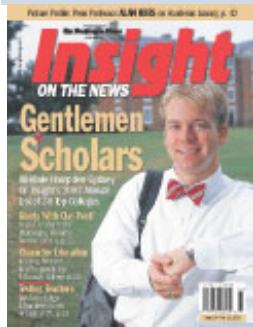


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## Picture Profile

### Kors Fights for Liberty on Campus

Posted Sept. 25, 2003

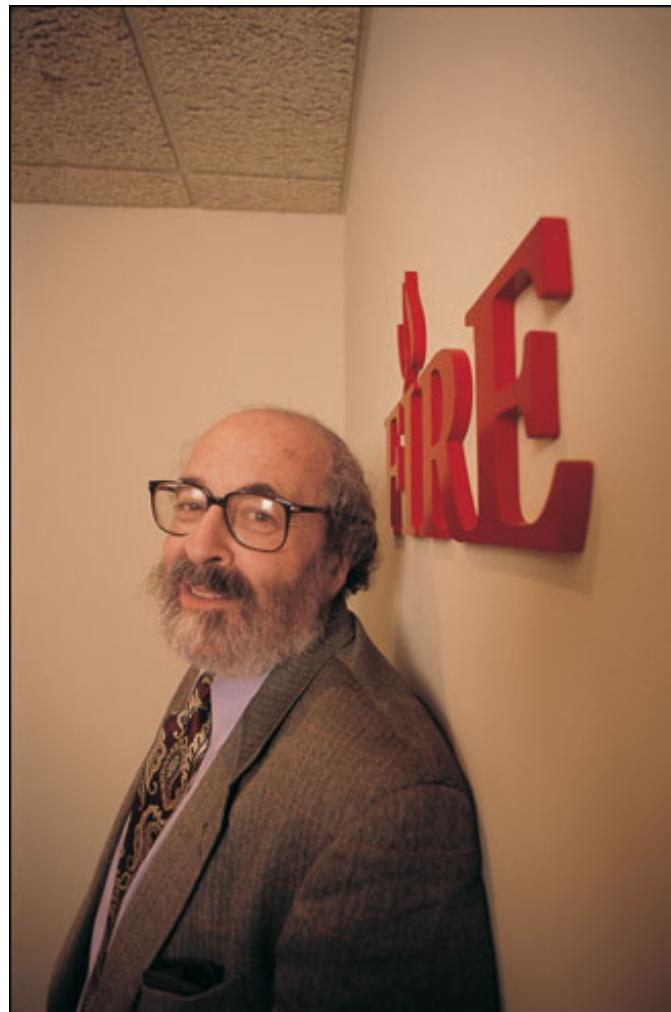
By Stephen Goode

The politically correct at America's colleges and universities have no greater enemy than Alan Charles Kors, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. Dazzlingly articulate and a passionate advocate of liberty, Kors has defended student and faculty freedoms ever since student speech codes, sensitivity training and the numerous other manifestations first began their inroads in higher education nearly two decades ago.

Kors was coauthor in 1998 with

Harvey Silvergate of *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses*, the best book on the excesses and evils of political correctness. It was a book well-reviewed by both liberal and conservative commentators.

Kors and Silvergate also are cofounders and codirectors (for which they receive no remuneration) of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based group that seeks "to restore liberty and dignity on our college campuses." FIRE takes up the cause of free speech at colleges and universities when possible violations of campus liberties are brought to its attention by students, faculty or



RICK KOZAK/INSIGHT

## Insight Poll

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really running for  
President?

Yes

No

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others, which happens frequently.

The 17th and 18th centuries are Kors' areas of academic concentration. He was editor in chief of the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment (2002) and author of many scholarly articles and books.

Two major awards for distinguished college teaching have come his way. And he's done two popular video and audio courses for The Teaching Company, The Birth of the Modern Mind and Voltaire: The Mind of the Enlightenment. Four times his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have elected him to university and school committees on academic freedom and responsibility.

Insight interviewed Kors in his office at FIRE on Philadelphia's Washington Square, near where the Founding Fathers met to draw up the U.S. Constitution. On the wall was a blown-up headline from a 1991 New York Times: "You can see what I carry around with me," Kors said. "I never thought I would see the New York Times talking about the Baltic States being 'occupied,' as it does in this headline. I used to go to captive-nation events when the notion of 'captive nations' was ridiculed. And look at this subhead! 'Leningrad officially gets back its old name, St. Petersburg.' That this would ever be, let alone that it would be the banner headline in the New York Times, is reason not to be fatalistic about change. That's why I keep it around."

**Insight:** Has the power of the politically correct diminished on American campuses in recent years? Or is the cultural left still in charge?

**Alan Charles Kors:** In a sense, things have not changed and one could argue from the evidence that they have become worse. Political correctness has institutionalized itself ever more deeply in higher education. The networking of the zealots has become ever more efficient.

Universities have become media savvy on how not to present themselves publicly and when to back off. Freshmen orientations resemble Orwellian political indoctrination more than an introduction to the university, let alone the critical life of the mind. And there has been the proliferation and, I think, the intensification of litmus tests in academic hiring.

**Q:** This does not sound good.

**A:** Yes, from those perspectives, things look worse. Where I think people have cause to be less pessimistic is what I hope I've shown from my own efforts and what FIRE has shown. This is that politically

### Personal Bio

#### Alan Charles Kors

**Currently:** Professor of history, University of Pennsylvania; cofounder and codirector of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE).

**Born:** July 18, 1943; Jersey City, N.J.

**Family:** Wife, Erika;

correct universities have an Achilles' heel. Their vulnerability is they cannot defend in public what they believe and wish to practice in private.

Ten or 15 years ago, voices such as mine on any campus calling for free speech, legal equality and respect for individual conscience were treated as being somewhere to the right of Conan the Barbarian - the character, not the actor. Now universities understand that voices like mine speak for the primary values of a broader American society.

I think what stunned universities was the discovery that on issues concerning what was happening in academic life - the restrictive campus speech codes, for example - there was literally no difference between editorials in the conservative Washington Times and the liberal Washington Post, no difference between Wall Street Journal editorials and editorials in the Los Angeles Times.

I think this shocked universities. I think they had convinced themselves that the main body of liberal opinion in the country and in the media thought just the way they did. But the fact is universities have so marginalized themselves in terms of the values of the broader American society - the sense of fair play, decency and respect for individual conscience - that the voices of complaint about what's happening on campuses no longer can be ignored.

The whole country looked at the speech codes, sensitivity training and the politically correct and said, "This is unbelievable! The absurdity of those college campuses!"

**Q:** By taking up the causes of individuals whose freedoms have been under attack on campus, FIRE has played a big part in this change by reminding colleges and universities what free speech means.

**A:** Ninety percent of our cases are settled, and they are settled at places that would have drawn a line in the sand 10, 15 years ago and ignored any pleas for free speech and common sense.

daughter Samantha, 25; son Brian, 23.

**Education:** B.A. from Princeton University; Ph.D. from Harvard University.

**Books:** Coauthor, with Harvey Silvergate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (1998); editor-in-chief, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, four volumes (2002).

**Positions:** Contributing editor, *Reason* magazine; executive boards of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and the Historical Society.

**Awards/achievements:** Two videotape and audio courses for The Teaching Company, *The Birth of the Modern Mind* and *Voltaire: The Mind of the Enlightenment*. Two awards for distinguished college teaching, the Lindback Foundation Award and the Ira Abrams Memorial Award.

When FIRE says, "Why don't you do the right thing for the right reasons before this case goes public?" - when FIRE says, "Here are the terms of the debate, here are the points you raise" - then they can't defend what they do.

There is a second cause for a certain [amount of] optimism. What was so paralyzing on campuses was the sense of fatalism on the part of classically liberal educators and many others, a sense that they were all alone and nothing could change. I think that things like the struggle against speech codes, the reception of The Shadow University, which was well-reviewed across the political spectrum, and, I think, the success of FIRE, have broken that fatalism.

So what we see now are more and more individuals on college campuses - students above all but also faculty, the least courageous - who now object to infringements of freedom on their own campuses and who are willing to come to us and go public. The fact that you now can find several faculty members, or even one faculty member, willing to say to campus authorities, "You cannot do that! You can't do that to free men and women!" - that's a major change.

**Q:** You nonetheless are cautious in your optimism.

**A:** Oh, there are several fashionable trends that are quite appalling on college campuses. The political litmus test in hiring continues at the levels of the faculty and the administration. It continues most dramatically in the whole student-life area and the officers who deal directly with how students should behave.

As a result of the litmus test in hiring, you have this political and ideological cloning. You have this reigning definition of "diversity" that excludes intellectual diversity, critical diversity, political diversity, ideological diversity, religious diversity.

Indeed, the reigning definition of diversity that excludes all of that continues to grow apace on college campuses and is in many cases much worse than it ever was. There are people who look back on the late 1960s as a period of the utmost political zealotry, but I was hired by a history department in 1968 as a hawkish conservative. Everyone knew that and they would not have dreamed of a political litmus test. They were hiring on the basis of the historical work I did on the 18th century.

I don't believe I'd be hired now by a major American university because of my politics and because of my extra-historical views and activities.

**Q:** It's one of the ironies of American academic history that many professors of the Old Left, decades ago, were far more tolerant of genuine intellectual and ideological diversity than are many of the cultural- and political-left professoriat today.

**A:** My introduction to the thought I now most value came at the hands of a Marxist professor, Arno Mayer, at Princeton. He once gave back his midterms and said to his class, "You've shamed me. You're just saying what you think I want to hear. But I've given you readings that should let

you reach very independent conclusions and conclusions that differ. So what I'm going to do is assign for the final exam a book by the person who would most disagree with me. I'm not going to ask you a single question about whether you think he is right or wrong, but there will be a whole section on the final exam calling upon you to re-create his arguments."

The book he assigned was Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* [a classic antisocialist text], and it changed my intellectual life. I cannot imagine a colleague doing that today.

**Q:** There are critics who say that there's no such thing as the politically correct, that it's an invention of right-wing zealots. These critics also say that there's never been a Golden Age of free speech at colleges and universities, that years ago colleges were uniformly conservative and white. So, they ask, why all the fuss about free speech now?

**A:** The remarkable thing about the logic that you just described is that it is as if a nation struggles to achieve freedom and speech and then says, "Well, now that we have freedom of speech within our grasp, let's silence other people with impunity because there wasn't always freedom of speech!"

What the struggle for rights in the United States always has been is the bringing of more and more people into the circle of equal protection under the law in the full enjoyment of their rights.

I think it's true that there was no Golden Age. The Princeton I went to in the early 1960s was in many ways a terribly exclusive, bigoted, anti-intellectual place. There was conformity of a very different kind that tended to dominate elite institutions at the time. But those were universities that found their way to a certain openness.

I think it's true there was no ideal period. But there were certain periods - the first half of the 1970s, for example - when universities really were centers of vibrant debate and when they were hiring with great intellectual and political diversity. What happened at this point is that the people who came into the universities looked around and said, "Well, we don't have to hire diversely now that we're here!"

**Q:** The arrogance of those who made that assumption is breathtaking! From where did that arrogance come? What led those who now run the universities to decide that when they got there they could make over our schools of higher learning so completely into their own image?

**A:** First, to understand the full scope of this arrogance, you must remember that they had been part of a movement whose motto was, "Don't trust anyone over 30," and once they found themselves in charge of the university that motto changed to, "Don't trust anyone under 30."

Not only is their motto "Don't trust anyone under 30," but those who control our universities look upon students as little children wholly mystified and brainwashed by American society. So the minimum that ought to be done, or so their belief goes, is that the university ought to

have four years in which to demystify them since Madison Avenue, the Fortune 500 and the Pentagon have been brainwashing them from kindergarten through the 12th grade.

Imagine anyone envisioning that Madison Avenue, the Fortune 500 and the Pentagon control K through 12! What a farce!

So what you have is, one, a total misreading of what's happening in primary and secondary education, as if its corrective would be a dreary, uniform orthodoxy of the cultural left. And, two, you have this infantilizing of students by declaring, "They can't be exposed to debate. They need to be re-educated during the whole four years that we have them."

There really is a generational swindle of epic proportions going on. We've gone from the free-speech movement of the early 1960s, and the war on mandatory chapel in the late 1960s, to the struggle for mandatory sensitivity training and diversity training in education.

**Q:** It would seem that even the cultural left would be aware of so blatant a hypocrisy.

**A:** When I speak on campuses, I often will quote from the anthem of the free-speech movement of the 1960s, Phil Ochs' song "I'm Going to Say It Now." When I quote from that song, students today look up with wonder that the people treating them like little children and imposing codes of behavior on them are the same people who thrilled - and still thrill - to the words of that song.

So, I'm going to quote those words now: "You'd like to be my mother and you'd like to be my dad and give me kisses when I'm good and spank me when I'm bad. But since I've left my parents, I've forgotten how to bow, so when I've got something to say, sir, I'm going to say it now."

The very people who claim to be thrilled by that song have imposed speech codes on students they openly refer to as "just children." That seems to me to be a new standard of hypocrisy and bad faith.

**Q:** Back in the late 1960s, it was commonplace to hear the radical students referred to as "the best-educated, the most moral generation America has ever produced." One heard that all the time.

**A:** And that generation believed it. By the mid-1970s it had become the faculty. It had become the young administrators. And it discovered that its students were listening not to acid rock but to disco! It found by 1979 that its students were making fun of the 1960s and making fun of the left and of liberals! That was disillusioning. In the 1984 election, a majority of American undergraduates voted for Ronald Reagan. A second disillusionment.

At that point, there was a moment of truth. The people who believed themselves the natural leaders, role models and gurus of all the students who came after them now had power on campus, but they discovered a new, fresh, independent generation that thinks for itself.

How to deal with that? They said, "The younger generation - the children - differs from us and it is laughing at us. They must really be mystified and brainwashed by American society. They need us to show them the way." You can date political correctness from that moment.

*Stephen Goode is a senior writer for **Insight**.*  
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