



Warding off attack: Attempts to stifle one professor's notorious opinions showcase the hypocrisy of American academe

BY HARVEY A. SILVERGLATE AND DAN POULSON

It would be tempting to pity Ward Churchill, if he were a more sympathetic character. It seems that whenever he opens his mouth these days, someone gets upset. Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, became engulfed in national controversy in early January, when an essay he wrote three years ago came to light. In the essay, he compared victims of the September 11 attacks to Nazi functionaries who were appropriate targets for retaliatory violence. Since then, there have been cries from politicians (including Colorado's governor), academics, and pundits (led by Fox News's Bill O'Reilly), demanding that Churchill be fired. Colleges where he was scheduled to speak have cited "security threats" as reasons to cancel his engagements; commentators and politicians have called him "vile" and a "bigoted terrorist supporter" whose speech should not be protected by the First Amendment.

Unsurprisingly, given the two-decades-long deterioration of free speech on American college campuses, the University of Colorado is taking the safest route. Rather than fire the tenured professor, the board of regents proposed that the university conduct a 30-day investigation of Churchill's scholarship to determine whether he should be dismissed for academic failures (in contrast to obnoxious opinions). One regent went so far as to ask "whether or not it is necessary to eliminate courses and departments of questionable academic merit." Passed off as a reasonable, if shrewd, compromise, the sudden investigation into the merits of Professor Churchill's academic work is in truth a flimsy excuse for an unconstitutional witch-hunt. And ironically, the academic left — of which Churchill is obviously a part — is at least partly to blame, with its own decades-long witch-hunts against conservatives in the name of "multiculturalism," "diversity," and "progressive" political values. Now, the academic left's politically motivated censorship campaign and the abject administrative cowardice that has allowed it to flourish have come home to roost. And given the even longer history of right-wing

witch-hunts in this country, it should come as no shock that patriotism would become one of those values over which it's okay to persecute a dissenter.

CHURCHILL, a militant quasi-Marxist and Native American-rights activist, is not a terrorist. He's just one of many careerist radicals whose politics are sufficiently provocative to earn him the praise of clueless leftist academics on the one hand, and the fury of gutless university administrators on the other. Moreover, while officials at the University of Colorado claim not to have been aware of Churchill's politics, it is abundantly clear that his advancement to the position of full professor (with only a master's degree, mind you) was not hindered by his radicalism, and may even have depended on it, regardless of the quality of his academic work. Churchill may or may not be an idiot, but a whole bevy of idiots ensured his success in academe.

Indeed, the "bevy of idiots" explanation for Churchill's meteoric rise was confirmed this past Tuesday by Colorado law professor Paul Campos, who wrote in the Rocky Mountain News that the hiring and promoting of Churchill was a "grotesque fraud — a white man pretending to be an Indian, an intellectual charlatan spewing polemical garbage festooned with phony footnotes, a shameless demagogue." Campos, a political liberal who supports affirmative action, decried the way campus administrators perverted the doctrine to reward a shallow grandstander.

The controversy over Churchill has been simmering for more than three years, but has only now come to full boil. On September 12, 2001, Churchill wrote an essay, published informally on various Web sites, titled "Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," in which he characterized the victims of the World Trade Center as "little Eichmanns," a reference to Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who helped maintain the machinery of death during the Holocaust. In Churchill's estimation, the victims of the attack were complicit in the imperialist foreign policy of the United States, and therefore should be condemned. He wrote, "If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I'd really be interested in hearing about it." The essay goes on to praise the "gallant sacrifices" of the "combat teams" who attacked the World Trade Center.

Churchill's post-9/11 essay lingered in relative obscurity for more than three years until December 2004, when he was invited to speak at Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York. At the time, Hamilton was reeling from another public-relations disaster, which had taken place just weeks before, stemming from its decision to hire Susan Rosenberg, a convicted felon and former leftist radical, to teach a one-month writing course. Rosenberg eventually declined the offer, but the controversy earned Hamilton both the ire of conservative political pundits and nationwide scrutiny. Wary of another scandal, a professor at Hamilton did some research on

Churchill and discovered the essay. The flurry of death threats directed at the college, administrators claimed, prompted the school to cancel the speech. From there, it didn't take long for the scandal to wend its way back to Churchill's academic home at UC-Boulder, which quickly began considering ways to silence him.