

# BEHIND THE LINES

*The bring-something-Texan-that-you-want-to-burn party.*

BY GREGORY CURTIS

It might not be everyone's idea of fun to go poking around among the English department faculty at the University of Texas at Austin for news of its continuing imbroglios. But if one did, one would soon be quietly asked this question: "Did you hear about the party with the flag burning?"

The English department at UT or any other large university touches the life and influences the thinking of every student there. All freshmen and sophomores have to pass certain English courses in order to earn a degree, no matter what their major turns out to be. With so many classes to teach to freshmen and sophomores, the department is by necessity one of the largest in the whole university and the largest in the College of Liberal Arts. At UT there are about eighty professors in the English department. With its size, budget, and contact with students, the English department can affect the atmosphere of the university in a way that the German department, for example, typically cannot.

For about the past five years, the English department at UT has been, as a professor might say, rent in two. Though many in the department simply try to avoid the fallout, the combatants are, on one side, generally older and more established professors who believe in traditional literature and traditional teaching. On the other are generally younger professors who see in literature a "tool of opposition," as a typical phrase goes, and teaching as a way of proselytizing for their gender, their race, or their radical—most often specifically Marxist—political beliefs. The numbers on each side are roughly equal, but the battle has shifted decidedly toward the radicals, who were the ones at the party. "That party was a kind of victory celebration for them," a conservative professor told me. "They didn't care about being careful anymore. They knew they had the power."

Here is the essence of what happened. Near the end of last year's spring term, an assistant professor in the English department had a party that was attended mostly by some other professors and many graduate students. The invitation said to bring something Texan that you wanted to burn. About midnight a fire was built in the street outside the professor's apartment, and various Texas things were thrown into the fire. Some of the graduate stu-

dents threw in papers graded by professors they didn't like. Possibly some road maps were burned, and the rumors around the department include the burning of a book by J. Frank Dobie, although two people present deny that. Finally, in went a Texas flag, which, despite some determined but comical efforts, would not burn completely.

This all sounds as silly as it must have been, although the symbolism—one thing that could not be lost on an English professor—is both powerful and repellent. During the days of intense gossip following the party, conservative wags would wonder why the radicals hadn't thrown in their paychecks. After all, they have "Tex-as" printed on them.

Fights among the faculty have enlarged into battles reminiscent of World War I, with both sides facing each other's entrenched and willing to use any tactics to gain an advantage. What mustard gas was to World War I, rumor-mongering and character assassination are to this dispute. To the traditional professors, the events of the party confirmed what they had been muttering among themselves: The radical professors have nothing but contempt for the society they are supposed to help educate and hatred for the state that pays their salaries. Similarly, anyone criticizing a woman or a minority or the work of a woman or minority runs the risk of being smeared as sexist or racist or both. At least one professor, who is hardly racist or sexist in any rational meaning of those words, a man with numerous scholarly publications and prestigious teaching awards, has been the object of an intense whisper campaign that has now spread outside the University of Texas to other schools. A minority faculty member hoped the department would hire his sister, who was about to earn a degree in literature from Texas' own graduate school. The English department has a long-standing policy of not hiring its own graduate students as new professors, and she was not hired. The faculty member claimed the decision was made solely for political and ideological reasons. Another minority faculty member claimed to be so upset by the opposition to the appointment that a special meeting of the whole English faculty was called to try to avert any charges of racism.

One reason these disputes are so bitter

is that they flow from very high-minded principles. Traditionalists believe that they are defending the values, traditions, and masterworks that are the best creations of our history and culture. The radicals say they simply want to include more people in that tradition and to recognize the value of other, different traditions, specifically the work of women and people of color. Both views sound reasonable enough, and in theory there is no reason why they couldn't both be honored. In practice, though, they are very hard to fit together. Time in any course is short, so the English department finds itself in the position of having to decide questions like this: In a survey course of American literature should a recognized writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, perhaps, be dropped and replaced by, let's say, Sandra Cisneros, a locally fashionable Mexican American author who has her champions on the faculty? Most professors and the huge majority of readers would describe her work, very charitably, as very minor and agree that Fitzgerald's claim on a student's attention is far better grounded than hers. But it can take more than simple nerve to keep to that opinion while being called racist because of it.

None of this is unique to the University of Texas. All across the country students and professors both are attacking traditional curricula for their supposed exclusion of the work of women and people of color. The reasons are not literary but political. It is by now an unfortunate fact that substantial numbers of English professors think of themselves not as teaching literature but as teaching politics. In 1988 an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* argued the need for a canon (the works generally accepted for teaching in college) that serves "concrete political commitments" without any regard for the literary or intellectual merit of any individual work. The current chair of the UT English department, Joe Kruppa, while stressing that there are a wide variety of political beliefs in the department, most of them solidly in the middle, says, "Personal political beliefs are inevitable in the classroom." He goes on to claim that professors who "foreground" their beliefs are preferable to those who don't. Evidently, he's getting his wish. One professor in the department speaks openly of transforming students into "lit-

erary terrorists." These attitudes imply what is too often the reality of contemporary college classrooms—professors using their position and authority to preach their personal political opinions to a captive audience of undergraduates.

Soon the politicizing of the classroom will be institutionalized in the very structure of the university. The administration is so fearful of being called racist and so lacking in vision or any moral force of its own that it is feverishly working right now for this very thing. There is a code word for this politicizing—multiculturalism. Very simply, all that means is teaching works by people other than white males. That's fair enough, except in reality what gets taught are works that serve a "concrete political commitment." Works that don't fit neatly into a professor's political views won't get taught. Both Joe Kruppa and Standish Meacham, the current dean of the College of Liberal Arts, are committed to multiculturalism. Kruppa says he doesn't favor requiring multicultural courses; rather he favors "infusing those variables" into already required courses. In other words, he doesn't favor requiring multicultural courses; he favors requiring required courses to be multicultural, a distinction, frankly, that escapes me. Furthermore, the demand from various faculty for more women's studies, black studies, and Mexican American studies has been constant. At present the debate is only whether these should be separate departments or centers within existing departments. Either way, the real issue here is jobs and money. Whether the result is separate departments or centers, new required courses or old required courses infused with variables, the school will need to dip into its strained budget to pay for all the new sinecures—chairmanships, faculty, and supporting staff—that these departments or centers will necessitate.

Other than those lucky enough to get the jobs, it's not at all clear whom all this will benefit. But it's very clear that students of every race and both genders will not benefit. I know a student at the university who went to her first sophomore English class this past fall. It is intended to be a broad survey course in literature. For many students it will be the only opportunity to study in a classroom the work of those who for generations have been regarded as our greatest writers. Instead the professor was in a fury. She tossed the standard anthology aside and announced that in her class they would read only the work of women from developing countries. That might be a worthwhile course for an advanced student, but it's preposterous for a sophomore survey course. My friend quickly switched to a professor who taught from standard texts. She found something she hadn't expected—an appreciation for Melville. But why, in a school with UT's pretensions and potential, did she have to switch classes at all? ♣