

Liberalism a threat to U.S. free speech

About a year ago, an editor-
alist for the student newspaper
at the University of Utah was
politely critical of Jesse Jack-
son. He praised the reverend for
his oratorical skills but ex-
pressed doubts about his stature
as a political leader.

For expressing these innocu-
ous opinions the writer found
himself under assault. A guest
editorial (written by two law
students) was printed in the
school paper describing the col-
umnist as a reactionary and a
neo-Nazi, the writer was physi-
cally intimidated by "progres-
sive" students, his car was van-
dalized. Perhaps most
significantly, the writer — a
young black man — was as-
saulted with racial epithets. For
daring to express unsanctioned
opinions, the writer was dispar-
aged as an "Uncle Tom."

I review this year-old outrage
in the hope that it will be a
cautionary tale for graduating
high school seniors. The atti-
tudes manifest in this incident
are not atypical of those that
are found on many American
campuses.

Hell hath no fury to compare
with that of an enraged pacifist;
nobody is quite as intolerant as
a paragon of liberal "open-
mindedness." Graduating sen-
iors planning to leave Utah Val-
ley to continue their studies
should be advised that the most
ominous threat to free speech
and inquiry in American acade-
mia comes from the left.

The dominant faith in Ameri-
can academia remains liberal-
ism. Contemporary liberalism is
not a philosophy; philosophy re-
quires thought. Rather, it is all
impulse that produces vacuous
rhetoric about "equality," "tol-
erance" and "sensitivity" and
the need to find "common
ground." Such nebulous lan-
guage would be harmless but
for the fact that it is used to
disguise an appetite for power
and a fierce intolerance for
competing opinions.

A quarter of a century ago
Hugh Nibley wrote about the
"Liberal Paradox": "The Liber-
al is unpretentious and open-
minded ... yet he forms a jeal-
ously guarded clique for the
exploitation of the general pub-
lic, and distinguishes sharply
between the intellectual class to
which he belongs as a special
elite and the layman, who is
expected to support him and to
seek instruction at his feet."

Today the "special elite" is



Will
Grigg

FOR THE
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most likely to define itself in
flattering contrast to "racist,
sexist" American society.

Many American universities
have devised regulations intend-
ed to extricate racism and sex-
ism by punishing "inappro-
priate" speech and scholarship.
For example, the University of
Connecticut forbids the use of
"derogatory names, inappro-
priately directed laughter, in-
considerate jokes, and conspic-
uous exclusion of another student
from conversation."

The University of Pennsylva-
nia will punish students for using
language that "stigmatizes or
victimizes individuals" or "cre-
ates an intimidating or offensive
environment." Similar restric-
tions have been applied to in-
structors.

Of course, such restrictions
are swaddled in idealistic lan-
guage about the need to build a
"better community" and to find
"common ground." But they
produce a confirmation of Karl
Popper's "law of unintended
consequences." Students cannot
find common ground with mem-
bers of other ethnic groups if
they are tongue-tied with terror
by the thought of giving offense.

A college education should be
a rigorous apprenticeship in
adulthood, something that liber-
alism — the politics of suspend-
ed adolescence — is singularly
unequipped to provide. In the
adult world it is necessary to
distinguish between a mere an-
noyance and a genuine offense.

Restrictions on speech that
cultivate exquisite sensitivity to
every annoyance do students,
particularly minority students,
a great disservice. Teaching
students to perceive every slight
offense as a violation of one's
rights helps produce a quarrel-
some, litigious society — and
helps create disgraceful inci-
dents like the one involving the
University of Utah columnist.

Perhaps it is too much to
expect our tenured radicals to
grow up. But is it too much to
hope they could allow other
generations the opportunity?