

The Morning Call

FLAGS-ON-BUSES FLAP IS GLIMPSE INTO ACADEMIA'S VALUES

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By Charles D. Snelling

Lehigh University is my alma mater and a fine institution, which I greatly respect and admire. Lehigh's president, Dr. Greg Farrington, is a first-rate individual with a splendid vision of where the university should be going and the will and ability to implement that vision.

So, how is it that last week a vice provost at Lehigh University issued an edict that the university's buses should not fly American flags, with the absurd justification that to do so might be considered insensitive to foreign students?

It didn't take long before this outrage was retracted and regretted. Apology accepted. Still, it is important because it gives the public a glimpse of the plague that infects some of America's finest universities. It is known by a variety of names, including "political correctness," "PC" and "deconstruction."

So, let me tell you what "PC" is all about and what a threat it is to academic and national well-being. There are 3,800 institutions of higher learning in this country, and only a relative few are seriously affected with political correctness. Mostly, it is not a serious problem with the Lehigh Valley's institutions. Perhaps 100 or 200 institutions are really severely afflicted, and unfortunately they tend to be the most prestigious and richest of institutions.

Academics and college administrators are often idealists and have utopian dreams. In and of itself, this is not bad. But frequently, absurd distortions can be introduced.

An underlying factor in "PC" is the attempt to eliminate real abuses, for example, the desire to eliminate racial, gender, ethnic and religious prejudices. We all share these goals. But this effort has been corrupted by deconstructionists who hold that society's values, laws, literature, and lately, even science, are not real but instead are social constructs. By "constructs" they mean artificial creations of those in power.

More than a little Marxism creeps into the PC concept. On many campuses, the enemy is groups that are comfortable and influential, and that includes, collectively, our nation. The "PC" people claim that values are not real but are instead one of the ways that those in power exercise control.

A great sin in the "PC" world is to be judgmental. No heed is paid to the protest that sound,

rational judgments are necessary and desirable. The concept of accountability is not fair, in the "PC" view, because it blames others for the problems of the disadvantaged. In the "PC" world, stable marriages are no better, no worse than "shacking up" or single parenthood, just different. In the "PC" world, having a clean neighborhood is no better, no worse than a dirty one, just a different culture. Religion, of course, is at its heart judgmental, so guess how the "PC" elite wants to treat it?

In the utopian view, the world is a village and everybody should be equal. What keeps that from happening is "nationalism" and patriotism. Patriotism, to the politically correct, is part of the problem. Within this view, the United States is not better than Afghanistan, just different. No judgments please. And since flags are the symbol of nationhood, all flags are equal too. So why display the United States' flag when it might hurt feelings? So we have come to the point where, on some campuses, it's okay to burn the American flag but not okay to display the American flag.

The ludicrous decision that prompted this column has been reversed and regretted. This is so, in my opinion, because it dawned on the person who made this decision the outrage it would cause. Decisions of this nature are made over and over again on campuses throughout America and never reversed because they do not come to public attention.

One wonders why their trustees, who are eminent people, fail to curb these excesses. The reason is the trustees are cowed by cries of academic freedom. The irony is that many "PC" advocates don't give a fig for intellectual freedom, academic freedom or freedom of speech in their own classes and their own institutions.

This is the climate in which the University of Pennsylvania could try to throw a student out of the university for calling a disruptive student a "water buffalo." This is the climate in which thousands of newspapers can be destroyed by radicals and the university does nothing because the views expressed in the newspaper were politically incorrect. People's feelings, rational or irrational, become paramount and what actually "is" doesn't matter. Interested readers might go to the library and have a look at the journal Academic Questions published by the National Association of Scholars. There are many accounts of injustice, censorship and reprisal against good students who simply don't share the "PC" orthodoxy.

To the "PC," free speech means nothing. The emphasis is on re-education and reorientation. All over this nation's universities there are mandatory programs intended to require students to think the politically correct way -- utopian thought control, really. The Modern Language Association leads the assault on western values. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and Byron are denigrated, while nearly incomprehensible "literature" full of hate, venom and destructiveness is celebrated.

The only way one knows these things are going on is if one is close to academia or if one is close to someone in a fine university -- a student who knows nonsense when he or she hears it and carries the knowledge home. The incident at Lehigh is significant not because the American flag was

denied to university buses for a few hours. It is significant because it gives the public a rare peek at the comprehensive, sustained assault on western values, literature, science and civil liberties in the name of utopian dreams that are not well founded.