

## Commentary

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# Especially in academia, all voices must have chance to be heard

I have been teaching ancient Greek history to more than 40 students this semester. We have often seen analogies with contemporary issues. This is understandable. Herodotus, the acknowledged father of Western history, traces the conflict between the Greek independent city-state cultures and eastern imperial kingly cultures that culminated in the Persian Wars (490-479 B.C.E.). He stresses significant cultural differences between East and West that affect events.

Recently, the general secretary of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan, the largest of Pakistan's religious parties, declared that "Western civilization is based on falsehoods and denials of the basic truth." He was then asked whether given that "there are so many contradictions between the West and the Muslim world... there [is] any chance of reconciliation and dialogue between the two civilizations?" His answer: "There is none. The basic concepts of both civilizations are in total contrast with each other."

Some of our future leaders had best be examining the principles and

origins of western civilization in a meaningful way, testing such radical claims and realizing that the problems now seen in Iraq have long and untidy histories.

Thucydides, founder of scientific history, wrote his account of the terrible war that engulfed the Athenian empire and the whole known world as a case study in how human beings and human societies react to the stresses of war. One prominent Thucydides scholar is Donald Kagan. Kagan and his son Robert have used their views of history in support of White House policies on Afghanistan and Iraq. This continues the keen interest of the U.S. State Department in Thucydides at the outset of the Cold War.

If even ancient history and classical scholars are relevant to the most important issues confronting us as U.S. citizens, it is likely that professors and students in many courses will confront such issues. What should they do?

This question comes up now because of the recent story about the Young Conservatives of Texas at the University of Texas at Austin publishing a watch list of 10 professors, nine of them "liberal," for attempting to "indoctrinate" students in the classroom. Heading the list was journalism professor Robert Jensen.

Jensen believes in confrontational politics. His letter in the Houston Chronicle just after 9/11 raised a storm of protest and drew a response from UT President Larry Faulkner. The current head of the Young Conservatives, Austin Kinghorn, was a student of Jensen's at that time and felt that in his class "[i]here was no opposing view presented."

Professors have a professional obligation not only to "profess" our technical subjects, but to signpost where and how these subjects are meaningful to our lives and to human society. Some will do this in a balanced way that promotes discussion and allows for varying perspectives. Others will be more radical and categorical, and that includes both conservatives and liberals. I think it is incumbent on us not to avoid controversial topics but to develop whatever perspectives our particular course specialties offer.

That being said, professors hold lots of power over students in a classroom. Professors must then try to be honest, yet restrained. Students themselves have to muster the personal courage to express opposing views. If Kinghorn did not speak up in opposition to Jensen's views, got his A, went away and later watch-listed Jensen, he will not appear in the next edition of

"Profiles in Courage."

And Jensen strikes me as disingenuous. He uses confrontation and provocation as political tools, but then complains that the response he evokes and the atmosphere he creates "make people a little nervous and there's a self-censorship effect."

Everyone should read chapter five of David Maraniss' acclaimed book "They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967." The president of University of Wisconsin-Madison, when confronted with the idea that there were too many radicals on campus, replied: "Our image... is that we are one of the great universities, high in quality, strong (very strong) in freedom of expression, a university at which we crush neither students nor faculty;... a university that has always considered itself strong enough to tolerate some dissenters and non-conformists... It is a tradition of which we are all very proud. We could hardly change the 'image' without changing the institution, could we?"

It strikes me that this is the image faculty and students and our president should foster at UT-Austin.

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