

The new McCarthyism: the witch-hunting of Ward Churchill

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The witch-hunt spearheaded by the ultra-right, with the assistance of the media, against University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill has dangerous implications for academic freedom and free speech in the US. It represents the latest manifestation of the new McCarthyism, the drive to suppress and silence critics of Bush administration policy and its “global war on terror” in particular.

Churchill, a Native American activist, is professor of American Indian Studies and former Chair of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder (he resigned from the latter post as a result of the current controversy). A member of the leadership council of the Colorado American Indian Movement and a past national spokesperson for the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, Churchill is an outspoken opponent of American imperialism. He is also co-author of *The Cointelpro Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* and *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*.

Churchill has been singled out for attack by Colorado Republicans and the right-wing governor of Colorado, Bill Owens, for an article he wrote following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington. The piece, “ ‘Some People Push Back’—On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” essentially argued that America got what it deserved in the attacks. Churchill wrote that the “most that can honestly be said about those [suicide bombers] involved in September 11 is that they finally responded in kind to some of what this country has dispensed to their people as a matter of course.”

The article came to light when Churchill was invited to speak at Hamilton College in upstate New York. In late January, right-wing elements, with demagogue Bill O'Reilly of Fox News at their head, launched a campaign to prevent the radical critic from speaking at the college, and the administration there obediently caved in. This is the pattern of the new McCarthyism.

Colorado Governor Owens has demanded that Churchill, a tenured professor, be discharged or resign, and university officials, egged on by the Board of Regents, have launched a 30-day investigation of his writings and statements to see if they can come up with a legal pretext for firing him. The university attempted to cancel a speech Churchill was slated to deliver February 8, on the grounds that the death threats against the professor created an unacceptable security risk. In the event, faced with a court challenge by Churchill and his supporters, the school backed down

and the meeting went ahead, without incident.

At the gathering, Churchill told more than a thousand supporters—250 more were turned away at the door—that “I do not work for the taxpayers of the state of Colorado. I do not work for Bill Owens. I work for you. I don't answer to Bill Owens. I do not answer to the Board of Regents in the way they think I do. The regents should do their job and let me do mine.” According to an Associated Press account, he received “thunderous applause.”

Churchill has collected support from faculty members and students. The *Denver Post* quoted Uriel Nauenberg, a physics professor and former chairman of the Boulder Faculty Assembly, who observed, “The faculty would oppose any removal of him, based on his past statements. He hasn't hurt anybody.”

In a letter to University of Colorado Chancellor Phil DiStefano, Professor of Education Margaret D. LeCompte argued, “Tenure was created to protect professors from constituencies who would impose silence on expressions that were annoying, offensive, or even heretical.... I remember too well that in the absence of tenure and courageous University administrators, many professors and writers and artists lost their livelihoods during the witch hunts created by the infamous House UnAmerican Affairs Committee. The current brouhaha over Professor Churchill's statements is far too reminiscent of those unhappy times for comfort.”

In his offending article, written in an almost stream-of-consciousness style and later expanded into a full-length book, Churchill detailed the crimes committed by the US against the Iraqi people, in particular the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children as a result of American military attacks and the US-led sanctions. He decried the lack of response of the mass of Americans to the crimes carried out in their name, compared them to the “good Germans” who supported Hitler and labeled them a “perpetrator population.”

The passage in Churchill's article that has created the greatest controversy concerned those who died in the World Trade Center in New York. “They formed,” he wrote, “a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire—the ‘mighty engine of profit’ to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved—and they did so both willingly and knowingly.... If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I'd really be interested in hearing about it.”

This is a wrongheaded and deeply reactionary argument, whether

it refers to top officials of investment firms or immigrant maintenance workers. The crimes of US imperialism are manifold, and seen from the perspective of a Native American, American history must appear a particularly bloody spectacle. Nonetheless, to identify the American people, from whom virtually all knowledge about the consequences of the Persian Gulf war and sanctions has been withheld, with the US war machine is a terrible political mistake and writes off the possibility of profound social change in America. Moreover, the essential callousness of Churchill's response to the bombings works in the opposite direction of cultivating humanitarian and generous impulses in the population.

As we wrote on the WWS in September 2001, in response to a British "leftist" who responded to the terrorist attacks with a verbal shrug of the shoulders, "To present 'the US' as some predatory imperialist monolith...can only confuse and disorient. It not only serves as a barrier to genuine internationalism, it overlooks the contradictory character of American history and society.... The contradiction between the democratic ideals and revolutionary principles on which the nation was founded and its social and political realities [including the slaughter and mistreatment of Native Americans] has always been the starting point of the struggle for socialism in the United States." [See "Anti-Americanism: The 'anti-imperialism' of fools"]

Churchill has attempted to clarify comments made in this essay, written in response to the hysterical US political and media reaction to September 11. He now says of his argument, "I wouldn't retract it. I would explain it better." He told the Associated Press, "If someone were to ask me, 'Do you feel sorrow for the victims of 9/11,' of course I do.... Let's begin with the children. Yes, they were innocent. And I mourn them. But they were not more innocent than those half-million Iraqi children."

In a statement he released in response to the "defamation of my character and threats against my life," the Native American professor explained, "I am not a 'defender' of the September 11 attacks, but simply pointing out that if US foreign policy results in massive death and destruction abroad, we cannot feign innocence when some of that destruction is returned. I have never said that people 'should' engage in armed attacks on the United States, but that such attacks are a natural and unavoidable consequence of unlawful US policy. As Martin Luther King, quoting Robert F. Kennedy, said, 'Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable.' "

In regard to his comments about the World Trade Center victims, Churchill observed, "Finally, I have never characterized all the September 11 victims as 'Nazis.' What I said was that the 'technocrats of empire' working in the World Trade Center were the equivalent of 'little Eichmanns.' Adolf Eichmann was not charged with direct killing but with ensuring the smooth running of the infrastructure that enabled the Nazi genocide."

Churchill goes on to suggest that a CIA office located in the World Trade Center, according to the logic that the US military uses in its operations, "converted the Trade Center itself into a 'legitimate' target.... If the U.S. public is prepared to accept these 'standards' when they are routinely applied to other people, they should not be surprised when the same standards are applied to

them."

He continued: "It should be emphasized that I applied the 'little Eichmanns' characterization only to those described as 'technicians.' Thus, it was obviously not directed to the children, janitors, food service workers, firemen and random passers-by killed in the 9-11 attack. According to Pentagon logic, [they] were simply part of the collateral damage. Ugly? Yes. Hurtful? Yes. And that's my point. It's no less ugly, painful or dehumanizing a description when applied to Iraqis, Palestinians, or anyone else. If we ourselves do not want to be treated in this fashion, we must refuse to allow others to be similarly devalued and dehumanized in our name."

Churchill's clarifications and emendations, convincing or otherwise, are not likely to mollify his opponents. The University of Colorado professor's empty-headed excesses and insensitivity provided the excuse for the onslaught, but no more than that. The real target of the Colorado Republicans, Owens, O'Reilly and the rest of this sordid right-wing crowd is the widespread and growing opposition to the illegal US intervention in Iraq and plans for further colonial wars of conquest. Their aim is to criminalize dissent, and intimidate and isolate opponents. Driving critics out of schools and universities, where they could have an influence on young people, is a particular priority of the witch-hunters.

The McCarthyite campaign extends beyond Churchill at Hamilton College, for example, to the individual who invited him, Nancy Rabinowitz, professor of Comparative Literature. Thomas Ryan, in *FrontPageMagazine.com*, a would-be contemporary equivalent of "Red Channels," the scurrilous publication that fingered "communists" in the early 1950s, writes that "Rabinowitz's ties to violent anti-Americanism go beyond mere emotional support; she has family ties to those who seek to overthrow our government. Her father-in-law was renowned Communist proponent and lawyer Victor Rabinowitz, whose law firm—Rabinowitz, Boudin, Standard, Krinsky and Lieberman—has represented domestic terrorists, accused spies, and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro."

The response of the liberal establishment, personified by Hamilton President Joan Hinde Stewart, is as predictable as it is reprehensible. After O'Reilly denounced her invitation to Churchill January 31 on his program and urged his listeners to bombard her with protests, ominously giving out her telephone number and e-mail address on the air, Stewart received an unknown quantity of hate mail and abusive phone-calls, including death threats. Her response? To call off Churchill's scheduled appearance, declaring, "Considerable threats of violence have been directed at the college and members of the panel. I have made the decision to cancel the event in the interest of protecting those at risk." The right to free speech was thus abandoned at a very cheap price.



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