

Giving In to the Mob
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Hamilton College Corrections & Clarifications

	Article	Corrections & Clarifications
1	<p>Years ago a Catholic school asked me to speak at an awards ceremony. I agreed, waiving my usual fee (\$87,436) and after intense negotiations accepted nothing. A bit after that, the school asked me not to speak, saying higher-ups in the Washington diocese had learned -- possibly by reading my column -- that I was pro-choice. I accepted that also.</p> <p>I cite this instructive episode in reference to Hamilton College, a venerable institution of higher learning in Upstate New York, which has canceled a speaking engagement for Ward Churchill, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. For more than a week, Hamilton stuck to its guns, insisting that Churchill would speak no matter what -- no matter what being that he is an idiot. For some reason, Hamilton did not know this at first. It soon learned it in spades.</p>	<p>Hamilton, like any institution committed to the free exchange of ideas, invites to its campus people of diverse opinions, often controversial. The opportunity to encounter and respond to people from outside the college community in their intensity and their immediacy is among the key attributes of a liberal education. The views of speakers are their own. We expect, as a matter of civil discourse, that the members of this academic community, as well as visitors, respect the dignity of reasoned and principled debate. It is in this setting that the substance and credibility of a speaker's views are established as being worthy of support, or not.</p>
2	<p>Churchill was supposed to speak about American Indian activism. He is the purported genuine article, an American Indian who, according to press reports,</p>	

	<p>interrupted Denver's Columbus Day parade because Christopher Columbus was a racist enslaver of indigenous peoples. That happens to be true. It is also true that some of those indigenous peoples engaged in cannibalism and the dismemberment of living human beings. No one refers to this period as the Age of Enlightenment.</p>	
3	<p>What finally got Churchill a measure of fame was not his Columbus Day exploits but an essay he wrote about the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. The victims, he wrote, were hardly innocent bystanders but rather the beneficiaries of an oppressive U.S. foreign policy and an exploitive American capitalism: "they were too busy braying, incessantly and self-importantly, into their cell phones, arranging power lunches and stock transactions, each of which translated, conveniently out of sight, mind and smelling distance, into the starved and rotting flesh of infants."</p> <p>Churchill was referring to the embargo then in place on Iraq and what it had done to that country's health system. For that reason, he called the victims of Sept. 11 "little Eichmanns," after the Nazi Adolf Eichmann, an architect of the Holocaust.</p>	
4	<p>A more repellent, idiotic and badly written passage you're not likely to read. It probably does no good, but I'd like to point out to Churchill that if infants starved under Saddam Hussein, it was because Hussein chose to use relief money to buy arms and build palaces. As for the "little Eichmanns," a fair share of them were restaurant workers and deliverymen and clerical staff, and, of course, cops and firemen. They had packed their power lunches that morning.</p>	
5	<p>There were reasons aplenty not to have invited Churchill and, once he was invited, to</p>	

	<p>have rescinded the invitation. Hamilton would not do so. It flung around the First Amendment with abandon, as if Churchill was a faculty member whose job was at stake. Then Bill O'Reilly struck. The Fox TV commentator went to town on the controversy, finding the usual liberal idiocy at the usual liberal college perpetrated by the usual liberal morons. Having rounded up his usual suspects, O'Reilly ended a segment about Hamilton by providing the name of the college's president, Joan Hinde Stewart, her e-mail address and the school's phone number. Then, blood dripping from his evil heart, he asked his deranged viewers to "keep your comments respectable."</p>	<p>From the beginning of this republic it has always been understood, and repeatedly reaffirmed by our greatest statesmen, that it is precisely unpleasant speech that must be protected; otherwise freedom of speech is meaningless. Of course, neither Ward Churchill nor anyone else has an inherent right to say insensitive or offensive things on anyone's campus other than his own; but once he had been invited here, once he had accepted that invitation, it <i>is</i> a matter of free speech. The wisdom of the invitation is no longer the issue; the educational principles of our College are.</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>The school caved. Stewart reported getting 6,000 or so messages, and I know, because I get them all the time, that many of them were vile and obscene and even threatening. But this is the true cost of free speech. It is not some rarefied principle, not some slogan, not some trivial right for professors to abuse in comfortable distance from the targets of their ideas, but the most powerful and dangerous right of them all. And because O'Reilly had, in effect, organized an Internet lynch mob, a collection of cyber-goons -- one of whom threatened to bring a gun -- the school simply junked the program. It chickened out.</p>	<p>We have done our best to protect what we hold dear, the right to speak, think and study freely, but the safety of our students and guests has to weighed more heavily than anyone's right to speak.</p>
<p>7</p>	<p>Hamilton should not have invited Churchill in the first place. His ideas are trash, cliches to boot, and the school could have -- as that Catholic school did with me -- changed its mind once it found out more about him. But once he had accepted, and once Hamilton had insisted by all that is holy that it would stick to its guns, it could not then collapse because those ideas, as loathsome as they are, might have real consequences.</p>	<p>Ward Churchill, a known scholar of Native American issues who is a tenured professor at the University of Colorado, accepted an invitation from the Kirkland Project last summer to speak at Hamilton on February 3, 2005, as part of a panel on prisons in the Project's "Class in Context" series. Since 9/11, Mr. Churchill has spoken at more than 30 colleges and universities across the United States without incident. Once he had been invited here, once he had accepted that invitation, it <i>is</i> a matter of free speech.</p>

	<p>Hire some guards. Frisk the audience. But don't cave to the mob.</p>	<p>We're a college campus and we're responsible for the safety of other people's children. The safety of our students supersedes all other issues. Hamilton only needed one credible threat to believe canceling was the right thing to do. Law enforcement authorities in New York are currently investigating five threats they deem credible. More than 100 threats of violence were directed at Mr. Churchill and Hamilton College.</p>
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