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The Final Lecture

Exclusive commentary by Izzy Lyman

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This graduation season's Kodak moment occurred at an Illinois college when the keynote speaker - a *New York Times* reporter named Chris Hedges - was not only booed but had his microphone turned off. Twice. The anti-war harangue he offered, even prophesying that "blood will continue to spill," wasn't appropriate for a Heartland commencement. But according to an organization that has been monitoring cap-and-gown celebrations for a decade, orators with a left-wing bent continue to be the favored choices of higher education's commissars.

Ron Robinson, the President of Young America's Foundation (YAF), explains, "For ten years, we've shown that college administrators have used commencement ceremonies to send their students off with one more predictable leftist lecture. This year the most prestigious schools exclude scholars like Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, Antonin Scalia, and Clarence Thomas for the likes of Kofi Annan, Madeleine Albright, Walter Mondale, and Geraldine Ferraro." (Prestigious schools are defined by YAF as those which *U.S. News and World Report* rank as the top 50 colleges and 50 universities in the United States.)

A survey by the Foundation reveals a lengthy list of liberal big shots, besides the aforementioned quartet, that were invited to deliver commencement speeches at elite schools, including former Clinton crony Leon Panetta (Berkeley), former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo (Harvard), and author Anna Quindlen (Colgate). YAF says that only four prominent conservatives - among them Indiana Senator Richard Lugar (Notre Dame) - hailed the grads. The top schools never want Pat Buchanan, although he has degrees from Georgetown and Columbia, and he's wittier than Mondale, Ferraro or Mondale/Ferraro. When they do invite a non-liberal, it's typically a safe choice, like Lugar or William Safire. Columnist Safire has the distinction of being the only conservative speaker, in the past nine years, that Tulane has hosted.

But given how forgettable graduation ceremonies typically are, isn't Ron Robinson's complaint much pomp over little of circumstance? Even the high-profile liberals who offer the boilerplate "be all you can be" send-offs encounter glitches. Because Madeleine Albright supported sanctions against Iraq, not everyone at the Smith College commencement swooned. One co-ed turned her back on the former U.S. Secretary of State while she presented the keynote address. (Maybe the lass was secretly upset that Phyllis Schlafly hadn't been invited to speak.)

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And, if Clarence Thomas is your man, it's not like he's in exile. Last week, the Supreme Court justice's talk to high school students in Washington, D.C. was televised on C-Span. He praised the strict grandfather who reared him, and reminisced about attending an all-white school. If snooty Yale, Justice Thomas' alma mater, snubs this nice, Constitution-loving American, it's their loss.

But the head of Young America's Foundation is not just another armchair critic. This past year, his educational organization sponsored over 300 lectures on campuses throughout the country. Speakers fill a huge void by making the case for conservative and libertarian ideas. Even in the age of America Idle, students eagerly attend these non-mandatory lectures. In February, Don Feder, the former *Boston Herald* columnist, spoke on "Why the Left Hates Israel" to a standing-room only crowd at Hampshire College.

Dr. Alan Charles Kors - the co-author of *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* - noted the intellectual poverty at our nation's campuses when he spoke at Amherst College on behalf of YAF. (A speech that should be heard by every independently-minded alum and parent.) He explained that the radicals of the 1960s and 1970s, and their disciples, are currently embedded in academia, as professors and administrators. They no longer desire to challenge "the establishment," as they once did, but they have evolved into careerists who scorn free speech, religious liberty, and individual rights and responsibilities. Professor Kors said of their tenure: "Most universities, however, promise academic freedom but deliver selective oppression and censorship; most promise nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, and sexuality, but then extend rights and programs differentially precisely on such grounds. We have names for that: fraudulent inducement, false advertising, and breach of contract."

Savvy undergrads quickly figure out they've been scammed. Smith student Melissa Parham, writing in *The Sophian*, complained about "the multiple vocal anti-conservative faculty members" at the school.

Chris Matera, a University of Massachusetts/Amherst political science major, explains an experience he had during an Art History class: "The teacher spoke about the budget cuts and put up figures that weren't well-researched. She said how these cuts were going to destroy the university. What was essentially happening was that a teacher was using class time to talk about something that had nothing to do with art history, and she was attacking the Republican governor and getting paid in state funds for doing this."

What responsible student wouldn't welcome the opportunity to hear from a real teacher instead of a political hack?

In the end, Kors could name only three schools - Princeton, Johns Hopkins, and Chicago - as institutions where free-thinking is encouraged. As for the rest - he thinks they should apologize to the nation for depriving students of an education.

Given the immense taxpayer subsidies that fund higher ed, a rebate would be preferable to an apology. In any case, congratulations are in order for Ron Robinson and Young America's Foundation for another successful year instructing young people. Theirs is the greater act of public service than being selected to deliver another "predictable leftist lecture" at a springtime commencement.

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