

SNG-Shutting down American mind-8-7-17

Shutting down the American mind

[alternate head: Discourse in disarray]

By Jim Nowlan

“Veritas” (goddess of truth) is emblazoned at the center of the seal of Knox College in Galesburg, a dear college where I have taught on and off over the years.

I fear the quest for truth is becoming a casualty of the forces of political correctness, accelerating snarkiness, and toxic political campaign rhetoric.

As one illustration among many, the conservative writer Charles Murray was recently blocked by student protestors from speaking at a prominent West Coast university.

Murray gained notoriety in the 1990s for *The Bell Curve*, which plowed old ground by reviewing the literature about purported racial differences in intelligence; liberals subsequently debunked his scholarship to their satisfaction. That debate will go on. It’s what the search for truth is all about.

Extreme views should be tested for their merit and not put aside because they make a person intellectually uncomfortable. After all, what is radical in one decade may become mainstream the next; think gay marriage.

Snarkiness (nasty, disrespectful commentary) is another anti-intellectual behavior that tears at the roots of civil discourse.

When I was young, I recall (can’t imagine I ever did this myself, of course) teens cruising on Saturday nights along downtown main streets, windows open, shouting out nasty comments to

couples on the sidewalks. The teens would then speed off, smug in the security their behavior would bear no consequences.

Today, social media has enabled this snarkiness to increase by orders of magnitude over those good ol' days.

Recently, I watched a live video stream on a conservative website of the debate in Springfield over whether to increase the state income tax. As one Africa-American female legislator spoke on the House floor, real-time comments from viewers were posted on the side of the screen.

The remarks, filled with four-letter filth omitted here, were horrific. "Get out a rope." "We need a lynch mob." "Run the scum out of office." "We need pitch forks and torches!"

There were names attached to the comments, though I don't know if they were legit. Either way, the cowardly remarks were spewed out in the confidence there could be no retaliation.

And snarkiness emboldens more of the same, egged on by like-minded commentary on our respective, ideologically comfortable outlets. [In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the memoirist La Rochefoucauld observed that it was easier for him to find one person who had never succumbed to temptation than one who had only succumbed once.]

And then there is negative political campaigning, so corrosive I think, of our democratic underpinnings.

As a candidate for the legislature in the 1960s, my opponents and I would never think of advertising a critical word about the other.

When I was running a U.S. Senate campaign (successful) in 1978, I recall our Washington political consultant saying that negative campaigning often created a backlash against the candidate who issued it.

Not today, apparently. Ads that skewer opponents with half-truths now appear to take up most of the ad dollars. Campaigns have always been rough and tumble affairs. But the pervasive, often billionaire-financed attack campaigns of today seem to blot out the sun.

Apologists for attack ads say they provide useful information for voters about candidates and their positions. Yet the ads collectively sour citizen perspectives on the value of voting and participating in the sullied political process.

In all of this, the quest for veritas is lost.

What to do? Some of the following sound fanciful, yet we are beyond governmental solutions.

First and obviously, college leaders have to take back their campuses as centers for debate of even uncomfortable ideas.

Second, shoot all the political consultants (and candidates who follow them like sheep). Just kidding. Don't want you to think I'm being snarky. Instead, quit hiring them.

Third, we need a secular Great Awakening, a la the religious movements that swept the country in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Maybe Colin Powell and Laura Bush could co-chair such.

Fourth, somehow fill more pews on Sunday morning. I'm not a religious person, yet the focus in most services across faiths is on loving, and could be an antidote to often hateful discourse.

We must open up rather than shut down the American mind.

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Correction: Greg Blankenship founded the Illinois Policy Institute in 2002, and not present IPI CEO John Tillman, as I reported incorrectly in a recent column.