

Tenets of Liberal Education Underpin Govt. Abuses

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - June 11, 2013

Leaving aside the NSA snooping, which is apparently legal (if worrisome), it is easy to view the three scandals rocking the Obama administration -- Benghazi, IRS, and Department of Justice -- as disconnected instances of the abuse of power.

But this is not necessarily so.

Although apparently unrelated to each other in their planning and execution, the three controversies exhibit a shared sensibility -- and possess a common root. Each reflects a cardinal tenet of the powerfully reinforced brand of left-liberalism inculcated on university campuses in this country.

One part of the Benghazi scandal involves the deception of the American people about the real causes of the Sept. 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. consulate that left Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others dead, along with 10 wounded.

U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice may have been innocently recycling erroneous administration talking points when she appeared on five Sunday morning talk shows five days after the attack and declared it the result of a spontaneous protest over a video mocking the Prophet Muhammad.

But recent congressional testimony suggests that by the time President Obama appeared on David Letterman's show two days later and also blamed the video and the mob -- a false version of events, which he repeated two days afterward on the Spanish-language TV channel Univision -- he knew the attacks had been planned and executed by an al-Qaeda affiliate in Libya.

It also seems likely that the president appreciated that the truth would be seen as inconsistent with his claims that under his leadership the United States had inflicted lethal blows on al-Qaeda and, with the election less than two months away, could harm his campaign.

The administration's misleading of the public reflects a teaching that is common to much literary theory, sociology, anthropology, political theory, and legal theory on college campuses today: Knowledge is socially constructed, and therefore the narrative is all.

Many professors even demote their own arguments and downgrade their accounts by characterizing them as stories, as in "I am puzzled by your story about the causes of the Civil War. I would tell a different story." A creature of the contemporary academy, Barack Obama

echoed this orientation in a January 2012 CBS News interview.

In response to a question about lack of popular support for his programs, the former professor of constitutional law asserted that he had failed to appreciate that “the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times.”

The problem, in the president’s eyes, was not that he failed to set forth facts accurately, not that he fell short in showing how his policy and conduct were consistent with constitutional principles, and certainly not that his programs were flawed, but that he neglected to craft an engaging and uplifting tale.

In March 2010, the IRS began targeting conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status. The IRS appears also to have subjected these groups’ donors to onerous audits. As Kimberley Strassel pointed out June 6 in the Wall Street Journal, while the IRS was harassing conservatives, and in the midst of a heated midterm election that was going badly, Obama led a public campaign (joined by top White House aide David Axelrod and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) to persuade voters “that ‘shadowy,’ conservative ‘front’ groups -- ‘posing’ as tax-exempt entities and illegally controlled by ‘foreign’ players -- were engaged in ‘unsupervised’ spending that posed a ‘threat’ to democracy.”

It is easy to see how IRS officials in hot pursuit of conservatives might conclude that they and the president they serve were on the same page.

In waging his campaign of vilification, the president was aided by the pervasive teaching on campuses that conservatism is wicked. This teaching is promulgated in colleges and universities by the routine exclusion of conservative texts and ideas from the curriculum; by casual expressions of scorn for conservatives and conservatism in class and in departmental hallways and offices; and by the dearth of guests brought to campus to expound and defend conservative positions. When a president accuses grassroots conservatives of operating to undermine American democracy, he is delivering a message that the hearts and minds of generations of college graduates have been cultivated to receive.

Finally, as part of a terrorist plot leak investigation, the Justice Department subpoenaed two months of records for 21 Associated Press phone lines, five reporters’ cellphones, three home lines, and two fax lines.

As part of a leak investigation concerning North Korea, the Justice Department named Fox News journalist James Rosen as a possible criminal co-conspirator in an affidavit and subpoenaed a wide swath of his private e-mails. Commentators of various persuasions have recognized that these secret seizures of extensive records are a menace to the freedom of the press, which is indispensable to robust public debate. Such invasive actions are certainly at odds with Obama’s promise on Jan. 21, 2009, the day after his inauguration, to usher in “a new era of openness in our country.”

But the glaring discrepancy between the president's high-minded promise of openness and his administration's ominous disregard for privacy and freedom of the press is consistent with contemporary university culture. On campus, students learn that liberty of thought and discussion is a norm to which lip service must be paid but which must not be taken to heart because of the importance of stamping out disagreeable and dangerous speech.

Universities drive this lesson home by encouraging students to regard those who make arguments whose conclusions they dislike as insensitive to their feelings; by enacting hate speech codes; and by depriving the accused of due process in cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Veteran observers of the political scene may object that there is nothing new here. Don't all politicians dissimulate? Don't all politicians treat their political opponents as enemies and incite the public to do so as well? Don't all politicians invoke high principle for public consumption and then shamelessly trample principle when useful?

The answer is that not all do. But many politicians, intoxicated by power and privilege, do deceive, foment hatred, and behave hypocritically. Others break the law.

A properly liberal education, one devoted to preparing citizens for the responsibilities of freedom, would work against these tendencies. It would fortify students for public service by promoting respect for facts, evidence, and argument; teaching them there are at least two sides to the great moral and political issues of the day, thereby expanding students' imaginations and fostering appreciation of opposing points of view and of those who hold them; and instilling respect for liberty of thought and discussion by organizing campus life in accordance with its imperatives.

Until liberal education in America is reformed, however, abuses of power of the sort we have witnessed by administration officials can be expected because such conduct faithfully expresses the most pervasive and basic lessons our universities teach future public servants.

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