

Much Talk, Little Action

Accuracy in Academia started slowly, but it has already drawn fire from both the left and the right

What's to be made of Accuracy in Academia? Is it just a group of feisty consumer activists, eager to correct professorial errors and expand the boundaries of campus debate? Or is it a gang of neo-McCarthyites, determined to first chill and then skewer any leftist they find teaching on campus? The answer may depend on the eye of the beholder. This much, however, is clear: after a semester's work, the young men who run AIA have shown a genius for attracting publicity, but thus far have produced only a handful of teachers whom even they might care to indict.

AIA was born during last summer's vacation, an outgrowth of Accuracy in Media (AIM), which is committed to combating left-wing influence in the mass media. AIM founder Reed Irvine, a right-wing activist who prefers the description "freedom defender," edits AIA's newspaper and provides office space for AIA's staff—two young veterans of campus ideological wars. Les Csorba III is a 1985 graduate of the University of California, Davis. As a senior, he organized protests about the lectures of a filmmaker named Saul Landau, who, among other things, had made what Csorba considered a favorable profile of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. The other is Matthew Scully, a former columnist for the student paper at Arizona State, where he had publicly flayed teachers for what he thought to be objectionable instruction.

The AIA men have opened two fronts. First they criticized a few professors in their newsletter, in a column they sent to college papers and in various public appearances. Several of AIA's targets were already well-known leftists. But they also attacked an English teacher at the University of Maryland for allegedly suggesting that there was more injustice in the United States than in Hitler's Germany. And they indicted an old foe of Scully's, a professor at Arizona State, who was charged with converting a survey course in Western political thought into a personal platform to denounce nuclear arms, warfare and energy. More attention was attracted by their second front—taking informa-

tion from student "reporters" about professors whose classroom performance seemed suspect to AIA. They rented a toll-free number (800 334-9141) and promised to keep secret the names of tipsters, lest they be penalized with a lower grade.

Frightening memories: To critics, AIA's opening salvos echoed the turmoil of the early 1950s. AIA staffers talked about lists of 10,000 Marxists teaching on campus. The invocation of the word "list" reminded many of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who spoke of having a list of communists in the federal government. He didn't, but his movement was launched. And the prospect of students reporting on their teachers caused its own sensation. For some, it was a reminder of the secret informers of the '50s, for others, the radicals of the '60s—an odd coupling joined by a common taste for tormenting professors whose views they opposed.

The informant label stuck to—and stung—AIA. The chancellor of the City University of New York, Joseph Murphy, called AIA the "thought police." Such comments hurt. For instance, at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the Republican club quickly reassessed its interest in AIA. "The idea of harassing professors is not what we had in mind," says James L. McFarland, president of the GOP group.

In response, AIA staffers insist that they are not trying to build a network of "spies." Says associate editor Scully: "The idea got exaggerated into a nationwide network of classroom monitors. The idea was to raise the whole question of academic freedom... [with] a few students here and there sending in complaints." As for their basic mission, they point to the views of other academics, most notably comments made by Boston University president John Silber. "To the extent that [AIA] is concerned simply in pointing out errors, in argument or fact, I don't know why any honest professor would worry about it," Silber said in a CBS interview.

For all this push and pull, the most interesting aspect of the debate is that AIA has drawn fire from the right as well. Secretary of Education William J. Bennett and neo-conservative writer Midge Decter, the executive director of the Committee for the Free World, agree that America's faculties are too sympathetic to the left. But both find fault with AIA. Bennett argues that "criticizing individual professors... will allow the left to portray itself as an embattled minority..." Decter says that bias itself isn't the problem, because educated people are entitled to their opinions. The issue is whether teachers have the "decency and honor" to test their views against other texts and opinions. Assessing that, and instilling that, she says, is "no job for kids." AIA respectfully disagrees, proving that at least when it is taking incoming fire, the group can find something critical to say about conservatives, too.

ARIC PRESS with ANNE MCCRORY in Amherst, Mass., ANGELA GAMBILL in College Park, Md., ELIZABETH COSIN in Washington, D.C., TIM KELLEY in Madison, Wis., and bureau reports

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