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NRO Contributing Editor



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September 19, 2002 9:00 a.m.

Through the FIRE

Fighting for freedom of thought.

School is in. Time to steel yourself for ten more months of horror stories about campus political correctness. But before the madness begins, let me give you some good news—even great news. When it comes to America's politically correct campuses, all is not lost. In fact, in some important respects we are actually beginning to win the battle for freedom of thought at America's colleges and universities. That is largely because of a feisty little three-year-old named **FIRE**, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. Everyone who cares about intellectual freedom in the American academy needs to know that there is real reason for hope. Or perhaps we should say that the enemies of freedom in today's academy have finally learned that they are playing with FIRE.

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Three years ago this October, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education was founded by right civil libertarian Alan Charles Kors and left civil libertarian Harvey Silverglate, best friends since college. That tells you something important. FIRE is about the respect for freedom of speech and conscience that used to unite all Americans, whatever their political persuasion. And truth to tell, despite the takeover of our college campuses by radicals who claim that classic liberalism is simply a cover for the power of oppressive elites, the great majority of the American people still believe in our traditional liberties.

That is the secret of FIRE's success. If FIRE had a motto, it would be Supreme Court Louis Brandeis's famous phrase: "Sunlight is the best disinfectant." Simply by publicizing (or by threatening to publicize) the worst campus abuses of individual freedom, FIRE has repeatedly succeeded in forcing radical professors and benighted college administrators to back down. In effect, FIRE works by deploying the good sense of the American people against the tyrannical machinations of our campus radicals.

As someone who follows these issues with care, I can tell you that I have rarely seen anything as exciting as an article about FIRE in a publication entitled, *Dean & Provost*. *Dean & Provost* is a specialized newsletter directed to high-level college administrators. The article in question featured an interview with FIRE founder, Alan Charles Kors, and told administrators in no uncertain terms that, while they might find Kors's views shocking or offensive, they had best be forewarned. In any controversy over speech codes, political indoctrination at freshman orientation, or the fairness of disciplinary proceedings against the politically incorrect, administrators would likely be facing either Kors himself, or one of his colleagues from FIRE. And in case after case, where they have indeed been confronted by Kors and his compatriots, college

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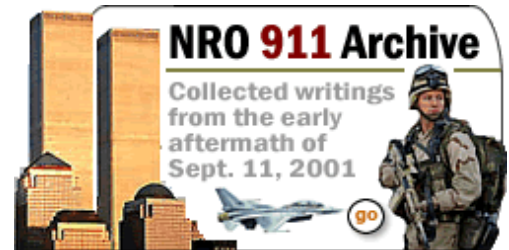
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administrators have been forced to surrender.

So what did Alan Charles Kors say to *Dean & Provost* that was so shocking and offensive? You really have to read the whole [interview](#), but here are some choice excerpts:

Q: Aren't chief academic officers damned if they do and damned if they don't as far as political correctness? How can they in all good conscience *not* protect minorities, women and gays and lesbians on campus?

Kors: What an absurd question. Chief academic officers should work to protect everyone on campus from crime, violence, and violations of their rights. What you term "minorities" (we are each a minority of one), and women, and gays and lesbians should have equal protection from crime, violence and violation of their rights. Rights belong to individuals; rights are not a zero sum game.

Q: How do minority professors and students feel about FIRE protesting against political correctness? Don't they expect to have a safe campus environment?

Kors: I don't distinguish students and professors by blood as you have just done, and I don't assume that there is a "minority" perspective that follows from blood. No one who tells people that they are too weak to live with freedom, legal equality, the Bill of Rights or academic freedom is their friend. Everyone expects a safe environment on campus. Anyone who initiates violence should be punished.

Anyone who has the presence of mind, the depth of understanding—and the sheer guts—to turn back such p.c. questions so brilliantly has my deepest regard. It saddens me (though it hardly surprises me) that we've reached a state where a publication like *Dean and Provosts* can find Kors's apt and admirable remarks offensive. But it delights me to imagine Kors and his friends sitting across the table from actual deans and provosts throughout the land—reading them the riot act in exactly this way.

That, in fact, is precisely what happens when FIRE goes to work. Seventy-five percent of FIRE's cases are successfully resolved without any publicity, chiefly because Kors and company privately let the administrators in question know what true liberty means—and promise that the world will hear about it if classic liberal principle is trampled. Again and again, politically correct administrators cave.

In its [first big case](#), FIRE went to the defense of a Christian student group at Tufts University which had refused to promote a member with an unorthodox view of scripture and sexuality. That member was a lesbian. When the Christian group was put on probation by Tufts, FIRE intervened, pointing out that a gay student group would not be put on probation for refusing to promote an Evangelical Christian with a traditional view of sexuality. Once a hair's-breadth from the grave, Tufts's Christian student group is now thriving.

FIRE has also made tremendous headway in its battle against the kangaroo-court disciplinary hearings commonly deployed against students and professors brought up on charges of sexual harassment or offensive speech. Largely because of public opposition orchestrated by FIRE's canny and articulate executive director, Thor Halvorssen, [Columbia University's draconian "sexual misconduct policy"](#) (i.e. sexual-harassment code) is on its last legs, while Harvard's code has already been reformed. Columbia's code denied all procedural rights to the accused, such as the right to an attorney, the right to cross-examine witnesses and the accuser, the right to an appeal,

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the right to an impartial jury, etc. With changes at universities like Harvard and Columbia, Halvorssen and FIRE may yet succeed in provoking a nation-wide reform of campus sexual harassment codes and rules for disciplinary hearings.

Another FIRE case shows why reform of these kangaroo-court college disciplinary proceedings is so desperately needed. In the wake of 9/11, FIRE went to the aid of Ken Hearlson, a tenured political-science instructor who was suspended and barred from the campus where he had taught for 18 years —without a proper hearing —after being accused by Muslim students of insulting them in class. After interviewing 25 witnesses and listening to audio tapes of the class, the accusations were found to be without merit. Yet even then —with taped proof of his innocence —it took publicity from FIRE to get justice for Hearlson. How many others are subject to punishment in kangaroo proceedings based on false accusations? What about those who are not fortunate enough to have audio tapes and an organization like FIRE on their side?

It isn't only conservatives who are defended by FIRE. Halvorssen makes it clear that FIRE would quickly come to the aid of a homosexual student group or a group of students who lionized Malcolm X, if they were denied money because of their views. You might say that finding a case like that is about as likely as finding the Easter Bunny. But last year, Linda McCarriston, a Marxist-Feminist professor at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, did indeed come under assault by radical students and craven administrators, for daring to criticize multiculturalism in her class, and for writing a poem about sexual abuse in native Alaskan culture. I wrote about this case in "[P.C. Hits Anchorage](#)," noting at the time the critical role played by FIRE in turning the tide in favor of McCarriston's academic freedom.

With these and many other victories under its belt, FIRE is on a roll, and well placed to make national reform of campus speech codes, college-sponsored political indoctrination, and kangaroo disciplinary proceedings a reality. Naturally, given the near-total domination of America's campuses by radicals with no love of liberty, too much optimism on this count would be foolish. But it is not at all unrealistic to say that, on many fronts, FIRE has given the opponents of campus p.c. a fighting chance —and more. This is a new and tremendously important development, and it deserves recognition.

Last academic year, with an enormous number of well-publicized and successful cases, FIRE truly came into it's own. But the battle has only begun. There are two things that readers can do —they can let FIRE help them, and they can help FIRE. As we head into the new school year, students and professors need to know that if their rights are violated, they can turn to FIRE. In fact, FIRE will soon make available a series of pamphlets that detail the rights to speech, freedom of conscience, and fair procedure to which all of America's students and professors are entitled. Armed with knowledge of their rights —and with the knowledge that they can call on the aid of FIRE should those rights be trampled —it will become increasingly difficult for politically correct professors and administrators to tyrannize their campuses.

For those with the inclination and the means to be of help in this battle, contributions to FIRE can make all the difference in the world. FIRE is not a wealthy organization, far from it. For three years, FIRE has worked miracles on a shoestring budget (both Kors and Silverglate serve without pay). But FIRE's success means that more and more students and professors who run afoul of political correctness are calling on FIRE's services. Without increased funding, FIRE will lose a rare opportunity to generate truly national victories against campus political correctness on several critical fronts. If you care at all about these issues —and want your contribution to actually *do* something —I know of nothing more effective than to feed the FIRE. Should you want to contribute, you can do so by clicking [here](#).

—[Stanley Kurtz](#) is a research fellow at the [Hoover Institution](#) at Stanford University.

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