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Helping students fight back

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I once went to a pound to get my family a dog I thought was a Labrador retriever. She turned out to be a mongrel, causing my wife to call her a "Labrador deceiver," but deceiver or not, she was sweet and lovable - though a coward.

When other dogs approached a youthful Molly Brown in a threatening manner, she would quickly lie on her back, sticking her paws in the air, as if to say she gave up and would raise no challenge to any affront.

All in all, the Molly Brown tactic was a good tactic for Molly Brown and those who cared for her. Although she wasn't the smallest of canines, she probably would have been chewed up badly in a fight. Or if I was trying to intervene on her behalf, I probably would have been bitten. The confrontational dogs would look at her in disgust and look at me to see if I was ashamed, but I could take it, and Molly Brown never seemed the least embarrassed once the danger had passed. I would prefer it, however, if Americans challenged by ideological enforcers would quit adopting this tactic. Americans will ordinarily stand up for themselves on most issues, but find it more difficult when accused of failing a political-correctness test. There is a danger of being branded a bigot. And especially on some college campuses, where speech control is dismayingly accepted by many as right and proper, the students or professors who speak their minds may find themselves standing alone.

Enter Alan Charles Kors. Several years ago, I heard him talk in Washington about the way universities were clamping down on free expression and was so taken by what he said that I later interviewed him on the phone for a Q&A article on the subject. Then, just a few months ago, I listened in my car to brilliant, taped lectures about Voltaire by this University of Pennsylvania history professor. Kors is himself Voltaire-like in his role as president of a group exposing the repression of free expression on the nation's campuses, as I was recently reminded when I received a donation-seeking letter from him.

In the letter, Kors told of a number of cases, such as one in which a naturalized citizen who had grown up in Ethiopia, Zewdalem Kebede, had argued with other students at San Diego State who were speaking in Arabic, which he understood. According to Kebede in an accompanying letter, the other students were "celebrating" the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and "praising Osama bin Laden." He says he had a "passionate discussion" with them - and later received a letter from the university "informing me I would be punished for my remarks."

A New York Times article quotes the San Diego administration as saying that the Arab students felt threatened. Kors writes that the issue was that Kebede's "questioning had offended the students, and he was to be investigated!" Kors' group - Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (www.thefire.org) - generated publicity about the incident, informed the student of his legal rights and secured an attorney to assist him if necessary. It wasn't necessary. San Diego State backed off.

Kors, who gives his time to this cause without recompense, writes that he receives letters about abuses of liberty daily. The universities, he reports, "punish individuals without even a semblance of fair procedure," and teach some terrible lessons. Students, he says, learn "to censor themselves so as not to say or do anything that may possibly bring them trouble." And when students "find themselves offended," he says, "they are taught that the appropriate response is not to discuss and debate, but rather to call upon coercive authority to silence those with whom they disagree by means of sweeping disciplinary action and thought reform."

As Kors reminds us, "Persuasion and moral witness, not repression, are the tools of a free people." How do you convince universities of that? Mainly, you arrange for publicity. "Universities cannot defend in public what they do in private," Kors writes.

It's still the case, says Kors, that "most faculty and students submit meekly or fatalistically to repression of their speech." But the more his organization gets known and draws attention to what's happening, the less students and faculty behave like Molly Brown. Instead, it's the universities that lie down on their backs, hoping the press will go away. It does my heart good to see them behaving like that, but I doubt I'll ever find them as lovable as a Labrador retriever who has grown very old.