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AP BREAKING NEWS

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The weak against the thong

Suzanne Fields

The contemplation of war brings out the best and the worst in us, calling up emotions ranging from the solemn to the absurd. Sometimes emotion, like smoke, gets in the eye of the offender and blinds everyone else.

So, it happened at Citrus College, a small junior college in Glendora, Calif., where a teacher of Speech 106 instructed her students in a required course to write letters to President Bush "demanding" that he not go to war with Iraq. Students who declined, or wrote letters in support of the president and the reasoning for war, were denied extra credit.

This sounds like small potatoes — or, being California, perhaps small kumquats — in the larger realm of the political correctness that frequently infringes on the personal liberties of students. But, no lemon in the faculty lounge is too small to squeeze, no violation of free expression is too insignificant to resist. Students at Citrus College called the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, whose combustible acronym is FIRE, which was established to educate, protect and preserve liberties on college campuses. FIRE concluded that the teacher had abused her academic authority and brought the matter forcefully to the attention of the college administration. The president of Citrus College promptly apologized to President Bush and the students and rescinded the assignment.

"What happens on college campuses is what happens in society in 20 years," says Harvey Silverglate, a litigator for civil liberties and co-director of FIRE. He makes the case for vigilance as the root of academic freedom in an era when a generation of college students is particularly ignorant of the rights and obligations of liberty, and is easily intimidated by the orthodoxy of the moment.

In 1998, Mr. Silverglate and Alan Kors, a co-director of FIRE, wrote a book called "The Shadow University: The Betrayal of

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Liberty on America's Campuses," documenting violations of freedom of speech, religion and due process. A growing number of college administrations control debate, conduct kangaroo courts and try to quarantine unwanted opinions in "free speech zones." FIRE has persuaded lawyers and others across a wide spectrum of ideology to help them do something about it.

FIRE created five guides, explaining students' rights on religious liberty, free speech, fees and funding, due process and thought reform. (The guides are available on the Internet at www.thefireguides.com.) FIRE describes them as tools to counter Orwellian thought control at both public and private colleges.

It's no secret that many elite institutions, including even Harvard, Yale and Princeton, which were founded as schools to train preachers of the Christian Gospel, have become places where religious traditions are often not welcome. One alumni recalls a popular refrain: "Hey, hey, what d'ya say, born-again Christians, go away."

"For all the talk about diversity and tolerance, too few students and faculty care when people of faith are given fewer rights than other groups," writes David French, a graduate of Harvard Law School, in the Fire Guide to religious freedom. "Such believers enjoy scant support when they engage in religious practices deemed 'regressive' by their more 'progressive' peers."

The board of editors of the guides include Alan Dershowitz, professor of law at Harvard Law School, and Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs at the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank. FIRE has assembled a network of lawyers who will work pro bono on behalf of students and professors who cannot win in the war of words. These lawyers are guided by the observation of Justice Louis Brandeis: "Sunlight is the best disinfectant."

When FIRE introduced the guides at the National Press Club the other day in Washington, what could have been a tower of Babel made up of radicals, liberals, conservatives, reactionaries and libertarians, was instead a forum of amiable unity, challenging censorship, kangaroo courts and double standards. Edwin Meese, the former attorney general who holds the Ronald Reagan Chair in Public Policy at the Heritage Foundation, sat at a table with Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union.

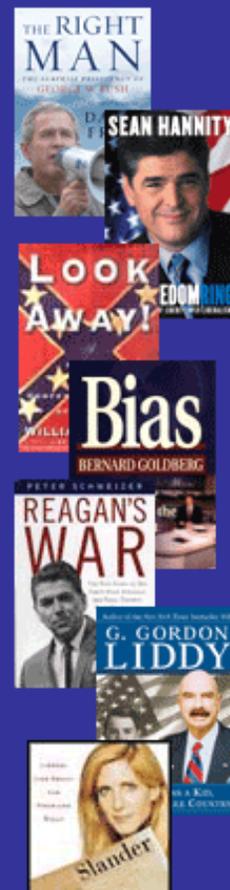
Miss Strossen wanted to stretch the limits of what's acceptable in polite society to make her point. She pulled a Monica Lewinsky, flashing a pair of thong panties. The panties — held up, not worn — were decorated with the emblem of the Total Information Awareness agency of the Defense Department, which civil libertarians decry as an invasion of privacy in the search for terrorists. Nobody protested or even blushed, even if here and there someone squirmed at the pushing at the limits of taste. But, she had made her point that the defense of speech of the weak or unpopular is not always polite. You might say she was illustrating the purpose of FIRE by supporting the weak against the thong.

Suzanne Fields is a columnist for The Washington Times.

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