

Brainwashed!

A Look Inside the Vast Left-Wing Campus Conspiracy

By John K. Wilson

In *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth* (WND Books, 2004), Harvard Law student and UCLA graduate Ben Shapiro spins a tale about how politically correct universities are turning young minds to mush by imposing a left-wing ideology. Shapiro's story is a familiar one, told often before in far more persuasive ways by much better writers.

The foreword by David Limbaugh (brother of talk-show host Rush) calls *Brainwashed* "a sophisticated and firsthand critique of the university as an institution of ideological propaganda for the leftwing, secular worldview."^(xi) In fact, Shapiro's critique is neither sophisticated nor firsthand. Shapiro claims that in order to prove the anti-American bias of his professors, "for three years, I sat in my classes and transcribed direct, in-the-classroom quotations from my professors, carefully noting the date of each quotation." Astonishingly, there is little of any consequence to be found in what Shapiro writes.

Shapiro's book follows a simple formula. He picks a public policy issue, and says that "professors" think something outrageous. Then he quotes three or four professors from some news account, usually saying something quite reasonable. Shapiro responds with snide remarks, dismissing them (sometimes quoting other professors who disagree, even though this undermines his argument that leftists control academia). Then he goes on to the next controversial topic.

Factual accuracy is a struggle for Shapiro. He starts his book with an error, misspelling Berkeley chancellor Robert Berdahl's name in an opening quote (where Berdahl actually opposes indoctrination).^(xv)

Consider this example. Shapiro asks rhetorically, "didn't the American economy experience the largest peace-time economic growth rate in history under Reagan?"⁽⁹⁻¹⁰⁾ apparently unaware that the answer is no, and the Clinton Administration was far more successful. Shapiro claims, "When Ronald Reagan pursued tax-cutting during his administration, median family income, median household income, and average household income all rose; from 1982 to 1989, the unemployment rate declined by 4.3 percent."⁽¹⁰⁾ Of course, when Bill Clinton pursued tax increases during his administration, median family income, median household income, and average household income all rose far more than during the Reagan administration, even though during Clinton's time the Reagan-era deficits were wiped out. Economic growth during the Clinton Era averaged 4.0% per year, versus 2.8% during Reagan-Bush; unemployment dropped from 6.9% in 1993 to 4.0% in November 2000 (in one notable statistical deception, Shapiro cites unemployment in 1982, when it peaked during the recession sparked by Reagan's policies, in order to exaggerate the later decline in unemployment).

One example of Shapiro's shoddy use of statistics is his attempt to use polls to prove that colleges brainwash students to become more liberal. Shapiro declares in his introduction, "In an informal exit poll conducted by the UCLA Daily Bruin during the 2000 presidential election, Gore garnered 71 percent of the UCLA student vote, with Bush receiving a mere 20 percent."^(xvi) Noting that national polls of entering college freshmen show only a 10-point gap, Shapiro repeats the exact same "fact" eight pages later, even though an "informal" poll by a newspaper isn't statistically accurate. But according to Shapiro, it proves that "By the time students become upper-classmen, a ten-point political gap often becomes a fifty-point canyon"⁽⁶⁾ due to college brainwashing. Shapiro's point makes no sense (because many of those polled by the Daily Bruin weren't upperclassmen), but it also reveals how poorly educated he is, since he misleadingly compares a national poll with a campus "poll". Why would anyone expect students in one of the most liberal cities in one of the most liberal states to vote the same as students around the country?

According to David Limbaugh's foreword, Shapiro "cites surveys and exit-polling data showing that while slightly more college freshmen identify themselves as liberal than conservative, that gap widens substantially as they become upper-classmen."(xii) The fact that this highly dubious reasoning is cited three times in the opening pages of *Brainwashed* shows how weak the argument of the entire book is. Of course, it is possible that students will change their political values in college (particularly when Democrats are more likely to support funding for higher education). To assume that brainwashing is the cause, rather than a sincere rational belief, is to dismiss most college students as idiots.

"Idiots" is a term that Shapiro likes to throw around a lot, along with other insults like "knee-jerk liar Stanley Fish"(12) or clever remarks like, "The far left of the university faculty are as red as overripe tomatoes."(24) With his McCarthy-style red-baiting, one can almost read Shapiro's book and imagine that we're still living in the Cold War.

The Marxist Threat

Among the various crimes of professors, Shapiro writes, "Professor A. Belden Fields of the University of Illinois leads the socialist group on campus in monthly discussions."(23) Gasp! No, not something so horrible as a monthly discussion! When will somebody stop this tragedy? Shapiro is appalled to report that "Classes on Marxism exist at major universities across the country," listing dozens of colleges that actually dare to teach a class about Marx.(22)

According to Shapiro, "Students often graduate believing in the mythic power of Marxism and hating the 'racist American system.'"(xv) Shapiro, of course, has no evidence to support his point. In fact, there's no evidence that a significant number of college students ever read Marx, let alone believe in some "mythic power of Marxism," whatever that is. Far from hating the American system or thinking it racist, most students desire nothing more than to get a good-paying job.

Shapiro condemns Joel Blau of the State University of New York at "Stoneybrook" (sic) for "communism" because Blau called Bush's tax plan "a proposal that caters to the wealthiest segment of the population."(10) Of course, that's a completely objective statement of Bush's tax proposal: it benefits the wealthiest more than others. Conservatives are free to argue that the wealthiest should benefit the most from tax cuts, since they pay the most taxes and supposedly create wealth; but Blau's statement itself is simply a fact. To not only dispute it, but accuse anyone who utters it of "communism" puts Shapiro on the loony right, an example of invoking McCarthyism from someone who barely was born before the demise of the Soviet Union.

"Communists" are not the only targets on Shapiro's hate parade. As Shapiro put it in one column, "If you pay tuition, you're sponsoring the militant homosexual agenda. If you pay taxes, you're sponsoring the militant homosexual agenda. If your child majors in English, you're sponsoring the militant homosexual agenda."

Shapiro is horrified that "New York University students get the chance to enroll in 'Race, Gender and Sexuality in US History.'"(39) According to Shapiro, "Sex is promoted non-stop in the classroom....Pedophilia is acceptable, if a bit weird. Statutory rape is laughed off. Bestiality is fine."(54)

Shapiro's book is particularly strange when he tries (and fails) to prove how much smarter he is than his fellow student. Shapiro reminisces about when a student in his geography class where Shapiro gave a presentation on oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge asked, "Why can't we get rid of cars, and like, all ride bicycles and stuff?" Shapiro reports, "I was stunned. This was a first-grade question coming out of the mouth of a college student at a highly respected university." Shapiro responded, "Bicycles aren't going to cut it....If the Chinese were to attack us with tanks, could we fight them with bicycles?"(73) Who imagines that China is going to invade the US with tanks? And why does Shapiro think that Americans would defeat Chinese tanks with our cars?

According to Shapiro, “Those with a leftist mindset assault the English language.”(44) His evidence: a UCLA class on language where he was “stunned” to be told that the phrase “It’s me” is acceptable: “Grammar clearly requires that we say ‘It’s I,’ and yet here the students were being told it is just as correct to say ‘It’s me.’ Incredible.”(45) Shapiro doesn’t explain how saying “It’s me” leads to the leftist takeover of the world, but in his world, even an obscure grammar dispute is a thinly veiled part of the vast ideological war on campus.

When a UCLA professor called Darwin’s *Origin of Species* the most influential book ever written by one author and a student mentioned the Bible, the professor declared that religious texts are written by multiple authors. Shapiro writes, “Last time I checked, God is not ‘multiple authors.’”(87) Of course, God didn’t write the Bible, human beings did (hence the four Gospels written by different authors).(87)

Even widely-acknowledged misstatements from the Bush Administration are treated as sacred writ by Shapiro. He writes, “Even after Secretary of State Colin Powell, the Left’s favorite cabinet member, made his highly-regarded speech at the United Nations on February 5, 2003, peaceniks whined that they needed more evidence.”(125) That was probably because virtually all of the key evidence in Powell’s “highly-regarded speech” turned out to be wrong. But Shapiro seems not to be in touch with reality, preferring to dismiss criticism of the reasons for war in Iraq with a single word: “Wrong.”(124)

According to Shapiro, to professors “Saddam Hussein was not an enemy, but a strong and principled leader.” He writes, “Many professors felt pangs of joy as they saw three thousand Americans dying... (100) Exactly who these professors were, Shapiro doesn’t say. He does object to Noam Chomsky’s criticism of US policies, and proclaims, “Next time, Professor Chomsky should volunteer to fly the suicide missions.”(102)

Shapiro sees political debate in warlike terms: “What these professors want is a jihad against God, a crusade against traditional morality. And their battlefields are lecture halls full of innocent civilians.”(84) At the end of one chapter, Shapiro even seems to urge the mass murder of academics: “The professors are the intellectual terrorists. May they reap what they sow.”(114)

Washing the Brain

Shapiro’s title, “Brainwashed,” reflects a bizarre idea of what brainwashing is. According to Shapiro, “At Wayne State University, professors rushed to brainwash students to oppose war and President Bush.” And what was this brainwashing? A call for a day of reflection on the war “to raise questions about this war drive and its potential consequences.”(115) Is it really brainwashing to ask questions?

Shapiro concludes, “professors are supporting labor by brainwashing their students”(31) based on reading a 1996 New York Times article about how a few academics were holding teach-ins about organized labor. Shapiro considers it “scary” that some students helped unions during Union Summer programs.(32)

Shapiro also denounced Brian Foley of Widener University School of Law for indoctrinating students because he proclaimed, “I will teach my class in the hope that the skills my students learn will make them better citizens, who will ask questions and demand answers before they let their country be led into war.”(116) Is this a betrayal of academic integrity, to teach students to ask questions?

Like David Horowitz’s “Academic Bill of Rights,” which prohibits “indoctrination” without defining it, the far right sees any criticism of the political status quo as illegitimate “brainwashing.” Shapiro calls the Academic Bill of Rights “a monumental document” and adds: “Students for Academic Freedom is doing a tremendous job on campus. I’ve never seen the conservative movement on campus as cohesive or powerful as it has become. Conservative students don’t feel like they’re alone anymore, and they feel like they have a real purpose, a real fight to fight, and the resources to fight it.”

The Daily Bruin Suspension

Shapiro's main claim to fame is being suspended in 2002 as a columnist from the UCLA *Daily Bruin*. According to Shapiro, "When I attempted to expose the fact that the Muslim Student Association at UCLA is treasonous, I was fired from the *Bruin*." Shapiro says that he had written two columns about Muslims at UCLA, but his editors rejected them. A viewpoint editor reported that the editor-in-chief "thinks that it doesn't add anything to the debate and that we need fresh opinions on this debate." (152)

Rather than go to the editor-in-chief and ask him to reconsider, Shapiro contacted national radio host Larry Elder and went on his show May 20, 2002 to denounce his employers at the *Daily Bruin* as censors with a "pro-Muslim bias."

He was suspended for six months for violating *Daily Bruin* rules that require permission for outside interviews and failing to mention that he was not a reporter and his views did not represent the paper. The *Daily Bruin* told Shapiro that he could reapply in six months and "he'll just need to reassure us that we'll be notified before he speaks with outside media." (155) Shapiro decided to quit instead, concluding, "That's how free speech works at college newspapers." (155)

Actually, that's how free speech works at corporations and the corporate-run media, where free expression is often restricted (few reporters who go on a national talk show to denounce their editors would be allowed to keep their jobs). Although it's unfortunate that the *Daily Bruin* followed this corporate model in restricting political activism by its reporters and columnists, conservatives were not targeted. The *Daily Bruin* has dismissed staffers for being involved in liberal groups, including a columnist who was fired for involvement with the Bruin Democrats.

The *Daily Bruin* may have been understandably leery of printing a column accusing Muslims of being traitors. Shapiro's fear of Muslims is extreme: "Here's the scariest part: there are over five hundred Muslim student organizations on campus in the United States and Canada, with a constituency of over one hundred thousand." (173) He called the Muslim Student Association "devious." (173) He even condemned an Arab student magazine for printing ads for organizations Shapiro regards as supporting terrorism: "This is clearly in breach of federal anti-terrorism law, punishable by deportation." (174) Urging that students should be thrown out of the country for what they print is not exactly the position of a strong supporter of freedom of the press.

While Shapiro denounces the left for "a strong stench of victimology," he used his own form of victimology to launch a national syndicated (if obscure) column and a book deal with a right-wing publisher, WND Books.

Aside from deporting Muslims and denouncing liberal professors, Shapiro is vague about his proposals for the solution to the problem of "brainwashing." Shapiro proclaims it "a decent idea" for conservatives to pull money from universities he deems too liberal, but bizarrely contends that foreigners will take over, claiming that "Saudi Arabia buys up American universities like they're going out of style" based on a handful of funded chairs and scholarships. (179-180)

Shapiro believes that "conservatives should redirect their funds from liberal colleges to conservative start-up colleges." Shapiro urges the Wall Street Journal to rank conservative schools and measure the financial status of graduates. Then, he says, conservative business can hire students only from the conservative colleges.

It is difficult to find anything worthwhile in Brainwashed aside from the danger of believing uncritically in the far right's attacks on academia. But Shapiro is right when he writes, "Swallowing whole what your professors say doesn't teach you to think—it teaches you to think what they want you to think. And that is indoctrination, pure and simple." (183) It's too bad that Shapiro was too busy swallowing right-wing propaganda to consider the possibility that some of his professors might have been right.

Yet Shapiro admits, “I don’t believe that large numbers of conservative students are purposefully targeted for grade penalization.” Shapiro, who seemingly cannot write a paragraph without making a factual error, a distortion of a statistic, or a specious argument, somehow managed to get good enough grades from all of his left-wing brainwashing professors to be admitted to Harvard Law School.

If *Brainwashed* is any indication, professors are bending over backwards to give fair grades to conservatives who, imitating their political talk show idols, have only a remote familiarity with accuracy. *Brainwashed* is a badly-written, badly-reasoned book that promotes a plainly false picture of higher education, but one that is increasingly popular among those who want to launch a crusade against the Marxists, communists, and militant homosexuals whom they imagine to be in charge of a vast left-wing conspiracy controlling American higher education.