

"Winning the Cultural War"

Charlton Heston's Speech to the Harvard Law School Forum, Feb. 16, 1999

I remember my son when he was five, explaining to his kindergarten class what his father did for a living. "My Daddy," he said, "pretends to be people." There have been quite a few of them. Prophets from the Old and New Testaments, a couple of Christian saints, generals of various nationalities and different centuries, several kings, three American presidents, a French cardinal and two geniuses, including Michelangelo. If you want the ceiling repainted I'll do my best. There always seem to be a lot of different fellows up here. I'm never sure which one of them gets to talk. Right now, I guess I'm the guy. As I pondered our visit tonight it struck me: If my Creator gave me the gift to connect you with the hearts and minds of those great men, then I want to use that same gift now to reconnect you with your own sense of liberty of your own freedom of thought ... your own compass for what is right. Dedicating the memorial at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln said of America, "We are now engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." Those words are true again. I believe that we are again engaged in a great civil war, a cultural war that's about to hijack your birthright to think and say what resides in your heart. I fear you no longer trust the pulsing lifeblood of liberty inside you ... the stuff that made this country rise from wilderness into the miracle that it is.

Let me back up. About a year ago I became president of the National Rifle Association, which protects the right to keep and bear arms. I ran for office, I was elected, and now I serve ... I serve as a moving target for the media who've called me everything from "ridiculous" and "duped" to a "brain-injured, senile, crazy old man." I know ... I'm pretty old ... but I sure, Lord, ain't senile. As I have stood in the crosshairs of those who target Second Amendment freedoms, I've realized that firearms are not the only issue. No, it's much, much bigger than that. I've come to understand that a cultural war is raging across our land, in which, with Orwellian fervor, certain acceptable thoughts and speech are mandated. For example, I marched for civil rights with Dr. King in 1963 - long before Hollywood found it fashionable. But when I told an audience last year that white pride is just as valid as black pride or red pride or anyone else's pride, they called me a racist. I've worked with brilliantly talented homosexuals all my life. But when I told an audience that gay rights should extend no further than your rights or my rights, I was called a homophobe. I served in World War II against the Axis powers. But during a speech, when I drew an analogy between singling out innocent Jews and singling out innocent gun owners, I was called an anti-Semite. Everyone I know knows I would never raise a closed fist against my country. But when I asked an audience to oppose this cultural persecution, I was compared to Timothy McVeigh.

From Time magazine to friends and colleagues, they're essentially saying, "Chuck, how dare you speak your mind. You are using language not authorized for public consumption!" But I am not afraid. If Americans believed in political correctness, we'd still be King George's boys, subjects bound to the British crown. In his book, "The End of Sanity," Martin Gross writes that "blatantly irrational behavior is rapidly being established as the norm in almost every area of human endeavor. There seem to be new customs, new rules, new anti-intellectual theories regularly foisted on us from every direction. Underneath, the nation is roiling. Americans know something without a name is undermining the nation, turning the mind mushy when it comes to separating truth from falsehood and right from wrong. And they don't like it."

Let me read a few examples. At Antioch College in Ohio, young men seeking intimacy with a coed must get verbal permission at each step of the process from kissing to petting to final copulation ... all clearly spelled out in a printed college directive. In New Jersey, despite the death of several patients nationwide who had been infected by dentists who had concealed their AIDS -- the state commissioner announced that health providers who are HIV-positive need not ... need not ... tell their patients that they are infected. At William and

Mary, students tried to change the name of the school team "The Tribe" because it was supposedly insulting to local Indians, only to learn that authentic Virginia chiefs truly like the name. In San Francisco, city fathers passed an ordinance protecting the rights of transvestites to cross-dress on the job, and for transsexuals to have separate toilet facilities while undergoing sex change surgery. In New York City, kids who don't speak a word of Spanish have been placed in bilingual classes to learn their three R's in Spanish solely because their last names sound Hispanic.

At the University of Pennsylvania, in a state where thousands died at Gettysburg opposing slavery, the president of that college officially set up segregated dormitory space for black students. Yeah, I know ... that's out of bounds now. Dr. King said "Negroes." Jimmy Baldwin and most of us on the March said "black." But it's a no-no now. For me, hyphenated identities are awkward ... particularly "Native-American." I'm a Native American, for God's sake. I also happen to be a blood-initiated brother of the Miniconjou Sioux. On my wife's side, my grandson is a thirteenth generation Native American ... with a capital letter on "American." Finally, just last month ... David Howard, head of the Washington D.C. Office of Public Advocate, used the word "niggardly" while talking to colleagues about budgetary matters. Of course, "niggardly" means stingy or scanty. But within days Howard was forced to publicly apologize and resign. As columnist Tony Snow wrote: "David Howard got fired because some people in public employ were morons who (a) didn't know the meaning of niggardly, (b) didn't know how to use a dictionary to discover the meaning, and (c) actually demanded that he apologize for their ignorance."

What does all of this mean? It means that telling us what to think has evolved into telling us what to say, so telling us what to do can't be far behind. Before you claim to be a champion of free thought, tell me: Why did political correctness originate on America's campuses? And why do you continue to tolerate it? Why do you, who're supposed to debate ideas, surrender to their suppression? Let's be honest. Who here thinks your professors can say what they really believe? It scares me to death, and should scare you too, that the superstition of political correctness rules the halls of reason. You are the best and the brightest. You, here in the fertile cradle of American academia, here in the castle of learning on the Charles River, you are the cream. But I submit that you, and your counterparts across the land, are the most socially conformed and politically silenced generation since Concord Bridge. And as long as you validate that ... and abide it ... you are -- by your grandfathers' standards -- cowards.

Here's another example. Right now at more than one major university, Second Amendment scholars and researchers are being told to shut up about their findings or they'll lose their jobs. Why? Because their research findings would undermine big-city mayors' pending lawsuits that seek to extort hundreds of millions of dollars from firearm manufacturers. I don't care what you think about guns. But if you are not shocked at that, I am shocked at you. Who will guard the raw material of unfettered ideas, if not you? Who will defend the core value of academia, if you supposed soldiers of free thought and expression lay down your arms and plead, "Don't shoot me." If you talk about race, it does not make you a racist. If you see distinctions between the genders, it does not make you a sexist. If you think critically about a denomination, it does not make you anti-religion. If you accept but don't celebrate homosexuality, it does not make you a homophobe. Don't let America's universities continue to serve as incubators for this rampant epidemic of new McCarthyism.

But what can you do? How can anyone prevail against such pervasive social subjugation? The answer's been here all along. I learned it 36 years ago, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, standing with Dr. Martin Luther King and two hundred thousand people. You simply ... disobey. Peaceably, yes. Respectfully, of course. Nonviolently, absolutely. But when told how to think or what to say or how to behave, we don't. We disobey social protocol that stifles and stigmatizes personal freedom. I learned the awesome power of disobedience from Dr. King ... who learned it from Gandhi, and Thoreau, and Jesus, and every other great man who led those in the right against those with the might. Disobedience is in our DNA. We feel innate kinship with that disobedient spirit that tossed tea into Boston Harbor, that sent Thoreau to jail,

that refused to sit in the back of the bus, that protested a war in Vietnam. In that same spirit, I am asking you to disavow cultural correctness with massive disobedience of rogue authority, social directives and onerous laws that weaken personal freedom. But be careful ... it hurts. Disobedience demands that you put yourself at risk. Dr. King stood on lots of balconies. You must be willing to be humiliated ... to endure the modern-day equivalent of the police dogs at Montgomery and the water cannons at Selma. You must be willing to experience discomfort. I'm not complaining, but my own decades of social activism have taken their toll on me. Let me tell you a story. A few years back I heard about a rapper named Ice-T who was selling a CD called "Cop Killer," celebrating ambushing and murdering police officers. It was being marketed by none other than Time/Warner, the biggest entertainment conglomerate in the world. Police across the country were outraged. Rightfully so - at least one had been murdered. But Time/Warner was stonewalling because the CD was a cash cow for them, and the media were tiptoeing around it because the rapper was black. I heard Time/Warner had a stockholders meeting scheduled in Beverly Hills. I owned some shares at the time, so I decided to attend.

What I did there was against the advice of my family and colleagues. I asked for the floor. To a hushed room of a thousand average American stockholders, I simply read the full lyrics of "Cop Killer" - every vicious, vulgar, instructional word. "I GOT MY 12 GAUGE SAWED OFF. I GOT MY HEADLIGHTS TURNED OFF. I'M ABOUT TO BUST SOME SHOTS OFF. I'M ABOUT TO OUST SOME COPS OFF..." It got worse, a lot worse. I won't read the rest of it to you. But trust me, the room was a sea of shocked, frozen, blanched faces. The Time/Warner executives squirmed in their chairs and stared at their shoes. They hated me for that. Then I delivered another volley of sick lyric brimming with racist filth, where Ice-T fantasizes about sodomizing two 12-year old nieces of Al and Tipper Gore. Well, I won't do to you here what I did to them. Let's just say I left the room in echoing silence. When I read the lyrics to the waiting press corps, one of them said, "We can't print that." "I know," I replied, "but Time/Warner's selling it." Two months later, Time/Warner terminated Ice-T's contract. I'll never be offered another film by Warner, or get a good review from Time magazine. But disobedience means you must be willing to act, not just talk.

When a mugger sues his elderly victim for defending herself ... jam the switchboard of the district attorney's office. When your university is pressured to lower standards until 80% of the students graduate with honors ... choke the halls of the board of regents. When an 8-year-old boy pecks a girl's cheek on the playground and gets hauled into court for sexual harassment ... march on that school and block its doorways. When someone you elected is seduced by political power and betrays you ... petition them, oust them, banish them. When Time magazine's cover portrays millennium nuts as deranged, crazy Christians holding a cross as it did last month, boycott their magazine and the products it advertises. So that this nation may long endure, I urge you to follow in the hallowed footsteps of the great disobediences of history that freed exiles, founded religions, defeated tyrants, and yes, in the hands of an aroused rabble in arms and a few great men, by God's grace, built this country.

If Dr. King were here, I think he would agree. Thank you. #