

Your speech is violence': the left's new mantra to justify campus violence

BY JONATHAN TURLEY, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR -
06/03/23 10:30 AM ET

"Silence is violence." When those words became a popular mantra years ago on college campuses, I wrote that the anti-free speech movement was moving toward compelled speech while declaring dissenting views to be harmful.

Today, it isn't just silence that is considered violence on college campuses. It is also speech, as both faculty and students are actively shutting down opposing views on subjects ranging from abortion to climate change to transgender issues.

Recently, many people were shocked by a videotape of Hunter College professor Shellyne Rodríguez trashing a pro-life student display in New York. Most were focused on her profanity and vandalism, but there were familiar phrases that appeared in her diatribe to the clearly shocked students.

Before trashing the table, she told the students, "You're not educating s-t [...] This is f-king propaganda. What are you going to do, like, anti-trans next? This is bulls-t. This is violent. You're triggering my students."

The videotape revealed one other thing. At Hunter College, and at other colleges, it seems that trashing a pro-life student display and abusing pro-life students is not considered a firing offense. Hunter College refused to fire Rodríguez.

The PSC Graduate Center, the labor organization of graduate and professional schools at the City University of New York, supported that decision and said Rodríguez was "justified" in trashing the display, which the organization described as "dangerously false propaganda" and "disinformation."

Rodríguez later put a machete to the neck of a reporter, threatened to chop him up and then chased a news crew down a street with the machete in hand. Somewhere between the machete to the neck and chasing the reporters down the street, Hunter College finally decided that Rodríguez had to go.

Rodríguez denounced the school for having “capitulated” to “racists, white nationalists, and misogynists.” She explained that her firing was just a continuation of “attacks on women, trans people, black people, Latinx people, migrants, and beyond.”

The redefinition of opposing views as “violence” is a favorite excuse for violent groups like antifa, which continue to physically assault speakers with pro-life and other disfavored views. As explained by Rutgers Professor Mark Bray’s in his “Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook,” the group believes that “‘free speech’ as such is merely a bourgeois fantasy unworthy of consideration.”

As one antifa member explained, free speech is a “nonargument...you have the right to speak but you also have the right to be shut up.”

When people criticized antifa for its violent philosophy, MSNBC’s Joy Reid responded to the critics that “you might be the fascist.”

Faculty members have followed this sense of license to silence others. Former CUNY law dean Mary Lu Bilek even insisted that disrupting a speech on free speech was free speech. (Hunter is part of the CUNY system.)

The same week as the Rodríguez attack at the State University of New York at Albany, sociology professor Renee Overdyke shut down a pro-life display and then allegedly resisted arrest.

Just last week, the Pride Office website at the University of Colorado (Boulder) declared that misgendering people can be considered an “act of violence.”

This week, University of Michigan economics professor Justin Wolfers declared that some of those boycotting the store Target over its line of Pride Month clothing were engaging in “literal terrorism.” (He insists that he was referring to those confronting Target employees.)

Faculty have also justified attacks on pro-life figures. At the University of California, Santa Barbara, feminist studies associate professor Mireille Miller-Young physically assaulted pro-life advocates and tore down their display.

She pleaded guilty to criminal assault, but the university refused to fire her. Instead, some faculty and students defended her, including claiming that pro-life displays constitute terrorism. The University of Oregon would later honor Miller-Young as a model for women advocates.

Likewise, at Fresno State University, public health professor Dr. Gregory Thatcher recruited students to destroy pro-life messages.

Other faculty have called for or countenanced violence against Republicans or conservatives. Professors have shouted down speakers, destroyed property, participated in riots and verbally attacked students.

University of Rhode Island professor Erik Loomis defended the murder of a conservative protester and said he saw "nothing wrong" with such acts of violence. He was later elevated to the position of director of graduate studies of history.

As faculty commit or support violence, students are assured that others are the violent ones. Recently, at the University of Texas at Austin, Professor Kirsten Bradbury tested her students on psychology by asking them "which sociodemographic group is most likely to repeatedly violate the rights of others in a pattern of behavior that includes violence, deceit, irresponsibility, and a lack of remorse?" Of course, the answer was wealthy white men.

The lesson took with students. A recent poll shows that 41 percent of college students now believe violence is justified to fight hate speech. At Cornell, a conservative speaker was shouted down, met with the common mantra that "your words are violence." At Case Western, the student newspaper editorialized against university recognition of a pro-life group because its pro-life views are "inherently violent" and "a danger to the student body." At Wellesley, student editors declared that it was time to shut down conservative speakers and that "hostility may be warranted." They added, "The spirit of free speech is to protect the suppressed, not to protect a free-for-all where anything is acceptable, no matter how hateful and damaging."

Those views did not spontaneously appear in the minds of these students. At one time, tolerance for free speech was the very touchstone of higher education and a common article of faith for students. These students are the product of years of being told that free speech is dangerous and harmful if left unregulated. From elementary school to college, they were taught that they did not have to be "triggered" by the speech of others.

We are still (thankfully) drawing the line at machete attacks. But it is the underlying views of Rodríguez that are the true threat, and they are being replicated throughout the country. We are raising a generation of censors and speech-phobics.

If we want to stop or reverse this trend, Congress must act. I have proposed legislation that would deny federal funding to schools that do not protect core free speech principles. We are funding schools that are taking a machete to the defining right for our democracy.

It is akin to the resolution recently of an antifa member who took an axe to Sen. John Hoeven's (R-N.D.) office in Fargo. Thomas "Tas" Alexander Starks, 31, was given probation...and his axe back.

We may not be able to deter people from speaking through machetes and axes, but we can at least stop subsidizing the hardware.

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