Patriotism, Partisanship, and the Conscience of Conservative Scholars

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This article will examine the verbal attacks on academic leftists prior to, and especially following September 11, 2001, by conservative scholarly organizations and individuals, and it will consider these attacks in light of David Brock’s recent book *Blinded By the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*. Among the lamentable aftermaths of September 11 was a new eruption of the dormant American culture wars. In November 2001, The American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued a report titled *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It* (revised February, 2002). The report accused liberal and leftist faculties of a sweeping array of misdeeds, including fomenting anti-American reactions to September 11 and general hostility toward American democracy and civic education, as well as “rushing to add courses on Islamic and Asian cultures” while “students can now graduate from 100% of the top 55 colleges without taking a single course in American history” (6, 7).

In his latest book, *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*, William Bennett, who is on the National Council of ACTA, says of “the educational establishment” that “those who are unpatriotic are, culturally, the most influential” (141), and he calls for “reinstatement of a thorough and honest study of our history, undistorted by the lens of political correctness and pseudo-sophisticated relativism” (141, 149–50). Bennett also wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* after September 11, “America’s support for human rights and democracy is our noblest export to the world. . . . America was not punished because we are bad, but because we are good.”

There has been widespread criticism of factual inaccuracies, skimpy or skewed documentation, and exaggerations in ACTA’s and Bennett’s
accounts, as in previous reports issued by ACTA and its allied National Association of Scholars. To address only one point of fact, the ACTA report fails to mention that many leftist academics did condemn colleagues who rashly “blamed America first” for September 11, or that the left press has been filled with fierce disagreements on this issue among prominent figures like Todd Gitlin, Michael Walzer, and Christopher Hitchens vs. Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and Howard Zinn. (In the category of half-truths, the updated version of the ACTA report contains a collection of hate mail received in response to the original, but fails to acknowledge that public opponents of President Bush’s post-September 11 policies have been assaulted with at least as much virulence.)

Beyond questions of factuality, there is a self-contradiction in ACTA and Bennett that has run through many past conservative salvos in the culture wars. On the one hand, they defend educational objectivity, avoidance of partisan advocacy, “thorough and honest study”; on the other hand, they sometimes seem to want history and current events to be “distorted by the lens” of unilateral advocacy for American patriotism, exempt from thorough and honest disputation. Can the causes of September 11 be determined without a thorough and honest consideration of evidence for the less-than-total innocence of American policies in the Middle East and elsewhere? (Neither ACTA nor Bennett present any substantive refutation of dissenters about America’s virtuousness like Chomsky, Said, and Zinn.) Isn’t some counterforce warranted against the one-sided propaganda produced by the Bush administration, as by every administration in every war? Surely, it is as simplistic never to blame America as to blame America first.

As a PhD in philosophy, Bennett certainly knows that the Western cultural heritage championed by conservatives is filled with cautions against the excesses of patriotism and blind obedience to government authority, especially in time of war—for example, Plato’s “Apology,” Samuel Johnson’s “Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels,” Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” against the Mexican-American War, or Mark Twain’s protests against the jingoism of the Spanish-American War.

In the current situation, a patriot might very well be horrified by the terrorist attacks and support retaliatory action, but at the same time be wary of blanket endorsement of every American military action, especially those hidden by censorship. A patriot might be equally wary of government officials’ possible conflicts of interest in multibillion-dollar
military and construction contracts in Afghanistan and the Middle East, or of the danger of the administration taking advantage of the wartime suspension of a loyal opposition to suppress civil liberties and railroad partisan foreign and domestic policies through Congress and the courts. Is it qualms like these that Bennett derides as "pseudo-sophisticated relativism"?

An intriguing perspective on this and earlier chapters in the culture wars is provided by David Brock’s recent confession Blinded By The Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative. As a former, self-described, journalistic “hit man,” Brock provides personal testimony for the case that liberals have long made about what he calls the “Big Lie machine” operated by the right wing of the Republican Party and its multimillionaire backers like Richard Mellon Scaife, the late William Simon, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Coors family, and Rupert Murdoch. (Brock’s testimony makes much the same case that Michael Lind did in his 1996 Up From Conservatism; Brock includes more juicy revelations about personal hypocrisies and rhetorical deceit on the right, while Lind is more intellectually substantive.) These “Leninists of the right,” as Brock calls them, exercise control “far more rigidly doctrinaire than the PC crowd that had so offended me [as an undergraduate] in Berkeley,” over a large network of political operatives, lobbies, jurists, newspapers, magazines, book publishers, talk radio hosts and TV pundits (48, 22). They utilize front foundations and think tanks including The Scaife Family Trusts, The John M. Olin Foundation (now defunct), The American Enterprise Institute, and The Heritage Foundation, which Brock confirms are in effect Republican propaganda agencies and corporate lobbies disguised in the trappings of nonpartisan research centers. He mocks his own former title of “John M. Olin Fellow in Congressional Studies” at Heritage (73).

Brock admits that he and other conservative journalists did the bidding of Republican leaders in cover-ups of right-wing atrocities in Chile and Central America, of the Iran-Contra scandal, and of Clarence Thomas’ guilt in Anita Hill’s charges against him, a cover-up accompanied by character assassination of Hill and her defenders. He was one of many journalists who enriched themselves with the millions that Richard Scaife poured into a fanatic crusade to bring down President Clinton from the day he was elected. Many conservatives who now dismiss Brock as a congenital liar eagerly embraced his lies when he was on their side. And while his book has been challenged on a few specifics, to date his larger case about the Republican apparatus has gone unrefuted.
Brock and his cohorts were constantly looking for “wedge issues” with which to polarize public opinion, a Republican specialty since Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” in the 1968 election. They boasted of being “attack dogs” and using “scorched earth” and “take no prisoners” invective. Their prime leader was Newt Gingrich, who advised his followers through GOPAC training tapes that “fights make headlines” and provided them with an all-purpose list of what S. I. Hayakawa termed “snarl words” to apply to liberals and “purr words” to apply to conservatives (61).

Brock reveals the prescribed rhetorical tactics he was coached in, beginning with the postures of sneering derision and apoplectic indignation. Other standard devices: Always stay on the attack; never admit fault or concede any points to the opposition. Make sensationalistic charges (even without adequate evidence) to credulous mass media through publicity agents. Disguise partisan polemics behind professions of objectivity and evenhandedness. Hyperbolically stereotype and demonize opponents, while sentimentalizing your own side and white-washing its sins.

Brock also admits that he and his fellow ideologues assumed that liberal political and journalistic circles were just as tightly organized and unscrupulous, so that conservatives told themselves they were just fighting fire with fire. But he eventually realized that “I unconsciously projected onto the liberals what I knew and saw and learned of the right wing’s operations” (114). About Republican control of media conservatives, he acknowledged in an earlier Esquire article, “There is no ‘liberal movement’ to which these journalists are attached and by which they can be blackballed in the sense that there is a self-identified, hardwired ‘conservative movement’ that can function as a kind of neo-Stalinist thought police” (“Confessions” 107).

Brock only marginally discusses the academic world, beyond confirming that the recent national attention to political correctness was engineered by conservatives as a “device to shut out and discredit legitimate diverse curricula” (34–35). However, his book tacitly poses anew the question of the extent to which academic organizations like ACTA and NAS form part of that “hardwired conservative movement.” Officials of these organizations indignantly deny that they are political partisans, and they point to some of their members who are Democrats and liberals. (David Riesman and Joseph Lieberman, for example, were on the National Council of ACTA. Riesman died at 92 a few months after the report appeared, and Lieberman dissociated himself from “Defending
Civilization.” Lieberman and Martin Peretz, also a member, are the prototypical Democratic Leadership Council “centrists” that leftists love to hate.) But with Lynne Cheney, wife of the Vice President, as founder and Chairman Emeritus, and with other National Council members described by Brock as key figures in the Republican propaganda machine (like Bennett, Irving Kristol, and Judge Laurence Silberman), how can ACTA expect to avoid legitimate suspicion of being, in effect, an enforcing arm of the Bush administration? I know personally or by their work many members of NAS and its affiliated Association of Literary Scholars and Critics who are intellectuals of the highest integrity, and I do not believe that they are Republican dupes. Yet, I am puzzled, especially when they are the ones who condemn the politicizing of scholarship, about why they let their independence be compromised by voluntary association with high Republican party officials. And why do they accept funding from foundations like Scaife and Olin—to the extent a few years ago of 1.2 million dollars annually for NAS, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education?

Likewise, conservative scholars periodically profess their dedication, in the words of a Chronicle of Higher Education column by former NAS president Bradford Wilson, to “the intellectual habit of openness to differing points of view” and to “disinterested, impartial, and strenuous inquiry.” And yet, their organizations, members, and journalistic allies have for the past fifteen years produced a non-stop flow of “research reports” (with lurid charges crafted by PR agents and pitched to mass media publicity, not disinterested scholarly deliberation), books, and articles tendentiously attacking leftist political correctness, and written in the same polarizing polemical formulas Brock emulated. The authors of these works have included Allan Bloom, Dinesh D’Souza, Roger Kimball, Richard Bernstein, Christina Hoff Sommers, Robert Bork, Norman Podhoretz, David Horowitz, and John Ellis, as well as Cheney, Bennett, and Brock himself—all funded by Scaife, Olin, or kindred conservative foundations.

All of these works, including Defending Civilization and Why We Fight, approach their subject with malice aforethought, determined to put the worst light on everything said and done by leftists, tarring irresponsible and responsible leftists with the same brush through distorting the latter’s ideas beyond recognition. They also fail to weigh the power and misdeeds of the political or cultural left evenhandedly against those of the right, any admission of which is suppressed or shrugged off. One would deduce from such works that college teachers imposing multiculturalist
dogmas are a greater cause for outrage than Latin American death squads and their American apologists. Attempts by leftists to point out factual errors or misrepresentations in these works, including my review in College English of Lynne Cheney's *Telling The Truth*, have usually not met with substantive responses but with stonewalling silence or contemptuous dismissal by conservatives as a "whitewash" or "cover up" of leftist guilt. Whether or not these authors and their allies in ACTA and NAS have direct ties to the Republican machine, their pretense of being neither ideologues nor partisans is as transparent as that of Republican officials (from President Bush on down) and Supreme Court justices.

I have no interest in whitewashing the sins of cultural or political leftists, some of whom are guilty as charged. The project of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, on whose advisory committee I serve, has been for the past decade to criticize authentic cases of PC while at the same time taking issue with distorted conservative accounts. I and the leftist colleagues I most respect are passionately committed to improving the abysmal quality of education for citizenship in America. We want students to become much more knowledgeable about both Euro-American civilization and other countries and cultures, about arguments for and against America's unique virtues. Why should these be mutually exclusive, other than for purposes of deliberate polarization by left or right ideologues? I have devoted over thirty years of college teaching and scholarship to connecting the study of both literature and argumentative writing to the ideal of civic responsibility, with emphasis on understanding opposed ideological viewpoints and their rhetorical strategies, so I can match conservatives' display of indignation when I am slandered as either unpatriotic or pedagogically irresponsible. What constructive purpose do conservatives think they are achieving by antagonizing leftists who might well agree on many points if approached with less strident, manichean rhetoric?

In my teaching experience, the obstacles to improving civic education are not restricted to the right's bogeys—doctrinaire PC teachers, featherbedding teachers' colleges and unions—though these share some blame. Obstacles also include the stupefying influence of consumerism, mass culture, and increasing pressures for strictly vocational and business-oriented studies (all products of the corporate capitalism that conservatives extol), along with the gross discrepancies in funding between elite (liberal-arts-oriented) secondary schools and universities and non-elite (vocationally-oriented) ones—compounded by political discourse reduced to the level of simplistic, divisive polarities like Bennett's. Why
do purportedly "disinterested" conservatives express so little concern about the latter influences?

Scholars and other intellectuals on the left and right will contribute little to the solution of this country's political or cultural problems as long as they lock themselves into opposing enclaves, from which they propagate self-approving dogmas and revile straw opponents whom they rarely engage in face-to-face dialogue. Surely, there are many conservatives and leftists of good faith who would be willing to join forces in disowning the polarizers on their respective sides and cooperating to pursue an even-handed weighing of virtues and faults in conservative versus left positions on education and other problems in American cultural politics. Perhaps we can establish an ongoing "truth and reconciliation commission," modeled on negotiations between warring countries or labor-management arbitration.

I implore colleagues in NAS and ACTA to curb their instinct to greet this article with yet another round of tu quo-que invective, and instead to show that they are truly dedicated to the nonpartisan ideals they profess, by agreeing to such a project and soliciting the financial resources of their funding foundations in its support. Bennett concludes Why We Fight with an admirable call for "genuine inquiry into fact and a genuine openness to debate" over America's virtues. I urge him too, then, to offer the sponsorship of his think tank Empower America for an extensive series of debates with leftists like Chomsky, Said, and Zinn.

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Notes

1. The standard conservative defense for accepting funds from these foundations is that they are no more than counter-agents to wealthier, and liberally-biased ones like Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie, and MacArthur. I have argued on many occasions—at without ever getting a straight answer from conservatives—that this is a false analogy on several points. The more liberal foundations are not aligned with a political party or agenda, not all of their projects are political, and they sometimes sponsor conservatives (William Kristol has received Ford funding). They are not controlled by and do not act in the interests of their sponsoring corporations or individual donors like Richard Mellon Scaife, William Simon, and the Coors family, nor do they prescribe a political line to their beneficiaries; indeed, their funding of projects that oppose their corporate interests is evidence that their motives are philanthropic (with the
laudable principle precisely of funding projects unlikely to gain corporate or other support), not propagandistic. Conservatives similarly argue that their foundations counteract the liberal bias of academic organizations like MLA and NCTE. Here again, however, the analogy is false: these organizations democratically represent their membership, so whatever biases they may have are presumably those of the majority of members, rather than the dictates of their officials—who in any case are not accountable to higher corporate or individual powers like Scaife, Simon, and Coors.

Works Cited


