

Keeping kids stupid: An intellectual lynching

ONE of the biggest problems confronting higher education is the fact that most students entering colleges and universities lack basic social science skills and knowledge. In a recent survey of college students in Buffalo, for example, almost half did not know who George Pataki is. Eighty percent had no idea, correct or incorrect, as to what communism is. Nearly the same number couldn't define capitalism. For whatever reason, social science education in America has collapsed at the high school level. For a democracy that relies on an informed electorate, such ignorance is toxic.

There are, however, a few rays of hope out there. Jay Bennish, a high school geography teacher in Aurora, Colorado, was one of them. During the last week, however, he's become a household name, suspended from his job and facing death threats after being vilified on reactionary talk radio for teaching geopolitics in a high school geopolitics class.

The controversy began at the end of January when Bennish assigned George W. Bush's State of the Union address as required viewing. On February 1 Bennish led a class discussion deconstructing Bush's speech from a geopolitical perspective. Sixteen-year-old Sean Allen, an aspiring comedian who describes himself as "the youngest stand up comic," recorded a 22-minute segment of the discussion. Aided by his father Jeff, the younger Allen, who boasts on his Myspace Web site of having beaten Jehovah's Witnesses over the head with Bibles, shopped his recording around the ultra-right media landscape.

After three weeks, Allen's father Jeff found a bite with Walter Williams, a Virginia-

based columnist and regular guest on Rush Limbaugh's show. Williams argued that Bennish wasn't preparing students for standardized tests and should be fired. One week later, with Iraq unraveling into civil war and with the Bush White House facing new charges of benign neglect in New Orleans and of misleading the nation regarding Iraq, right-wing talk radio switched over to an All Jay Bennish, All the Time format.

Locally, radical-right-leaning Entercom Communications tarred Bennish on their flagship WBEN radio station as being "long-haired" and "maggot-infested." On their branded "left" radio station, WWKB, Entercom's California-based host echoed the rightist attacks, saying Bennish's in-class discussion had nothing to do with geography. "Moron," I yelled at my radio. "What exactly do you think geography is?"

This was the most common attack across the right-wing blogosphere and radio world – that Bennish had no right to discuss geopolitics in a class on geopolitics. After elementary school, geography moves beyond "name that country" map study. Geography is multidisciplinary. It explores, among other things, how and why countries came into existence, and it studies the continuing evolution of the earth's political geography. Scholars earn doctorates in geography, not because they are extremely proficient with colored crayons or have memorized all of the world's capital cities but because they have endeavored to explain how we got to where we are and where, perhaps, we're going.

Bennish teaches Accelerated World Geography, an honors class designed to prepare students for college. In his course syllabus, Bennish explains that his course will "look into the geographical – or spatial – relationships between human societies and cultures, the natural environment, and historical changes that have shaped the contemporary world. More than answering the question 'what is where,' this course adopts a conceptual approach to understanding and explaining the dynamic human and natural features of the earth's surface." Themes covered during the semester, he explains, include "population, religion, human rights, notions of development and underdevelopment, impact of colonialism historically and currently, sustainability, impacts of modernization on developing countries, globalization of economy and culture, political and international conflict, cultural diversity, and global environmental concerns." In order to effectively teach this stuff, he explains, "A deeper understanding of current events from a historical and geographical perspective is imperative. Thus, timely issues and events in the news will be tied into the overall framework of the course."

Bennish's syllabus admonishes his students to engage in critical and creative thinking and to utilize various social science tools when examining world geography. He asks his students to remain open minded and to tolerate differences in opinion. He writes that the main objective of his class is "to help students to think for themselves, and to become

independent, responsible, upright young adults. This entails showing respect, consideration, and tolerance to all people and ideas in an academic context.”

In the interest of balance, Bennish asks his students to familiarize themselves with right-wing Web sites such as those of the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Project for a New American Century and the Wall Street Journal.

During the seminar in question, Bennish attempted to stimulate a discussion by critiquing and responding to Bush’s State of the Union address. He put the U.S. into context by describing us as “probably the most violent nation on planet earth.” By almost every measure this is true. We have the highest incarceration rate, one of the highest murder and domestic violence rates, among the world’s most violent entertainment, and we have gotten ourselves into more wars than any other nation in modern history.

Bennish also said that Israel’s founders engaged in terrorism. This fact isn’t in dispute. Israeli students learn this in their history books. Jewish terror groups Eliyahu Hakim and Eliyahu Bet Zuri, for example, assassinated the anti-Zionist British diplomat, Lord Moyne, in Cairo. The Irgun and Lehi (“Stern gang”) terrorist groups, in an attempt to drive the British occupiers out of Palestine, bombed trains, British officers clubs and, most famously, the King David Hotel. This is not edgy stuff. It’s history.

Then there was the bombshell line, where Bennish compared Bush’s rhetoric to Hitler’s. Anyone who has read a persuasion or propaganda textbook can see that most global political leaders employ similar propaganda techniques in a time of war. Both claimed the rhetorical right to ignore international law and engage in “preemptive” war against enemies whose threat they fabricated or inflated. Both then employed nationalism and flag-based iconography to shield themselves from accountability. Both defended spying on citizens and encouraged folks to report “suspicious” behavior, creating the illusion of an omnipresent enemy within. Both defended the need for internment camps and indefinite incarceration without charges as part of a fight against terror. Both rhetorical campaigns justified changing the map of the world, with Germany occupying much of Europe and with the U.S. occupying, for starters, Iraq and Afghanistan. This is geography.

We don’t have to agree with the analogy. And there’s no evidence, in fact, that Bennish himself agreed with it. But it’s a good pedagogical strategy to get students to discuss geopolitical issues while juxtaposing contemporary realities with historic ones.

Most importantly, nowhere in young Mr. Allen’s 22-minute, out-of-context recording does Jay Bennish misstate any facts. The “what” is bulletproof. The “why” is up for debate. This is the hallmark of a good class. Bennish’s syllabus, and most of his students who have gone on record, state that he welcomes opposing views. In the end, if the argument gets lively enough, the class will succeed in stimulating critical thinking and meeting Bennish’s

goal of helping students formulate their own informed opinions.

Rosemarie Jackowski, writing for Mediamonitors, argues that the Bennish case "is not a freedom of speech issue. It is an issue of the right of students to have access to historical information." I'd chance to guess that Bennish's students would be better prepared to go to college knowing both the name of their governor and the definition of communism and capitalism.