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## Power and the Word

by Patricia J. Williams

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A few weeks ago, if you recall, Britain's Prince Harry was having himself a high old time at a Colonials and Natives party to which he came costumed as a Nazi officer. I heard about it on a late-night BBC broadcast and was quite struck by a particularly clueless discussion between two reporters whose names I did not catch. One opined that Harry was wrong to wear Nazi insignia, because in some parts of London, "among the lower classes," such apparel has "real political meaning." The other reporter responded that this was not a matter that divided itself up by class but was rather generational; there were, he said, a lot of people out there "posturing" in the media about how upset they were when they "weren't even alive" during the Holocaust.

The exchange was interesting because it captured rather succinctly some of the carelessness that has tended to permeate the analyses of our own home-grown Prince Harrys. First and most obvious, perhaps, was the assumption that someone of the perpetually off-handed, genially jesting upper classes would not be capable of "real" political expression (even if he is a prince). Yet, presumptively at least, the identical expression from those among the lower classes would be much more ominous and dangerous--for they are presumed to say what they mean and mean what they say. The second reporter's response was just as troubling, with its implication that the only ones entitled to be upset by historical events like the Holocaust were those who went through them. In any event, the flap died down amid royal apologies and general recognitions that life for Harry has been hard; he's a motherless misfit whose frontal cortex, in the manner of adolescent males, has not yet matured to the point where he exercises good judgment.

Switch to this side of the pond. We don't think of ourselves as upper- and lower-class in precisely the same way as the British, but it does seem to me that we privilege power with a kind of unconsciousness that is similar. Consider that panel in San Diego at which Lieut. Gen. James Mattis, commanding general of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, opined, "Actually, it's a lot of fun to fight. You know, it's a hell of a hoot.... It's fun to shoot some people. I'll be right upfront with you, I like brawling.... You go into Afghanistan. You got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn't wear a veil... you know guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them." Mattis, who is "responsible for developing Marine warfighting doctrine, techniques and tactics," is a man with a soft, puppyish, even endearing face very much at visual odds with the brutality of the statement. Indeed, as commander in Iraq he had been generally known for more humane sentiments with which to inspire the troops. Like Prince Harry, Mattis was roundly condemned, but then the letters to the editor started pouring in. Oddly, his very high rank did not seem to be an issue for many people--rather, it became evidence that he surely didn't mean it literally, even as others praised him for "the truth." It was a joke, for heaven's sake, the excusable hyperbole of a seasoned warrior. Like Prince Harry's armband, Mattis's comments were rationalized away by those who accused the media of posturing and of not knowing the first thing about war's reality.

In a letter to the New York Times, for example, Michael Close of Anaheim, California, wrote: "I applaud and salute excellent warriors like Lieut. Gen. James Mattis. Soldiers don't have the privilege of choice when it comes to killing in war when ordered to do so. How dare any civil liberties groups or individual pass judgment on how a man separates himself to cope when he is answering the call to aid his country?" Like Prince Harry, the issue became one of "coping" rather than self-discipline.

Meanwhile, over in the groves of academe, Native-American activist Ward Churchill was disinvented from a speaking engagement at Hamilton College because of an essay in which he called the CIA office workers who died in the World Trade Center "little Eichmanns." Not to be outdone, Bill O'Reilly, in a column on his website, called the entire tenure system "a dastardly con that protects teachers for life. They know they can't be fired so they become

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little Ayatollahs." Calls abounded for Churchill to be fired from his home institution, the University of Colorado, and he has already resigned his chairmanship of the department of ethnic studies. No such fate has been suggested for the powerful, corporate-sponsored O'Reilly.

In this war of words and polemical personalities, there is an increasing privatization of speech. New, well-funded organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) specifically urge universities to monitor and divest themselves of those engaged in "rank political indoctrination"--which even they rather sheepishly acknowledge is an awfully thin line away from political speech. The model of the university they espouse is not the one envisioned by Louis Brandeis, to whom even open antagonism was a necessary component of civic engagement because "the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people.... The path of safety lies in the opportunity to discuss freely supposed grievances and proposed remedies." These days, the ability to speak has become subject to the whims of a literal rather than metaphorical marketplace. According to FIRE, "voluntary association" is a measure of academic freedom and funding is an "expressive act."

And so we find ourselves in an era when speakers like Michael Moore are spurned by campuses because major donors might get upset and students don't want their funds spent on anything they don't agree with. We seem to have entered a time of shunning that bears a passing strange resemblance to blacklisting. And with that shunning an ethic of "don't listen." "A scholar," says FIRE, "is entitled to shout his ideas from the rooftops, but he or she is not also entitled to do so in front of an audience or to do so while being bankrolled by those who deeply disagree with those ideas."

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