

■ ON CAMPUS ■

# Dr. West and Mr. Summers

A Harvard tale

ROGER KIMBALL

**W**HEN an individual assumes certain positions of public responsibility, we require him to place his financial assets in a blind trust. We do this in order that he not profit personally from his office. When an individual assumes the presidency of a great university, we require him to place his testicles in a blind trust. We do this in order that he not rebel against the dictates of political correctness.

As an illustration of what might happen were university presidents allowed to think for themselves and exercise independent intellectual leadership, consider the recent case of Cornel West vs. Larry Summers at Harvard. West is the Alphonse Fletcher, Jr., University Professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University. (He is also, incidentally, head of Al Sharpton's presidential exploratory committee.) Summers, a former professor of political economy at Harvard, served briefly as Bill Clinton's secretary of the treasury and has been president of Harvard since last July.

Summers early on showed troubling signs of independence. Last fall, for example, he extolled the U.S. military, publicly noting the "special nobility . . . [of] those who are prepared to sacrifice their lives for our country." True, the terrorist attacks of September 11 have resulted in a partial dispensation for

patriotic speech. Still, when was the last time you heard the president of a major university praise the military?

Well, this friskiness soon caught up with Summers. In October, he had the temerity to meet with Cornel West and suggest that he turn his hand to some serious scholarship—West's most recent production was a rap CD called *Sketches of My Culture*—and lead the way in fighting the scandal of grade inflation at Harvard, where one of every two grades is an A or A-. What an outrage! West went to sulk in his tent, announcing on the way that he was applying for another year's leave of absence (he had just returned from one) and letting it be known that he might just up and leave Harvard.

The true seriousness of this firestorm became evident when the *New York Times* put the story on its front page at the end of December. The firmament trembled. Not only West, but also other members of Harvard's Afro-American Studies department—including Henry Louis Gates Jr., the high-profile chairman of the department—were thinking of defecting, to Princeton perhaps, in the wake of Summers's perceived insult.

## In the *New York Times*, West was "Dr.," but Summers was plain ol' "Mr."

Within a week, the situation seemed to be spinning out of control. Jesse Jackson asked to meet Summers to seek "clarity" on Harvard's commitment to "diversity." Charles J. Ogletree, another professor of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, thundered that "it's absolutely critical that the president make an unequivocal public statement in support of affirmative action."

Oh dear. A Harvard spokesman whined that the whole thing was just "a huge misunderstanding." Summers himself declared, "We are proud of the Afro-American Studies program at Harvard, collectively and individually. We would very much like to see them stay at Harvard and will compete vigorously to make this an attractive environment." In other words: "Name your price, boys; we give up." The *Times* rewarded Summers with a second front-page story that

announced his rehabilitation: "In two interviews . . . he seemed eager to refute any suggestion that he was too confrontational," the paper reported. "Even his critics seem to grant that Mr. Summers has learned from the disputes over the past few weeks."

You betcha. He's learned, for example, that if he dares to criticize black professors at Harvard, he will face the wrath of the *Times*, Jesse Jackson, and the whole steamroller smear machine of racist political correctness. (Even Al Sharpton got into the act, threatening to sue Harvard for damaging his prospects as a presidential candidate.) The episode of Cornel West vs. Larry Summers is not simply another sorry tale from the annals of academic pusillanimity. It is a textbook example of liberal intimidation at work. That first story on the *Times's* front page was not news—it was a warning shot fired across the bow of Summers's presumption of independence. What it meant was, "Be careful. If you do not capitulate, we will hound you out of office with an avalanche of negative publicity."

The *Times* was quite right to take Summers's initial insubordination seriously. A college president out in Podunk might be allowed to buck the trend of political correctness. But the president of Harvard? Never. The *Times* understood that if Summers held firm, the intellectual Potemkin Village that three decades of political correctness has built might be exposed for the rickety stage prop it is.

In all the mainstream press coverage of this affair, it was put about that Cornel West is a serious scholar, that Afro-American Studies is a serious academic discipline, and that Harvard's department of Afro-American Studies in particular boasted a "dream team" of important intellectuals. I suspect that the *Times's* bizarre decision to call West "Dr. West" while it habitually refers to other academics and Ph.D.-holders as "Mr." or "Ms." So-and-So ("Mr. Summers," for example) was part of the general effort to burnish West's academic aura. The unpalatable truth is that Afro-American Studies is a pseudo-discipline—an academic ghetto constructed to accommodate the beneficiaries of "affirmative action"—and that the celebrated occupants of Harvard's department are second-class scholars with first-class salaries and perquisites.

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Cornel West, like the Afro-Am Studies sociologist William Julius Wilson, is a University Professor at Harvard, one of only 14 out of a faculty of 2,000. His personal website ([www.cornelwest.com](http://www.cornelwest.com)) declares him "one of the preeminent minds of our time." It also explains that his rap CD "constitutes a watershed moment in musical history" and speaks of "Dr. West's passionate oratory and deep grasp of a multitude of subject matter [sic] (from hip-hop culture to a treatment on Nihilism and Nietzsche [sic])." But what has this "preeminent mind" produced? The CD—you can listen to excerpts on his website—is subliterate, anti-musical garbage. West has a reasonably impressive list of publications—impressive in length, that is. In content, those writings are half racial demagoguery, half polysyllabic New Left gospel.

West began his career as a student of religious studies, and his work poaches early and often on Christian rhetoric (what West likes to call the "prophetic Christian tradition") to make a variety of fashionable left-wing political points. Anyone who has seen him perform knows that, should the academic world ever wise up to him, he could have an immensely successful career as an itinerant preacher. In 1995, Leon Wieseltier wrote a long and devastating assessment of West's work in *The New Republic*. He spoke of West's "union of pomposity and enthusiasm," and noted that West was essentially "a homiletical figure, a socialist divine," whose books are "almost completely worthless." West's work, Wieseltier concluded "is noisy, tedious, slippery, . . . sectarian, humorless, pedantic and self-endearing."

I cannot improve on that. But for the sake of completeness, it is worth sampling a sentence of the professor's prose. "Since," West writes in an essay called "The Historicist Turn in Philosophy of Religion,"

I believe that the major life-denying forces in our world are economic exploitation (resulting primarily from the social logic of capital accumulation), state repression (linked to the social logic of state augmentation), bureaucratic domination (owing to the social logic of administrative subordination), racial, sexual and heterosexual subjugation

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(due to the social logics of white, male and heterosexual supremacist practices) and ecological subjection (resulting, in part, from modern values of scientific manipulation), I entertain a variety of social analyses and cultural critiques that yield not merely one grand synthetic social theory, but rather . . .

Etc.

West is good mimic. He sounds very much like an angry postmodern intellectual. Someone with his talent and brass might well find a secure place somewhere in academia these days. But the uncomfortable question is this: What if West were white or Asian? Would he be a University Professor at Harvard? A similar question can be asked about the rest of the "dream team." Henry Louis Gates Jr., for example, is an industrious and thoroughly mediocre scholar. What if he were white or Asian? Would he be fought over by universities across the country, his every publication showered with awards? Would he have been tapped to deliver this year's Jefferson Lecture, the "federal government's highest individual honor for scholars in the humanities"? (Past Jefferson lecturers include Cleanth Brooks, Bernard Knox, Stephen Toulmin, and Leszek Kolakowski.) To ask such questions is to answer them.

The institution of Afro-American Studies is a politically motivated con game. It is not about scholarship, it is about the politics of racial redress, on one side, and misplaced liberal guilt and cowardice on the other. There are plenty of black intellectuals—genuine ones—who understand full well what G. K. Chesterton meant when he spoke of "the false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test." But partisans of Afro-American Studies are terrified of telling the truth, and retreat to intimidation and activist grandstanding.

I am no zoologist, but I like to keep a copy of Ralph Buchsbaum's classic *Animals Without Backbones* handy just for its title. Larry Summers might want to pick up a copy. In the meantime, contemplating Harvard's shield, emblazoned with the word "Veritas," I finally understand why it is crimson. Hypocrisy and cowardice inevitably beget shame.

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## ■ PSYCHOLOGY ■

# Just Your Average Shoe-Bomber

'Not a bad lad,' and  
how not to be had

THEODORE DALRYMPLE

**S**HORTLY after the identity of the would-be shoe-bomber of the Paris-to-Miami flight was revealed, a British newspaper traced and interviewed his father. Speaking of his son, Richard Reid, Mr. Reid Sr. said, "He's not a bad lad. I can't imagine him doing anything like this without being involved with somebody else."

Not a bad lad! One rubs one's eyes in disbelief. Here's a young man who in his early youth devotes himself to attacking and robbing people in the street (the kind of crime that in our brave new Britain is invariably described as "petty," though it means that no elderly person in the land feels safe ever to walk in the streets), and then gives up only to devote himself to murdering 197 strangers at random: yet he's not a bad lad.

Actually, "he's not a bad lad" is now a stock phrase of British parents when asked to comment on the appalling conduct of their offspring. Not long ago, for example, it was reported that a youth aged 14 had been caught by the police for about the 250th time while committing a crime, terrorizing the entire district in which he lived: but he, too, in the opinion of his mother, was "not a bad lad, really."

This phrase reveals the deep sentimentality that pervades modern life and thought. The goodness of a person has no

Mr. Dalrymple is a physician and psychiatrist who works in a British prison. He is also a contributing editor of *City Journal*. The most recent of his books is *Life at the Bottom*, a collection of essays based on his prison work.

connection with how he conducts himself: for each of us carries within him a Platonic essence (more real than any illusory phenomena such as behavior) that is, by definition, good. It follows that each person has an inalienable right to be considered good, however he behaves. We shall all be judged and found perfect.

Virtue is thus not a discipline that improves our conduct and controls our baser impulses: It is a permanent and unalterable state of being, acquired at birth. And the "real him" is to the parent of the criminal what the "real me" is to the criminal himself.

The person who commits a terrible crime believes that it does not alter his essence as a good person, however many times he repeats the crime. Thus I have heard men claiming not to be violent who have stabbed, beaten, and shot many people over many years. A man who beats women (usually from motives of jealousy) over ten or twenty years says, with every appearance of sincerity, "It's not me, doctor, I'm just not like that."

"If it's not you," I ask, "then who is it?"

The disavowed conduct is conceived of as something alien, as an invader, almost as possession by a spirit. The act exists independently of the actor.

There is more. The phrase "he's not a bad lad" indicates a deep impoverishment of our moral vocabulary, and what cannot be said cannot be thought. The opposite of not being a bad lad, of course, is being a bad lad: but in our modern parlance, being a bad lad means indulging in pranks that go a bit too far, perhaps, but that arise from an understandable excess of youthful energy and spirits. A bad lad will eventually grow out of it and become more responsible: We shouldn't work ourselves up too much over his youthful indiscretions, therefore, and indeed to do so is to show ourselves defective in humor, understanding, and human warmth.

Thus the very use of the term "bad lad" precludes the consideration of any act as evil, as being beyond the pale, as being humanly unforgivable. There is no true darkness in the world of bad lads, only light that is slightly less bright: and if Mrs. Schicklgruber were a modern Briton, she would no doubt say of her Adolf that he wasn't a bad lad really, if looked at in the right way.

As for the senior Mr. Reid's incapacity

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