

OPERATION INFINITE JEST

THE RETURN OF THE CULTURE WARS

By Chris Lehmann

One hundred and fifteen people have vanished, and I'm trying to figure out why. The bodies in question had appeared by name in a report bearing the near-operatic title "Defending Our Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America And What Can Be Done About It." The report is the handiwork of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a group co-founded in 1995 by Lynne Cheney and Sen. Joseph Lieberman to raise periodic alarms over the state of higher learning in America. Previously the ACTA had issued reports that denounced the atrophy of history requirements on American campuses and the PC excesses of today's scholarship in Shakespeare studies.

This time, however, the group was seeking to document a more pressing threat: that America's "college and university faculty have been the weak link" in the country's mobilization against terrorism. As the authors of the report, Anne Neal and Jerry Martin, put it in a much quoted passage from the introduction: "The message of much of academe was clear: BLAME AMERICA FIRST."

The report puts this dismaying reflex down largely to a pedagogical failure: "Expressions of pervasive moral relativism are a staple of academic life in this country and an apparent symptom of an educational system that has increasingly suggested that Western civilization is the primary source of the world's ills—even though it gave us the ideals of democracy, human rights, individual liberty, and mutual tolerance." To drive this impression home in a dramatic fashion, the bulk of "Defending Civilization" is devoted to an exhaustive-looking appendix, much longer than the main text, in which 115 utterances of various alleged "Blame America First" sentiments were presented to elicit shock and outrage.

By early December, however, the names attached to these statements had disappeared—yanked off the ACTA Web site and excised from the final versions that would be sent out to the group's members. Rumors began to circulate among professors and campus activists that the names had been pulled out because far-right thugs were

already seizing upon the report as a hit list, in much the same fashion that anti-choice zealots used Internet directories listing the names and addresses of abortion providers as assassination manuals.

When I put this question to Anne Neal, she grows indignant. "I'm amazed at the hyperbolic, imaginary claims being made by professors. Are they saying they can't be criticized?" Yet Neal supplies only the most elliptical explanation of this odd vanishing act: "We are interested in what's being said, and the fact that it's being said by faculty and not students. Who the particular speakers are is not important."

I go through a litany of obvious objections: The group's report claims that the whole campus debate over the war is one-sided, yet the ACTA won't even permit those whom they've accused—not always accurately—to answer. And excising the identities of the speakers and writers seems downright perverse for a group championing higher academic standards. Would the ACTA accept anonymous quotes in academic papers—or, for that matter, in this article?

"The names can be traced through the citations," Neal says, referring to the footnotes at the end of the report. "The focus of the report for the trustees and alumni who will get the report eventually is this striking cleavage between the intellectual elite and the rest of the country."

But doesn't a single block of unsourced type amount to a willful distortion of what actual people said in specific situations? Isn't the ACTA concerned about its credibility? "I'm saying the sources are identifiable to the audience," Neal replies. "We're talking about the atmosphere. The atmosphere is what's important."

The atmosphere on my end of the conversation is starting to billow with fog. I ring off with Neal—who in spite of her unyielding determination to remain on message (and contrary to the standard Punch-and-Judy scripting of American culture warfare) is neither unreasonable nor noticeably Manichean in temperament. I feel, nevertheless, like I've clambered out of a rabbit hole.

Maybe some math will help. I return to the appendix of "Defending Our Civilization," which I had printed out before the disappearance. As I pore over the appen-



dix, it gradually dawns on me that there weren't really 115 speakers in the first place: Several of the quotes are multiple entries attributed to the same person. William Blum, identified only as a "journalist at a University of North Carolina teach-in" rates three entries, with walk-on lines such as "there are few if any nations in the world that have harbored more terrorists than the United States."

Stan Goff, a "panelist" at the same UNC event, appears twice, with gnomic prophecies like: "We will tumble from chauvinism into the abyss of recession and tribalism." And slogans from demonstration placards are quoted repeatedly (mainly old standbys like "an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind")—even though we have no way of knowing whether the placard-brandishers in question are even members of a university community. Still other entries describe genuinely bone-headed bids by one or another university administration to tamp down expression—reprimanding student editorial cartoonists and blocking faculty Web sites that support the U.S. war effort—on grounds that they would somehow injure the sensibilities of minority and foreign students. (Each of these oafish actions, in addition, appears to have been reversed after formal protests were lodged.)

I decide to tally up the list again, taking care to set aside the utterances by students, journalists and panelists, the unsourced protest slogans and the actions by administrators. The report, after all, has stipulated faculty to be "the weak link" here—and it is, by the lights of the ACTA, professors who are charged with transmitting the ideals of our civilization on to the next generation. My count yields 63 utterances

nonce, at least, our civilization seems to be spared organized betrayal at the hands of inside agitators.

The point of all this is not, per the usual strictures of our culture wars, to demonize the ACTA as the real threat to our civilization, to dismiss them as overheated propagandists or lackeys of right-wing foundations. It is, rather, to begin to circle around a bigger question: Where has such rhetoric come from? Why do so many of the most dubious assumptions of culture warfare—that culture is principally an instrument of social control; that the tics of cultural selection are proper materials for bitter, protracted public argument—receive such ready assent on either side of the battle? And why, especially at the height of a clear and pressing threat to America's global interests and domestic security, do the partisans insist that such questions matter now more than ever? Why is a war against terrorism, of all things, so often portrayed as culture war by other means?

Lest you think I exaggerate, or lay the brunt of the indictment too squarely on the culture warriors of the right, consider what is emerging as a common theme of left-liberal commentary on the war against the Taliban: Having routed a deranged, fundamentalist foreign government on the field of battle, we should now dial the Kulturkampf up another notch at home. "The struggle of democratic secularism, religious tolerance, individual freedom and feminism against authoritarian patriarchal religion, culture and morality is going on all over the world," Ellen Willis announced in a recent *Nation* article, echoing sentiments already aired by Christopher Hitchens and Michael Lind. "The culture war has been a centerpiece of American politics for 30 years or more, shaping our debates and our policies on everything from abortion, censorship and crime to race, education and social welfare. ... Yet we shrink from seeing the relation between our own cultural conflicts and the logic of *jihād*."

This tight identification of religious crusades, East and West, flows, naturally enough, from a single, pleasure-hating psychic structure. "If exposure to forbidden freedoms aroused in Osama bin Laden and his confrères unconscious rage at their own repression," Willis writes, "what better way to ward off the devil than to redirect that rage against it? And if the World Trade Center represented global

capitalism ... wasn't there yet another, more primal brand of symbolism embodied in those twin phalluses?"

Going the epic civilizational theses of Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama one better, Willis pleads that culture conflict should form a central plank in U.S. foreign policy from now on. "There are many things to be learned from the shock of September 11," she writes. "Surely one of the most important is that culture is not only a political matter, but a matter of life and death. ... To recognize that the enemy is fundamentalism itself—not the 'evil' anti-American fundamentalists, as opposed to the allegedly friendly kind—is also to make a statement about American cultural politics." And taking a final swipe at center and left efforts to downplay cultural struggles in deference to more conventional economic and political ones, Willis delivers a solemn envoi: "It remains to be seen whether fear of terrorism trumps fear of facing our own cultural contradictions."



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by non-professors (or by sources too vaguely characterized to be presumed to be anything)—leaving 54 faculty members on the list. (At least four of these remarks, in addition, came from faculty who are on record supporting the war—Todd Gitlin, Richard Falk, Strobe Talbott and Paul Kennedy. The first three of these, moreover, were prominent figures in the '60s anti-war moment, so their endorsement of a U.S. military action seems far more noteworthy than any qualifications they may have attached to it.)

Still, hewing to the most generous interpretation of things, the ACTA turned up 54 faculty members who said something in public that could be construed as critical of American foreign policy. There are probably more university faculty who are practicing Wiccans or Freemasons—and certainly more who are creationists. In other words, one might safely conclude that the fifth column of the ACTA's feverish imaginings resembles something more like a toothpick; for the

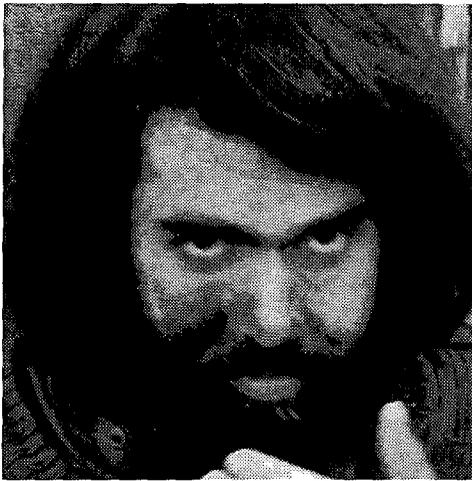
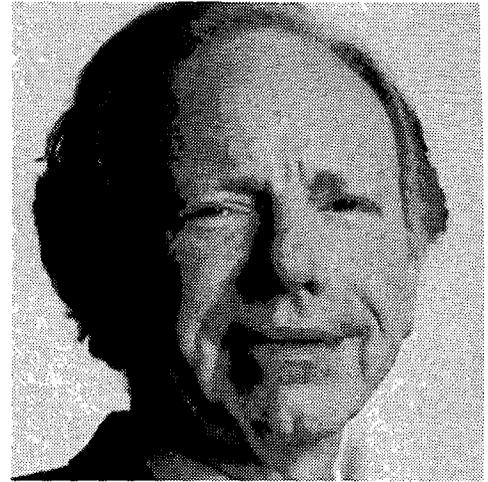
There are many immediate objections to raise to such rhetoric. First, there's the tacit moral equation of al-Qaeda, which targets thousands of innocent civilians for death, with American Protestants who overwhelmingly practice peaceful (if lavishly funded) political persuasion. As appealing as such analogies may sound to the arch-secularist ear, there remains a great difference between church-pamphleteering or campaigning for school board slates and blowing up embassies and skyscrapers.

Or consider that Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have been in the worst possible political odor ever since their joint announcement on the September 13 broadcast of the *700 Club* that the World Trade Center attacks bespoke the judgment of an angry god on a decadent, fetus-aborting, gay-tolerant nation. To the extent there has been an explicit linkage of domestic fundamentalism with the al-Qaeda brand, in other words, it has been vigorously and all but universally repudiated. Finally, a less tendentious acquaintance with Freud might have led Willis to conclude that the very function of culture is largely to sustain and express "cultural contradictions"—the clash of instinct and civilization, reason and desire, the universal and the particular—not to deliver them before warring camps for resolution, on the world-historical stage of foreign policy, no less.

Willis' eager demonization of the fundamentalists poses a more central problem, which oddly enough brings to mind the ACTA's own lamentations on the abysmal state of historical knowledge in the United States. Hard as it may be to imagine today, American fundamentalists were a political nullity through much of their early career. Early fundies read with exceptionally literal rigor the Bible's various admonitions to leave the arrangements of worldly power and property to those on their own likely course to perdition; such matters were no concern of the solemn believer.

What changed all this was an exceptionally bitter culture war. As America prepared to enter World War I, American fundamentalists were targeted in various propaganda outlets for their official stance of otherworldly neutrality. Ardent academic propagandists whipped up the perception that fundamentalists were in the thrall of German biblical scholarship and hence covert sympathizers with the enemy Huns (a particularly bizarre claim, since Germany was also home to the new modernist brand of historical biblical scholarship that fundamentalism initially arose to demolish).

After enduring such slanders, American fundamentalists resolved that they could no longer afford to remain aloof from



All the rage (clockwise from top left): the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman, Taliban fighter John Walker Sidh and journalist Christopher Hitchens.

political affairs. Resolutions were passed at regional conferences, candidates endorsed, and a doctrinal hue and cry went forth to demonstrate once and for all the rock-solid Americanism of the fundamentalist faith. And so the path was cleared for full fundamentalist participation in the great Kulturkamps of the 1920s, such as the crusades for Prohibition and the "Americanization" of immigrants, and the battle over teaching evolution in the schools.

Much the same dynamic holds for the political prominence of fundamentalism in today's politics. Paul Weyrich, the mailing-list baron of the religious right, reports that it was neither the *Roe v. Wade* decision nor the vast godless agora of mass entertainment that produced the great upsurge in conservative Protestant political activism in the '80s. Rather, the religious right's great organizing putsch was sparked by a fairly obscure 1978 directive from the Internal Revenue Service that religious private schools were to be denied tax-exempt status if they did not meet racial quotas.

In other words, American fundamentalists felt (with some justification) that their religious schools—themselves a hallmark of believers' will to separate from mainstream civic life—were being singled out for discriminatory treatment from a hostile state. And so commenced the successive fundraising, voter-registration and school-board election drives that turned the Christian right into one of the bedrocks of modern Amer-

ican conservatism. (The order itself generated 100,000 letters of protest and was reversed by Congress the following year.) It is up to future historians of liberal decline to decide whether the zealous pursuit of racial quotas in already conservative religious educational institutions was really worth the enormous, rightward transformation of American politics that ensued. But such historical set pieces do suggest, at the very least, that we think twice before we open up a new rolling domestic front of our war against terrorism that targets biblical literalists for vague and unappeasable cultural retribution.

Nevertheless, the current, reigning vision of America's war on terror as a pitched battle of towering, intractable civilizational premises seems certain to guarantee that the culture warriors on the left and right alike will continue exploiting the conflict for their pet domestic agendas. It seems all the more likely to proceed further down this course, indeed, now that the military phase of the Afghan war has yielded such unexpected, immediate results. In this setting, the egghead-baiting of the right and the fundie-baiting of the left are two sides of the same well-worn coin: The selective vetting of an extreme minority body of opinion is made, via the curious alchemy of culture determinism, to stand in for an entire sensibility imagined to be gaining covert command of the culture at large.

On the right, a think tank produces a harum-scarum collection of decontextualized—and, finally, unattributed—utterances and anecdotes, seeking to conjure up a monolithic, America-hating professoriat out of thin air (or, more precisely, out of a misleading assemblage of administrative actions, recycled news items, teach-in sloganeers and demonstration placards). On the left, never-specified Christian authoritarians, wracked by weird patriarchal libidinal demons, morph blurrily into stealth global terrorists for whom no sacrifice of civilians is too great and no military engagement is too bloody.

And on it goes. No sooner had John Walker Sidh, the 20-year-old Taliban warrior from Marin County, California, stumbled out of a Mazzar-e-Sharif prison compound than a fresh round of pundit-flak from culture alarmists commenced. It turns out that, as a troubled teen, Walker had posed on Internet listserv as a street-tough rap music connoisseur. He'd converted to Islam after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was named for John Lennon and enjoyed the full doting attentions of divorced parents who encouraged their son to sample the teachings of other religious traditions. Presto, English professor Shelby Steele announced on the *Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page: "A certain cultural liberalism cleared the way for [Walker's] strange odyssey of belief."

Walker was prepared for his seduction by Islam, Steele opines, by a "post-'60s cultural liberalism (more than political liberalism) that gave every step toward treason a feel of authenticity and authority." And sure enough, Steele summons up, in the next breath, the same wayward vectors of lapsed American cultural authority so prominently demonized by the ACTA: "This liberalism thrives as a subversive, winking, countercultural hipness. We saw it in the stream of 'hip' academics and intellectuals who—no sooner than the planes had struck—began to slash at their own country as if to keep it from gaining any victim's authority of its own."

Steele appears to have given the right's culture front an ugly new methodological twist: Where the ACTA was content to eradicate named human subjects in its quest after a convenient monolith of opinion, Steele opportunistically overstuffs an already prominent adolescent psyche with his own didactic script of culture warfare. It seems quite plain, however, that if John Walker had not existed, conservative culture warriors would have had to invent him—as indeed they have, in spite of knowing next to nothing about his actual existence. One awaits with a weary heart the arrival of the first leftist op-ed depicting Walker as the wholesale product of a divorced couple wrestling with the intolerable contradictions of a Catholic morality.



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There should be some exit point from such giddy invocations of the iron determinism of culture, especially since they spring from a little-noted paradox: Our generation of high-culture warfare invests the products of American culture with this sort of world-historical import at the very time when its chosen content is so resolutely trivial. One of the early bits of popular soothsaying in the immediate aftermath of September 11 was that we would soon find ourselves awash in a New Seriousness—that the childish things of '90s boom culture and Bill Clinton's America would wither away, and America would be briskly reprogrammed to adhere to the reveries of our sober anchorman-propagandists for the Greatest Generation. Moreover, the argument went, the very virtues that had made the United States target of first resort for the medieval reprisals of al-Qaeda—ethnic pluralism, gender equality, religious tolerance—should bring a long-overdue renaissance of American civic culture.

Oddly, however, we are using the materials of our culture to jury-rig a domestic politics that consistently denies the free play of these virtues. Tolerance, for Shelby Steele, segues briskly into moral relativism and treason; for Ellen Willis, it cannot be imagined to extend to the warped phalocrats of American fundamentalism. The ACTA defends free speech on campus, but reserves its own right to conceal the identities of speakers. And all of these partisans militate on behalf of the broad mandate to continue waging the culture wars with redoubled force here at home. If we really want our culture to bear the sort of meaning we imagine it has, we should try approaching it as the outcome of something like reasoned debate rather than as a spoil of war. ■

Chris Lehmann, former culture and managing editor of *In These Times*, is a senior editor for the *Washington Post Book World*.

The Arms Dealer Next Door

International billionaire, French prisoner, Angolan weapons broker, Arizona Republican. Who is Pierre Falcone?

By Ken Silverstein

On December 1, billionaire businessman Pierre Falcone walked out of the Fleury-Merogis prison near Paris after a judge opted not to prolong his provisional detention. Despite having spent a full year behind bars, it's doubtful that Falcone felt a great sense of relief that day.

The key player in a huge scandal that has tarnished some of France's best-known politicians, Falcone is still expected to stand trial later this year for his role in the sale of half a billion dollars worth of Eastern European weapons to Angola. He obtained his release only after paying a \$15 million bail, turning over his passport to the court, and accepting severe restrictions on his movements and activities.

Falcone was initially charged with illegal arms dealing because he allegedly brokered the Angola sales without authorization from the French government agency that reviews weapons exports, but prosecutors later dropped that count due to a legal technicality. He remains accused of bribing numerous prominent parties to further his arms business—most notably Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, son of ex-President Francois Mitterrand—and of failing to pay tens of millions of dollars in taxes on profits from the Angola deals, legal or not.

Though largely unreported, the man at the center of "Angolagate," as the French press has dubbed the scandal, has extensive American ties. Falcone's primary residence is a mammoth estate in Paradise Valley, Arizona, where he and his wife, Sonia, a former Miss Bolivia International, are active in political and community affairs. Falcone's American activities range from advising a major U.S. oil company to teaming with a Virginia-based arms dealer who has worked for both the CIA and Saddam Hussein. What's more, a floundering health and beauty company run by Sonia Falcone made a controversial \$100,000 donation to the Republican Party during the 2000 presidential campaign.

Beyond Falcone's own stake in the legal outcome, Angolagate has significant geopolitical implications. Angola has emerged as one of the world's leading oil producers—it is now America's ninth-largest supplier, ahead of Kuwait and England and right behind Norway and Colombia—and is sitting on enormous untapped reserves. But civil war and rampant corruption in Angola, which serves as the backdrop to the Falcone affair, has kept the country isolated on the international stage and its economy in shambles. "Angola is going to remain a pariah as long as the government keeps cutting deals with people like Falcone," says a former State Department official who has closely followed Angolagate. "It sends a terrible message to the rest of Africa, because if Angola can't make it with all of its energy resources, there's not much hope for the rest of the continent."

When I first heard about Pierre Falcone—and his beautiful Bolivian wife, vast wealth and jet-setting lifestyle—I imagined a dapper, handsome man straight out of a John Le Carré novel. It came as something of a surprise when I first saw his picture, which revealed him to be a plump, balding man who looked more like an upscale insurance salesman than a covert operator.

Falcone was born in 1954 in Algeria, which was then under French rule. His father, Pierre Sr., was the mayor of a town called Bou-Haroun-Alger, ran a fishing fleet and, according to *Le Monde*, was involved in the arms trade. After the Algerian Revolution of 1962, the family moved to France, where Falcone lived until he was 22. Since then, he has traveled the world, building a business empire that runs from advertising in China to oil in Africa.



Pierre Falcone is out on \$15 million bail.

Falcone bought a home in Arizona in the '80s and met Sonia Montero at a 1990 Formula One auto race in Phoenix. They were married four years later at a church outside of Paris. Hundreds of guests attended the wedding and reception—the latter was held at the Chateau de Ferrieres, the 19th-century home of the Rothschilds—including the groom's good friend, Jean-Christophe Mitterrand.

The arms trade comprises a small, if notable, part of Falcone's commercial activities. In France, he served as a consultant to a government agency known as SOFREMI, which exports military equipment under the auspices of the Interior Ministry. In that capacity, he reportedly arranged sales to Africa and Latin America. Through Arcadi Gaydamak—an