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# Culture Chronicles

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## WORDS AND POWER: A Review of Michael Knowles' *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds*<sup>1</sup>

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Social, cultural, and political forces today clearly reveal that America is a divided nation. The division is so thoroughgoing and deep that it is not only reflected at the polls but it is evident in the very language that politicians and other leaders use to address the leading questions of the day. A winning strategy is to frame a salient issue in such a way that one's choice of words will do much of the heavy lifting such that contrary views, especially traditional ones, will now be deemed out of bounds. In other words, such an approach is a way to win an argument before it even begins. If those who hold contrary views accept the framing, that is, the very language of the discourse, they have already lost the argument. Welcome to the topsy-turvy world of political correctness. To use the rhetoric of Lewis Carroll, in his *Through the Looking Glass*, we can see

the contours of this new linguistic landscape: "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it

means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less....the whole point of words is 'to be master, that's all.'"

Into this challenging environment, in which a social and cultural hegemony, if not a political one, is clearly in the offing, enter Michael Knowles and his very readable and engaging new

book, *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds*. Famous for his earlier work, Knowles is a critical thinker in the best sense of the term. He begins the work with the very definition of political correctness and reveals, surprisingly enough, that the definition may already be prepackaged to route the naïve and the unwary down deeply troubling pathways.

To illustrate this last point, many people today understand political correctness to mean conformity to the belief that language, our very words, could offend the political sensibilities of minority groups, especially racial or sexual ones. Challenging the accuracy of such a definition, especially in terms of its explanatory power, Knowles brings forth a wealth of hard data, always annoying to the myth makers, and shows that not only do the majority of Americans loathe political correctness but that "minorities hate it most of all" (87). In fact, "Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians all reject PC at higher rates than whites. These rates reach as high as 82 percent among Asians, 87 percent among Hispanics, and 88 percent among Indians" (87). And though the rejection rate by blacks is admittedly lower than that of whites, it nevertheless comes in very strong, as high as 75 percent (88).

Who then are the great champions of political correctness in America today? Who are the most likely to be offended by the word choice of others? They are none other than "progressive activists," Knowles informs us, "a fact

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1. This article was originally published in *Firebrand Magazine* on December 7, 2021.

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that undermines PC's pretensions to be the voice of oppressed minorities" (88). Indeed, "progressive activists are the whitest, richest, most highly educated group in the country" (88). Most are heterosexual. Accordingly, what may actually lie at the foundations of political correctness is not race or sex, as is so often supposed, but class—that is, the worldview of white American elites who are eagerly "punching down."

The terminology of political correctness hails from the cultural revolution in China when Mao in his 1966 *Little Red Book* gave birth to a new way of speaking oriented to the party line. Such patterned speaking, with numerous guardrails to keep the masses in line, emerged in the West during the 1960s in the writings of the political theorist Herbert Marcuse. He made the case, odd as it may seem, for a "repressive tolerance" in which traditional ideas and practices were suppressed and revolutionary ones celebrated. Earlier popular authors such as Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World*, written in 1932, and George Orwell in his *1984*, published in 1949, were clearly prophetic. They saw well ahead of their time all the verbal mischief on the horizon. For one thing they sensed that the West, given its own difficult history in the twentieth century, was ripe for the dystopian world envisioned by self-declared masters who thought that they knew far more and far better than the common lot. With speech in the crosshairs there were now such things as "thought crimes."

Remarkably enough, much of the criticism of this carefully argued book is not directed at cultural radicals and mischievous wordsmiths but at conservatives and traditionalists who do not fully appreciate the challenging verbal context in which they operate. As a consequence, they are often feckless in their basic approach to some of the leading issues of the day and woefully inept in their arguments. Indeed, to consider the challenge of political correctness largely under the banner of "censorship and free

speech" (40) already constitutes defeat when conservatives and traditionalists energetically champion some abstract notion of "intellectual diversity" (83) in which all the bad behaviors of political correctness are given free play. The result is that the traditional standards of conservatives have already been gutted before any conversation even begins. As Knowles points out, political correctness is an "anti-standard standard" (183) that destroys traditional standards in two key ways. The first occurs when people are persuaded or coerced (by inordinate social and political pressures) to adopt or tolerate some new radical code of behavior. The second takes place when the use of politically correct speech has the effect of disavowing standards entirely (142).

These two challenges are both ongoing and considerable. Thus, the framing of a particular issue, the specific language employed, may once again point to the "proper" judgments that are to be made, while at the same time conservative and traditional views will be rendered obscure or even invisible. Take for example any discussion concerning "transsexuals." Firstly, there is a rare condition when persons are born with the genitalia of both sexes (known as intersex, a condition that used to be called hermaphroditism). A physical discrepancy exists between external and internal genitalia. This perplexing and difficult condition is biologically grounded. As such these persons are to be treated with the utmost compassion and understanding as they make their way to their sexual identities. The condition of "transsexuals" however, is much different. To illustrate, the politically correct employ the language of "transsexual" to describe the discrepancy not between internal and external genitalia but between biological sex (with little or no evidence of intersex complications) and gender identity which is viewed as a freely chosen personal construct and is therefore considered fluid.

Once the language of "transsexual" is employed, whether in the church or

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without, the discussion quickly moves away from any biological grounding to any number of gender identities that are embraced by a well-ensconced autonomous self with its whirligig of desires. If there ever was to be any debate here, it has already been lost because the politically correct framing of the issue with its artful language games in play has moved the issue from biology to human desires and ultimately to human rights. Consequently, to oppose such emergent, newfangled rights can only result in being labeled a “bigot.” In other words, every other option has already been cut off, especially when democratic, egalitarian scripts are then brought in to provide added muscle. And traditional understandings of human sexuality, with their biological grounding are nowhere to be seen. They’re AWOL. So much for free speech.

Knowles is perceptive enough in his analysis to recognize that a particular understanding of human freedom is foundational to how political correctness plays out in American culture. That is, the reigning understanding of human liberty today, distorted as it is by political scripts, has now become indistinguishable from what is best described as licentiousness, that is, lacking moral restraints, sexual or otherwise, and showing disregard, even contempt, for traditional, hereto-

fore established norms. All of this has been built into the language moves of the day. The Herculean task of traditionalists and conservatives

then before they even enter the linguistic arena is to develop, articulate, and champion a moral and political vision of the good (186), that is, a standard, along with the appropriate sense of liberty

necessarily associated with it. In this setting, then, liberty must be understood as what emerges at the end of a process of discipline as one leans into “the right to do what one ought” (98), and one thereby develops a freedom that is nothing less than prodigious and empowering.

As a consequence of this empowered understanding of liberty, the self is now set free from wayward, disorienting desires and is therefore able to acquire those enduring goods, the virtues, that ennoble character. Simply put, it is the difference between the freedom to do whatever one wants, regardless of consequences (which is actually quite dangerous when you think about it), and the freedom, let’s say, to play the piano well or to be able to run five miles or to get along with others. In the past the parameters of acceptable public speech (and there have always been such parameters) were meant to encourage the latter freedom, especially in terms of moral goods, because such speech was understood in terms of the cherished standards that lead to human flourishing.

If the politically correct among us sense that the conversation is no longer going well with the moves that Knowles suggests, that the verbal minefield that they have carefully laid out is now being avoided, and that as a consequence they must now face what standards they had imagined were already gone, they can always take the nuclear option, so to speak. That is, they can deny that political correctness even exists and then they can gaslight conservatives and traditionalists into believing that they have concocted all of this in their heads: “It’s nothing but a conspiracy theory energized by a raging, out of control, hysteria!” Words are whatever we choose them to mean. The whole point of words is “to be master, that’s all.” In the end, it’s about power. It has always been about power.

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# Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds

By Michael J. Knowles

“Every single American needs to read Michael Knowles’s *Speechless*. I don’t mean ‘read it eventually.’ I mean: stop what you’re doing and pick up this book.” —CANDACE OWENS

“The most important book on free speech in decades—read it!” —SENATOR TED CRUZ

## A New Strategy: We Win, They Lose

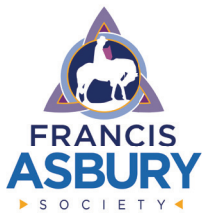
The Culture War is over, and the culture lost.

The Left’s assault on liberty, virtue, decency, the Republic of the Founders, and Western civilization has succeeded.

You can no longer keep your social media account—or your job—and acknowledge truths such as: Washington, Jefferson, and Columbus were great men. Schools and libraries should not coach children in sexual deviance. Men don’t have uteruses.

How did we get to this point?

In *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds*, Michael Knowles of *The Daily Wire* exposes and diagnosis the losing strategy we have fallen for and shows how we can change course—and start winning.



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