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SAVING AMERICA'S FREEDOM: A CALL TO ACTION
A Review of *No University Is an Island*

Can the university be saved from the forces of “neoliberal ideology and managerial administrative style that have overtaken higher education”? Does the new generation of professors, those who have entered the academe in the last two decades, have the determination to resist the effort to destroy the university as it has emerged during the last century in order to replace it with a variation of the nineteenth-century high school? These are the fundamental questions that AAUP national president Professor Cary Nelson grapples with in his new book, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York: New York University Press).

Cary posits first the question “What is academic freedom”? But that question is part of a larger problematic: What is the university in which academic freedom is to be housed? Beginning as a training ground for priests, physicians, and eventually also the king's managers, the university served to maintain the ruler and the ruling system. Over centuries of struggle, culminating in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the university slowly escaped the clutches of those who lacking the force of faith in an educated people relied instead on force. For Cary, that victory is now in peril. Why?

Two social forces have combined to create the perfect storm. The first is the managerialization, the Enronization, of university administration. Rather than seeing the university as the place where ideas are contested, where “truths” are challenged, and above all else citizens, not subjects, are created (for citizenship is a learned social responsibility whereas subjection is a condition of servitude), the regents, presidents, and provosts of most universities and colleges today seek to transform the university into a handmaiden for business and industry whose primary purpose is to increase the profits and power of those already in power. In this medievalization of the university, the primary product should be the same as for the nineteenth-century high school—obedient, well-trained workers who do not question and who are “loyal,” unquestioning subjects. Faculty (employees) are there to “train” future employees (students), and to the maximum the production of products that can be marketed by the university itself. University administrators are there to discipline the faculty and prevent them from poisoning the minds of a new generation with heretical ideas of citizenship. For it is the latter, the creation of a free society, built on reason not obedience, that Cary argues to be the lost purpose of the university, the true meaning of academic freedom.

In the mindless pursuit of dollar signs, university administrators (and Cary spends much time describing the process at his own university, the University of Illinois) have launched a campaign to “kill off or curtail what fails the test of

profitability” in the name of “excellence”: “In a semiliterate plan for the future, my chancellor touts “excellence” over and over again. But he does not actually mean excellence within disciplinary understanding and judged by intellectual standards. He is not talking about quality. Excellence to him means entrepreneurial skill and success.” And in the corporate university, the humanities and social sciences fail the “excellence test” of entrepreneurship and profitability, and thus should be underfunded if not eliminated.

The success of Enronization demands that faculty be gelded. That demands that tenure and shared governance be weakened where it cannot be destroyed. Whereas it has proven difficult simply to eliminate tenure, it has been surprisingly easy to reduce the proportion of tenured faculty, faculty who by virtue of their rights of academic freedom, including the freedom to challenge the diktats of corporate/university administrators through mechanisms of shared governance, might upset corporate plans. From 1975 to 2007, Cary demonstrates, the percentage of American faculty either tenured or tenure eligible was cut in half, from 56.8 percent to 31.2 percent. Simultaneously the percentage of contingent faculty rose from 43.2 percent to 68.2 percent. That latter percentage has continued to grow over the past two years. Contingent faculty, facing daily the threat of dismissal without cause, are far more likely to practice self-censorship and fall before the hammer blows of corporate masters. In tandem with this transmogrification of the faculty has been the withering of faculty oversight through shared governance over programmatic development, budget allocation, and educational mission. “Thus . . . as shared governance declines and managerial administration rises, tenure and academic freedom will mean less than they have for nearly half a century. . . . The contingent world without tenure is a living laboratory for higher education as a whole. The results of experiments conducted there will not bring good news to any of us.”

The academic managers have been assisted by the organized Right in American politics. First the Right red-baited the judicial system, then the so-called liberal press, both of which Cary points out “went belly up” as witnessed by the U.S. Senate handing the Right the federal judiciary and the press handing President Bush the Iraq war along with his non-existent “weapons of mass destruction” justification. “Now higher education is being red-baited in the same way, with hyperbolic accusations of left-wing bias. The aim is the same: to house-break yet another independent democratic institution.”

The second social force threatening the democratic purpose of the university—the recreation every generation of critical citizens empowered by the force of the mind to protect and expand the gains of democracy—is the insouciance of faculty hired within the past twenty years. Cary sees a younger faculty immersed in careerism and oblivious to the forces threatening to turn the university into one more factory. The key, in part, is the redefinition of faculty self-interest: “We need to encourage models of faculty identity that combine careerism with social responsibility.”

The means to restoring the university to its rightful purpose, Cary argues, is organization—whether in the form of active AAUP chapters, faculty unions, graduate student [i.e. future faculty] unions, or campaigns to improve the professional conditions and academic rights of contingent faculty or the working conditions of staff on campuses. But this, Cary admits, runs counter to many faculty’s existing

identity: “Faculty’s fear of collective action—revulsion at the thought of having their imperial, transcendent individual agency smothered in mob rule—is their version of horror at gay marriage, a form of false consciousness learned at the cradle of the academy.” Cary’s hope is that the very victory of corporate administrators will wake faculty to the threats that surround the university: “losing power over the curriculum, watching institutional mission morph from education into job training, watching administrative salaries soar, witnessing the sheer number of administrative positions multiply like the triffids of the 1962 science-fiction film, and seeing the teaching profession reduced to the academic equivalent of fast-food employment will [hopefully] lead faculty to realize that their self-interest does not reside in group impotence.”

Cary is not naïve about the ability of the AAUP to lead in this process of saving America’s freedom. For one “the neoliberal managerial ideology that increasingly dominates higher education means that administrators are generally less concerned about AAUP censure and faculty disapproval.” Second, Cary has grave concerns about the workings of the national AAUP office, especially over the past decade, concerns that make for difficult reading: the administrative collapse that was reflected in the fiscal crisis of 2005-2006, the overweening authority of AAUP staff, the wariness of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure to take on some of the most challenging cases. Yet Cary remains confident in the ability of an organized faculty to resist: “Those faculty members who have given up need to wake up instead, because higher education’s governing principles of academic freedom and shared governance need not be lost if we are willing to fight. Resistance is not futile, especially if we have an alternative vision to offer, if we can promote community and citizenship in place of the ruthless economic philosophy that is increasingly shaping our fate.”

Some in the Georgia Conference may well find parts of Cary’s argument with which to disagree. Free academics debate. But looking at the past several years in Georgia, we cannot be blind to the forces that Cary describes: the efforts to introduce in the legislature the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights”; the creation of a “tenure-free” new unit in the University System; the unrestrained growth in the employment of faculty off tenure; the use of post-tenure review as a means to punish “uncooperative” faculty; the cancellation of campus talks by “radicals”; the determination of policies, including recently the imposition of furloughs, without appropriate faculty involvement; and the careerism that leads some faculty to ask “Why should I pay dues to the AAUP?” Defeating the threats to America’s freedom, because the threat to academic freedom is nothing less, will not be easy. But unless we are willing to join battle together, we are left with but individual and group impotence. Ask one colleague to join the AAUP; host one meeting on campus to discuss the threats to the academy; resist one ignorant action. Be free.

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