



Free speech again quashed at Harvard

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By HARVEY SILVERGLATE | October 21, 2009

It should come as no surprise to readers of “Freedom Watch” that yet another instance of political, intellectual, and academic censorship has sprung up at Harvard, the self-touted pinnacle of higher education.

Last week, the Harvard Undergraduate Legal Committee withdrew an invitation to the founder of the controversial Minuteman Project, Jim Gilchrist, to be a panelist at its upcoming conference on immigration. Gilchrist is a strong proponent of severe restrictions on immigration, including arming citizens to round up those who enter the country illegally. In February, he was part of a Harvard Law School panel discussion on border security and immigration reform.

This latest example of blatant censorship and narrow-mindedness at Harvard was justified by an undergraduate who told the Boston Globe (in a line that typifies modern academic repression), “It’s a victory for people who are trying to get hate out of the immigration debate. There’s a difference between having views and hate speech.”

Of course, there absolutely is no such difference — the Supreme Court has held that “hate speech” is constitutionally protected. Besides, by extending the initial invitation, the group conceded that Gilchrist was worth listening to. The ground for disinviting him was clearly related to disagreement with his point of view.

But what can you expect, given that the speech code in effect at Harvard College, devised by the administration and approved by the faculty, prohibits “using racial stereotypes” or “verbal comments or suggestions” of a sexual nature?

How do these codes play into the current contretemps? At Harvard and on campuses across the country, students are the new speech police. Censorship — not more speech — is the weapon of choice against viewpoints with which they disagree. The restrictive policies implemented a generation ago by administrators, and allowed by faculty, are now bearing the fruit of student self-censorship. In the marketplace of ideas, you don’t learn how to offer a superior product by forcing your opponents off of the shelf.

We as a nation may one day resolve the highly contentious immigration problem that so divides the American people: how and where we should draw a line against people seeking liberty and opportunity in what once was called the New World — people very much like our own ancestors. But it is becoming clearer with time that the answers are not going to come from academia, where a free and honest discussion is no longer permitted.