

Bill O'Reilly, Ward Churchill, and Hamilton College

Why did Bill O'Reilly have Ward Churchill on "The O'Reilly Factor" last Tuesday night?

For several days this week, Mr. O'Reilly attacked Hamilton College for inviting Ward Churchill to speak on its campus. Because of Mr. Churchill's offensive comments about the victims of the 9-11 attacks, Mr. O'Reilly said it was outrageous and unacceptable for anyone to give him a forum.

Night after night, Mr. O'Reilly repeated this message. He urged alumni and other donors to withhold contributions to Hamilton. He broadcast the college's telephone number and its president's E-Mail address, urging his viewers to contact the president and insist that she cancel Mr. Churchill's appearance. On Tuesday, after the college and the panelists had received over a hundred threats of violence, the president did cancel the event.

But on last Tuesday evening, "The O'Reilly Factor" featured a taped interview with Ward Churchill. And Mr. O'Reilly said he had extended an invitation to Professor Churchill to appear on his show. Mr. Churchill said he'd think about it.

Here's what I want to know: if it's a bad thing for Hamilton to permit Ward Churchill to speak to an audience of a few dozen students, why is it a good thing for Bill O'Reilly to give Mr. Churchill a national audience on the Fox Network? If Mr. Churchill doesn't deserve a forum, why did Mr. O'Reilly offer him one?

And here's my answer: it wasn't wrong for Hamilton to have invited him to speak. It was completely right. Hamilton had proposed that Mr. Churchill appear on a panel entitled "The Limits of Dissent." Two Hamilton faculty members would have analyzed what Mr. Churchill said, questioning his assertions and insisting that he explain and defend them. Then Hamilton students could have discussed and evaluated the arguments they had heard.

That's part of what my colleagues and I try to do. We give our students an opportunity to examine ideas and claims -- outrageous and far-fetched ideas as well as familiar ideas -- so that students can learn to think critically and independently. To give them that opportunity, the college invites a wide variety of people -- academics, researchers, writers, politicians, and other public figures -- to our campus.

As the Hamilton College catalog says, "The College expects its students to develop the ability to read, observe and listen with critical perception, and to think, write, and speak with clarity, understanding and precision. Students should develop their appreciation for inquiry, combined with the confidence to

evaluate arguments and to defend their own positions. They should learn to question creatively, derive information from and analyze data, and formulate hypotheses. They should recognize the limits of factual information and become attuned to how such information can be used and misused. Above all, students should develop respect for intellectual and cultural diversity because such respect promotes free and open inquiry, independent thought, and mutual understanding.”

Although I like to think Hamilton College is particularly good at teaching students to engage in this kind of free and open inquiry, we’re not the only institution that does. Most American colleges and universities try to teach it, because critical inquiry lies at the core of our mission. It’s important to our society that we do it, because people who learn to think critically can make good decisions in their lives as citizens.

What Mr. O’Reilly does on “The O’Reilly Factor” is a show business parody of what we do. He interviews people who disagree with him, but he bullies them, cuts them off when they try to speak, and brackets their utterances with his own. Although he calls his program a “No-Spin Zone,” it’s really just the opposite, a source not of information but of distortion and disinformation.

When Mr. O’Reilly began his attack on Hamilton College, most of us here didn’t understand why he had singled out a small liberal arts college in a small village in upstate New York. But now we realize that although we are today’s target, Mr. O’Reilly’s objective is much bigger. He is leading an assault against freedom of inquiry and expression wherever they exist on American college and university campuses. His movement is gathering strength, and it behooves anyone in the United States who values free speech and thought to join us in resisting it.

John H. O’Neill
Edmund A. LeFevre Professor of English
Hamilton College
198 College Hill Road
Clinton, New York 13323
joneill@hamilton.edu
Home Telephone: 315-853-3145
Mobile: 315-525-0883