have in tenure," Jay says.

As a result, he argues, conservatives attacked higher education indirectly in the '90s and the first part of this decade through "defunding" public colleges and creating an economic situation where the proportion of tenure-track positions declined. So now, as cultural attacks on colleges are renewed, Jay says, academe finds itself with a less secure financial base and many professors don't have any meaningful job security.

Others see what is going on now as but the latest sign of a conflict that is centuries old. James Davison Hunter, who teaches sociology and religious studies at the University of Virginia, says that "this kind of conflict is always just beneath the surface of public life and is driven by competing visions of a good society."

Hunter, author of *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America* and *Culture War*, traces the splits over academe (and society broadly) back to Europe, to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and the clerics of the *ancien regime*. "This isn't driven by issues," he says. "Issues like intelligent design and the war are manifestations of this deeper debate."

Still others see the serious issues in the country — such as terrorism and the war in Iraq — as being responsible for much of the ideological debate today, although people arrive at that conclusion in different ways.

Roger Bowen, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, says that when things aren't going well for conservatives — say a war without victory in sight, a deficit increasing at shocking rates, indictments of prominent Republicans — higher education is a useful whipping boy.

"As a way of deflecting attention from real problems, cultural warriors look to the universities, which are staffed by free-thinking people, and people who are willing to say that the emperor is naked, and attack. It allows them to stay on the offensive," Bowen says. Since conservatives now control the White House, both houses of Congress, and the courts, they have a more difficult time explaining away the flaws in the country, he asserts.

"Look at the historical anti-intellectualism in America and the mistrust of the academy, and we are an easy target," he says.

Neal of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni sees the impact of terrorism and war in a different way. She notes that Ward Churchill was saying "outrageous things" before September 11 and yet the public never noticed. While Neal says that professors "have a right to express their views, however ludicrous they may be," she says it's also appropriate to counter those views and to ask whether only certain sets of views are presented to students.

In the wake of 9/11, with a war going on, and people more concerned about terrorism generally, she says, there may be more willingness to challenge professors. "I think that when it's a matter of life and death, people tend to look at a topic in a different way. Certainly Ward Churchill got more attention in light of 9/11 and succeeding events than he would have otherwise," Neal says. "What's happened is that if faculty were saying outrageous things in the past, perhaps we didn't notice it."

If the war and 9/11 are relatively recent, some of the issues that are now in the forefront of attention — God and evolution — are hardly recent developments. So why are so many religious leaders questioning science and research universities right now, prompting some researchers to become harshly critical of the activities of some religious groups?

Robert C. Andringa, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, says that the growing divide between religious America and researchers in America shouldn't be happening. "For much of history, science has been carried out enthusiastically by people of faith," he says. Those who suggest that one must make a choice between science and religion are creating "an ill-conceived, arbitrary and unfortunate separation."

Andringa says that there are people in the churches and in the academy who are creating divisions.

"As a person who takes my faith seriously, I am appalled sometimes at the insensitive, aggressive and disrespectful way in which some in the religious right express their opposition to those who differ. I don't think that's the model of Christ, and I think we are called actually in the Bible to be ministers of reconciliation, to think more highly of others than ourselves, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, and some of these good lessons are sadly lost on some people who are engaging in these culture wars," he says.

At the same time, he adds that "there is a perception and unfortunately I think it's accurate in many cases that intellectuals today are advocates of diversity until it comes to religion," and that academe — including secular academe — needs to give more thoughtful consideration to religious issues. "To be intellectually honest, one has to look at the world, and say a majority of the people of the world are religious. how can we carry on the work of the academy without trying to understand that world?" he says.

Leshner, of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, echoes Andringa, noting that most religious people have no trouble with science and that many scientists take faith seriously. He would like people to see science and religion as "different," but not competing, domains.

Some of the tensions around science today — such as those involving stem cell research — reflect relatively recent scientific advances. But Leshner says flatly that he does not know why evolution has come under such attack now. He says that university scientists “have a tremendous need for engagement” with religious groups of all denominations to repair the damage that is going on now, but he adds that “most people don’t know how to go about having that discussion.”

The impact of the intensified culture wars is negative in many ways, scholars say. Bowen of the AAUP says that academics nationwide are being smeared when people like Kimball imply that a Ward Churchill reflects the views of many professors. “I wouldn’t call Churchill a liberal academic. I’d call him an extremist, just as I think Horowitz is an extremist. They both use inflated language and see a lot of conspiracies. It’s unfortunate,” Bowen says.

He adds that this kind of smearing has an impact, with a declining respect for professors making it possible for legislators to ignore important needs in higher education and to question tenure.

Bowen also says that many people who are attacked find themselves unable to fight back. The professor at Warren County Community College, for example, had what many considered to be a good defense. While the e-mail he sent might have appeared rude if he had known he was sending it to a student, he thought he was sending it to an activist with a national conservative organization and not to a student. That defense never was heard by most people, Bowen says, because the professor was an adjunct and didn’t have the means to fight.

“I think there is greater vulnerability in that the poor fellow in New Jersey was a contingent faculty — part time. He didn’t have any protection,” Bowen says. And most administrators feel that they can’t afford a controversy. “There is an automatic fear that if there is controversy on our campus, I may lose support of administrators and legislators,” he says.

Jay says that periods like the one academe is in now encourage professors — especially those without tenure — to keep quiet. “I think we’ve institutionalized a certain self-censorship in the academy. I think people are more careful about what they say,” he says, especially with so few people getting a shot at tenure. “Tenure and promotion committees are still feared, and people look at what’s going on and don’t want to give the other side cannon fodder.”

“I see real regression on many issues,” Jay says, and for all the complaints about liberal academe, “I see a more conservative climate than we had 10 years ago.”

To get out of the current situation, some say that colleges need to take more of a role in not just being a place for people to express opinions of all types, but in shaping debates. Andringa of the Christian colleges group says that he thinks about this issue a lot because his membership — while thought of by many academics as conservative — includes colleges affiliated with pacifist faiths that find themselves dissenters about the war in Iraq.

Colleges generally have people who dissent from popular views, he says, but too frequently, the public hears only the dissent and only the more extreme dissent.

"It seems to me that any educational institution in any community should say, 'We are the ones who foster dialogue over tough issues, so we are going to be very thoughtful in how we create forums for both sides, for all sides,'" he says. If colleges more actively created such forums, he says, people might not associate colleges with just one point of view and — perhaps more importantly — people would leave such forums with new ideas to think about.

But Andringa says he sees few colleges doing this. "I think the vocal anti-war faculty find their own platforms with blogs or classrooms or columns in the local paper, which may give a bad rap to the whole institution," he says. "Why should a university depend on rallies organized by one side or another rather than having a president say, 'This is one of the big issues of our time, so let's discuss it.'"

Others agree, and many educators say that the solution is more civility and more of an attempt to find reasoned middle ground on tough issues. But while no academics are coming out against civility, some worry that calls for reasoned debate can also be a way of encouraging a blandness of opinion and take away the role of academics in raising tough issues that others might ignore.

Nelson of Illinois, author of *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* and other books about higher education, says that in times like these, many people — including many faculty members — want professors to speak with "sweet reasonableness."

But such an approach limits the role of professors, he says. In the classroom, he says, professors frequently "take an outrageous position to get people talking," and such a technique works. Faculty members who want to be public intellectuals shouldn't be afraid to do the same thing, he says.

"I think there is utility to public statements that are sometimes surreal and outrageous," he says. "Clearly debate can be provoked by statements and I'd to think that faculty members can't play the game of strategically offending people. We do that in the classroom. Why can't we use that in the public sphere?"

— [Scott Jaschik](#)