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Little Red Herrings — Is Intellectual Freedom at Risk?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Just about everyone has weighed in on the most recent elections, so I won't, at least not immediately. The attacks on intellectual freedom at our nation's campuses of higher education, however, are raising their ugly, transmogrified faces all too routinely.

I have been writing about intellectual freedom off and on for the duration of my career. I began with a piece back in the 1980s, followed that up with a few presentations at various conferences. Later, I even pulled together several essays by various and sundry writers on the topic for the journal, *Society*. Unfortunately, very little of what I or anyone else has written about the topic appears to have made any difference.

Recent events at **Middlebury College** (<http://nyti.ms/2n24WVY>) illustrate this point most spitefully, giving even the most hardened observers pause. **Middlebury College** is located in Middlebury, Vermont and is a small liberal arts institution of about 2,500 students. Granted, the college isn't known for its conservative bent; indeed, it's safe to say that it doesn't really have a "bent" that is conservative at all — just a few students who may lean a bit to the right. And that's where the trouble began.

Will DiGravio, a student in Film Studies and English, is editor of the campus paper. The paper published a piece by the school's American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Club. The piece advertised an event with the author **Charles Murray** and his book titled *Coming Apart*, a book that focuses on the disenfranchisement of the white working class. **Murray** has written a number of books, many of them controversial, and none more controversial than the mammoth best-selling tome he co-authored with the late **Richard Herrnstein**, *The Bell Curve*. **Murray** is fellow at AEI, a conservative think tank in D.C. One may agree or disagree with his work, but he is a brilliant and compelling writer regardless. President **Laurie Patton** of **Middlebury** was to introduce **Murray**, and Professor **Allison Stanger** of the Political Science department agreed to moderate the discussion.

On the surface, this looked to be what we in higher education live our lives for. Moreover, it's what we in libraries and other staunch supporters of intellectual freedom preach about: balance in the marketplace of ideas. Here we had a highly credentialed intellectual coming to discuss and even debate his work with those who were not even a little like-minded. While my own college days are no more than a distant memory, I can still remember spending hours listening to speakers with whom I agreed or disagreed, not to mention dozens of professors who soothed my conscience or raised my hackles. Frankly, both were learning experiences, even those in which I felt I would suffocate before I got out of the building.

Unfortunately, at **Middlebury**, things did not go as planned. Even before **Murray** arrived, hundreds of students and alumni called his appearance "unacceptable and unethical," and more than fifty faculty asked that **Patton** not introduce this "discredited

ideologue." After all this, things really went downhill fast (**Murray's** take on the event is here: <http://bit.ly/2lZ1fzn>).

A crowd of about 400 students stood with their backs to **Murray**, and chanted for so long and so loud that he could not speak. He left with Professor **Stanger** of **Middlebury** and went to a prearranged location where he delivered his talk that was livestreamed to 300 students. When **Murray** and Professor **Stanger** left the location, more protestors accosted them and became so violent they physically abused both **Murray** and **Stanger**. **Stanger** was later treated at a local hospital for a concussion. Last April I wrote about political correctness and how many comedians now refused to speak at campuses. The events at **Middlebury** drive home that point even more sadly, more brutally.

Now not all of the protestors attend **Middlebury**. Of that, one can be almost certain. But many do and they were intransigent in their dislike of **Murray**, so much so that they were willing to do anything — anything necessary — to prevent him from speaking. Fortunately, many on the **Middlebury** administration in charge of the event had foreseen the uproar and had made backup plans so those wishing to hear **Murray** could. **Middlebury** is very much in the soul-searching mode right now, and that is a good thing. President **Patton** is already taking steps (<http://bit.ly/2meQIRu>) to assure this will never happen again, or so one can hope.

I am troubled by this event and others like it, not so much about who it is, but that it happened at all. Sure, many campus speakers stir up controversy, but not many are greeted in this manner. Is this where the most recent elections have left us? It would appear so, since many unhappy with the results have acted out their displeasure in the same manner: rioting, terrorizing, and looting. For all the hoopla we in higher education make about critical thinking skills, is this where it has left us: unwilling even to listen to others with whom we viscerally disagree?

Yes, I know **Murray's** work and I have read *The Bell Curve*. (As it turned out, almost no one by their own admission — faculty or students at **Middlebury** — had read anything by **Murray**). And yes, I understand that it's controversial and to many it is loathsome. We'll set aside that **Murray** wasn't there to talk about the twenty-year old book but about his new work on the white working class. As **ALA** has argued, free speech isn't free if it eliminates the very things that we may find personally objectionable.

For those of us who work in libraries, regardless of our political leanings, this, and the subsequent post-election behavior of some, should be disturbing. If intellectual freedom means this, then we must admit it is neither intellectual nor free, but myopic and hidebound. Further, we should consider that we have failed miserably at our jobs as librarians, faculty, and higher education administrators. 🍌



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Endnotes

1. A "Penthouse Interview" with **Russell** at the **2016 Charleston Conference** was published on the **ATG** website at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMYU294IZxs&feature=youtu.be>.
2. Reprinted in the Foreword to *Public Information: Access and Benefits* and also available at 4uth.gov/usa/English/politics/assess/vol3.pdf.
3. Additional information about the **Elsevier** project is available in *Collaborative Librarianship*, Vol. 8 (2016), "Academic Library and Publisher Collaboration: Utilizing an Institutional Repository to Maximize the Visibility and Impact of Articles by University Authors" (<http://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol8/iss2/4/>).