COMMENTARY:
“HAVE YOU NO SENSE OF DECENCY, SIR?”

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This commentary was recorded in February 2006 on WAMC-Northeast Public Radio.
This month, David Horowitz, a best-selling author who makes his living by hawking his personal journey from a communist upbringing to his present extreme right-wing political values, has released a book entitled *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. This diatribe normally would be written off as just another rant by an ideologue if it weren’t for the fact that 25 states and the U.S. Congress are considering legislation, first proposed by Mr. Horowitz, to limit the political speech of professors.

The so-called “Academic Bill of Rights” has been taken up by a select committee of the Pennsylvania State Assembly, and some variation likely will end up in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act now before Congress.

Supporters of the proposal paint a pretty scary picture. To hear them tell it, left-wing indoctrinators control universities without regard for teaching. But where’s the evidence? As Pennsylvania Rep. Dan Surra said in a hearing on the proposal last month, “This is the educational equivalent of Big Foot.”

At the State University of New York, where I teach, the board of trustees reviewed every campus looking for student complaint of political bias. SUNY has 64 campuses and 400,000 students. Zero complaints. A similar study was conducted at the University of Pittsburgh with the same result.

Rep. Surra also rightfully said that the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights” is “a solution looking for a problem that doesn’t exist.” What is a problem is defamation of character based in fiction.

Horowitz and his supporters have used stories such as one about a Penn State biology professor showing the Michael Moore movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* to a classroom of science students as evidence to call for such a measure. At the Pennsylvania hearings, he had to admit the *Fahrenheit 9/11* tale never happened. In the same hearing, he also backed away from a story about a California student punished for his views on abortion — never happened. His protégé’ at UCLA, Andrew Jones, the one behind the “Dirty Thirty,” also has had a very “inventive” history. Jones, who offered to pay students to spy on professors, recently had to change...
his modus operandi because of public outrage.

The inside flap of *The Professors* reads, “Coming to a campus near you: Terrorists, racists and communists—you know them as The Professors.” In the book, Horowitz paints with a pretty broad brush. Even quoting a communist can get you on the blacklist. Distinguished Columbia University professor Eric Foner made the list merely for having an uncle who was a communist and for quoting African-American actor and Cold War-era communist Paul Robeson, who said, “The patriot is the person who is never satisfied with his country.”

University of Illinois communications professor Robert McChesney comes under attack for raising questions about the media, its corporate ownership and what effect that has on news coverage.

Georgetown University law professor Mari Masuda is criticized for courses that mix the study of law with social activism.

At my institution, professor Michael Schwartz is attacked primarily for being pro-labor and anti-war, positions held by millions of Americans.

It doesn’t matter if everyone agrees with the views of these professors. Universities should foster the free exchange of ideas. It is a slippery slope when you allow either the state or federal government to limit speech on campus. If students and faculty cannot freely exchange their thoughts, then all Americans are the losers.

We’ve seen this before. In the 1950s, Sen. Joseph McCarthy went after academics such as J. Robert Oppenheimer and Robert Watson, as well as lesser known figures such as the Duke University professor who dared to challenge the senator’s claims about spies in the State Department.

Around the same time, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* about the Salem witch trials and about the witch hunts of the 1950s. The message of the play was that every period of history needs to be vigilant for similar cases of hysteria. The “Academic Bill of Rights” is our witch hunt.

McCarthyism collapsed when the hearings became televised and the nation witnessed Special Counsel to the Army Joseph Welch say to the senator, “Have you no sense of decency, sir?” The words need to be repeated today.