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A Not-So-Professorial Watchdog

Anne Neal has never worked at a college, but she has become a leading critic of left-wing faculty members

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Cambridge, Mass.

On a bright fall day last month, professors and their guests gathered for lunch here in the elegantly decorated dining rooms of the Harvard University Faculty Club. But up the grand spiral staircase, a whole different kind of meeting was taking place.

Welcoming people to the library room was Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. She is no friend of Harvard professors. Just last winter Ms. Neal ripped into them when they helped force the ouster of Lawrence H. Summers, criticizing them as "politically correct" and saying it was Harvard professors, not the president, who deserved a "vote of no confidence."

Yet here were Ms. Neal and her compatriots, "in the belly of the beast," as one of her aides described it, holding her organization's annual round-table discussion on higher education.

The meeting was an allegory of the role Ms. Neal has taken on as an outside critic who is also gradually becoming a major player within the higher-education establishment. Her 11-year-old group, based in Washington, counts trustees and alumni as its chief constituents. But Ms. Neal has become a self-styled watchdog of the professoriate, criticizing faculty members for taking advantage of their academic freedom by offering what the council sees as ideologically tinged courses on race and gender. And while she has slammed colleges for failing to curb grade inflation and for keeping military recruiters off campus, she has called a lack of intellectual diversity the "most serious challenge for higher education today."

Still, at the council's annual meeting she brushed off the obvious question: What was a woman like her doing in a place like this?

Ms. Neal was quick to point out that ACTA is "not a protest group." Given the tug of war between professors and Mr. Summers, she said, Harvard was a natural place to meet. "There are many *good* things about higher education," she told the 100 or so people gathered at the Faculty Club. "But it is complacent and in need of reform."

Tempering her criticism with compliments has helped earn Ms. Neal wary recognition from some in higher education. Michael Bérubé, a professor of English on Pennsylvania State University's main campus and a well-known liberal commentator, calls Ms. Neal a "more serious and substantial opponent of academic freedom" than most other critics.

She has worked her way into the national debate — testifying before the Senate Finance Committee, contributing to the deliberations of the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education, and writing about academic freedom for the journal of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

"Anne Neal is a legitimate player," says Gordon G. Brittan Jr., a philosophy professor at Montana State University at Bozeman who invited her to the campus last March to speak during a forum on academic freedom. "There is a concern about what's going on in the classroom, and Anne is expressing what a number of parents who are increasingly shouldering college bills are worried about."

But make no mistake, says Roger W. Bowen, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors: Ms. Neal is dangerous. "Anne is on a mission from God to remake the academy in the image of conservative values," he says. "She is part of a larger, national campaign to take over higher education and influence its agenda. If you're conservative, you say, 'We've got the White House. We've got the courts. We've got Congress. What we don't have is higher education, and if we want to control the country, that's where we have to implant ourselves.'"

Force to Be Reckoned With

The AAUP is the nation's largest faculty group, with more than 45,000 members. To his credit, Mr. Bowen invited Ms. Neal to its annual meeting, in June. The month before, on its blog, the council had started an occasional feature called AAUP Watch, to chronicle what it believes are the organization's missteps. "Keeping the AAUP Honest" was the headline on an article announcing the feature in the council's quarterly newsletter.

Leaders of the AAUP seemed understandably apprehensive about her presence. Not that she is physically imposing: A slight, small-boned woman with an outsized laugh that occasionally peals into a cackle, Ms. Neal typically speaks in careful, measured sentences. Still, she did not hold back at the AAUP meeting, standing up during one session to challenge the group with numbers

from its own poll. The AAUP had just released a survey that, it bragged, showed that most Americans did not find political bias in the classroom the most important issue facing higher education ([The Chronicle](#), June 16).

Ms. Neal accused the association of having an "ostrichlike reaction" to the numbers. She pointed out that more than one-third of the public was concerned about professors' political bias, and that half of those questioned believed that academic standards were low.

"They were trying to dismiss this thing as a tempest in a teapot," Ms. Neal recalls. "But looking at their own numbers suggested quite the contrary."

Later on at the AAUP meeting, the featured luncheon speaker, Stanley N. Katz, president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies, did not mince words. He said he considered Ms. Neal's group to be a "hostile organization." He went on: "We have to be prepared to know who our enemies are." He even questioned why Ms. Neal was part of the higher-education debate. "She represents only a couple of hundred people," he said. (ACTA says it has supporters — including alumni and trustees — from more than 695 colleges.) But that Ms. Neal was a topic of discussion at all seemed to prove that she has become a force to be reckoned with.

How exactly has that happened? After all, Ms. Neal, who is 51, does not have one iota of academic experience. She doesn't hold a Ph.D. and has never been a professor. She has never even served as a college trustee. She is a Harvard-educated lawyer who is married to Thomas E. Petri, a Republican representative from Fond du Lac, Wis., who was first elected to Congress in 1979.

But, says Ms. Neal, you don't have to be an academic insider to issue well-informed critiques. "There's a traditional concept that anyone who's not in the academy should just leave well enough alone," she says. "But that kind of a response underscores the insularity of those inside the academy, which is part of the issue we're trying to address."

While Ms. Neal is not an academic, she is a serious student of American history and architecture. She has headed a decade-long effort at Washington's National Cathedral to restore woodlands designed by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and has done extensive research on the Olmsted collection at the Library of Congress.

She also is an ardent admirer of George Washington, whose civic involvement, good judgment, and sense of discipline, she believes, are vastly underappreciated. Her office, in a modern building in downtown Washington, is stuffed with drawings, figurines, and other likenesses of the founding father. On one wall hangs a framed copy of a little red book called *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, which Washington wrote when he was 16

years old.

Her interest personifies her organization's own convictions, including its call for a return to basics in higher education. In 2000, Ms. Neal wrote an ACTA report called "Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century." The group had commissioned a survey of college seniors and found that 81 percent of them could not identify Valley Forge, passages from the Gettysburg Address, or the principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Ms. Neal's respect for the Constitution, specifically the First Amendment, was fostered during her childhood, in Indiana, where her father was owner and editor of a small-town newspaper called the *Noblesville Daily Ledger*. When Ms. Neal was 10 years old, a local judge tried unsuccessfully to jail her father for contempt after he wrote a column criticizing the judge.

The experience helped propel Ms. Neal, who graduated from Harvard Law School in 1980, into a career as a First Amendment lawyer in New York. Later she took a job with the Recording Industry Association of America, where she put forward the industry's position in one of the most contentious free-speech battles of the 1980s, over the labeling of lyrics. It pitted her against parents and legislators who wanted to protect children by putting warning labels on recordings that dealt explicitly with sex and violence.

With her pearls and cashmere sweaters, Ms. Neal struck a somewhat discordant note as she brushed shoulders with the musicians Sting, Rosanne Cash, and Rodney Crowell, among others. "In a way it worked, though," she says, "because I was against type, and for this particular purpose it was very valuable." In the end, she and the recording industry prevailed.

'Threats From Within'

Ms. Neal's initiation into the world of higher education began in the early 1990s when she worked as general counsel to the National Endowment for the Humanities under the chairman, Lynne V. Cheney, who had criticized professors for using humanities classrooms to advance what she saw as their left-wing political agendas.

In 1995, Mrs. Cheney — with money from conservative groups like the now-defunct John M. Olin Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation — helped start the National Alumni Forum. Ms. Neal was with the organization from the beginning, working alongside Jerry L. Martin, a former philosophy professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In January 1998, they changed

the group's name to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

The group's Web site says it was founded to "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."

The organization trains trustees to be watchful stewards through its Institute for Effective Governance. But in the past few years, ACTA has turned a spotlight on the classroom and on professors. "I increasingly became concerned," says Ms. Neal, "that the greatness of higher education was being challenged by threats from within."

At the heart of the problem, she believes, is how the professoriate regards the concept of academic freedom. Faculty members too often use it as a "sword" to keep outside critics away, she says, while failing to accept the responsibility that comes along with it.

"Academic freedom does not mean anything goes in the classroom, and our concern is that increasingly that has been the message," says Ms. Neal. "Professors have limited amounts of time, and they must stick to material that has met accepted scholarly standards."

That is precisely where she believes that the American Association of University Professors has gone astray. To make her case, she frequently refers to its own originating 1915 "Declaration of Principles" on academic freedom, which she says clearly tells professors to keep their political views to themselves.

It reads: "The university teacher ... should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine ... " and "should, above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves."

Ms. Neal calls it "the essential statement on academic responsibility." Then with a smile, she adds: "This is something I keep around and look at all the time. Our only hope is that the AAUP will begin to reread it."

The AAUP's Mr. Bowen says the 1915 statement, with its portrayal of students as "immature and vulnerable," is outdated. Cary Nelson, a professor of arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who is president of the association, agrees. "I don't find students quite so malleable and permeable as ACTA seems to think," he says. "They have opinions on just about everything from the get-go."

Mr. Nelson says he frequently expresses his views in the classroom and expects students to challenge him. "I think that helps train them to be critical thinkers," he says.

Deciding what belongs in the classroom and what doesn't, Mr. Bowen argues, is not as easy as Ms. Neal believes. "Anne has never taught a class, and she doesn't know the dynamics," he says. For example, the council has criticized the AAUP this year for failing to come down hard on professors in Wisconsin and New Hampshire who have endorsed September 11 conspiracy theories in the classroom.

But Mr. Bowen says sometimes such a discussion is relevant. "What if you're teaching a psychology course? I think you could make the case that conspiracy theories are an interesting aspect of mass psychology. Thus far the evidence for these theories is lacking, but does that make discussion of that out of bounds? I don't think so."

In 2005, ACTA issued a report called "Intellectual Diversity: Time for Action." It emphasizes some of the same points that the conservative activist David Horowitz has made in his effort to police what he calls the left-wing political bias in academe. But Ms. Neal's critiques have generally been more measured, and she keeps her distance from him.

"We certainly have crossed paths," she says of Mr. Horowitz, who is considered bombastic by many in academe. "But he does his thing, and we do ours." Her organization, she says, takes a different approach, asking universities to fix the problem themselves rather than, as Mr. Horowitz has, calling on legislators to force a change. Indeed, the council's 2005 report strikes a conciliatory tone, offering a set of "practical suggestions" that colleges can use to assess "the current state of intellectual diversity on campus."

Perhaps that is why some in higher education were flabbergasted when ACTA issued another report, in May, called "How Many Ward Churchills?" It contends that Mr. Churchill, the University of Colorado professor who referred to some victims of the World Trade Center attacks as "little Eichmanns," is far from alone in his beliefs. "The kinds of politically extreme opinions for which he has become justly infamous," says the report, are "enthusiastically embraced" by academe.

The report lists course after course to prove, it says, that professors are "displaying an ideological slant" in the classroom. "Indoctrination," the report concludes, "is replacing education."

The report was met with howls throughout academe, echoing across Web sites and the blogosphere. Timothy Burke, an associate professor of history at Swarthmore College, was among those who ripped into it on his blog. In an interview, he explains that he was jolted by the "Churchill" indictment because it departs from other ACTA reports, which he says are "sober, collegial, and offer more careful conclusions."

To Mr. Nelson, likening Mr. Churchill's remarks to what goes on in classrooms across the country is ridiculous. The report, he says, reveals the council's desire "to return to a 19th-century state of knowledge." The kinds of teaching that the report lambastes — including an anthropology course on Mr. Nelson's campus that examines "racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and other stereotypical ideologies of 'the Other'" — aren't wacky or way-out, he says: "These are fundamental conclusions of central academic disciplines, positions that have evolved over time." The Churchill report, he adds, "is sort of a rejection of modern life."

Ms. Neal says critics of the report have overreacted, displaying the well-worn professorial attitude that "no one outside the ivory tower understands academics," that "outsiders are not qualified to judge or scrutinize or question." The council's report, she says, did not endorse censoring professors or outlawing academic freedom. "Somehow people who disagree with our suggestions that things might be improved like to call us names — censors, intemperate, or McCarthyite," she says. "It seems that reaction is designed to shut down the conversation that needs to be had."

But Alan P. Jones, dean of faculty at Pitzer College, argues that the report says as much about Ms. Neal as it does about academe. "She presents herself in the context of a legitimate and unbiased organization," says Mr. Jones, who criticized the report in an online essay. "But ACTA has roots in organizations that are very partisan, and their funding is very conservative."

Indeed, some of Ms. Neal's critics accuse her of trying to camouflage her organization's right-wing roots. She frequently describes ACTA as "bipartisan," offering up the fact that Democrats were among its founders. They include Joseph I. Lieberman, the senator from Connecticut who lost the Democratic primary election in August mainly because he supported the war in Iraq.

She also points out that her organization's meeting at Harvard this fall attracted both Democrats and Republicans, with a variety of perspectives. Labeling her organization "conservative," she says, amounts to an effort to discount it.

Ms. Neal does little, however, to publicize her own links to the Republican Party and to ideological conservatives. She campaigned for President Ronald Reagan and worked for two years as a lawyer in his administration.

Absent from her professional biography is any mention of the year or so she spent during the mid-1990s as a fellow with the Discovery Institute, a think tank that has become well known for challenging evolutionary theory and pushing schools to teach the alternative idea of intelligent design. Ms. Neal says she took the fellowship to work on a newsletter for college trustees, an effort she later moved to ACTA. Since then, she says, she has had nothing to do with the institute.

There is also the matter of her being the wife of a Republican congressman. Ms. Neal says she and Mr. Petri, who have been married for 23 years, "keep our professional lives separate," although she does help him campaign in Wisconsin. (In fact, to many people there she is known by a different name — Dede Petri.) Her organization, she says, does not take much advantage of any entree her husband's position might provide in Washington. "ACTA does not as a general matter look to the federal government as an answer to the problems we're addressing," she says.

When Ms. Neal and Representative Petri are at their Georgetown home in Washington, they have focused on creating a family life for their only child, Alexandra. This fall, though, she went off to college. (When it came to choosing a campus, she let her parents know that while her mother might be "in the business," Alexandra wanted to make her own decisions.) Her departure has left at home just Ms. Neal, Mr. Petri, and their overzealous English bulldog, Ketcham.

One night in September, a few weeks after Ms. Neal had driven Alexandra to college, she and her husband sat down at home to watch their daughter on television. She was a contestant on *Jeopardy*.

The couple already knew the outcome. Ms. Neal had accompanied her daughter to Hollywood in August for the taping. She recalls being so nervous sitting in the audience that she didn't even try to think of the correct responses. "I just decided to look at the floor," she says.

Alexandra has always been a high achiever. She plays the accordion, competed in the Maryland Mathematics League, wrote prize-winning poetry, and earned perfect scores on the SAT — twice. But although she did well enough in a *Jeopardy* category called "math jokes" to be leading with \$3,400 at the first commercial break, in the end she was outmatched by her older opponents and came away with just \$2,000. "I'm hoping," says Ms. Neal, "that it goes toward college tuition."

And where does a chief critic of higher education send her super-smart daughter? To Harvard, of course, even though it earned a D on ACTA's 2004 "core curriculum report card."

It was the only place Alexandra applied.

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