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The Perils of Self-Censorship

ROBERT D. LEIGHNINGER, JR.

EDITOR

Earlier this year, Jim Midgley, until recently Dean of the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, was asked to write a guest editorial for the National Association of Social Work's (NASW) premier journal *Social Work* by its new editor Jorge Delva. The topic was international social work and the challenges of globalization. After presenting some of the pros and cons of globalization, Jim chose to focus on "unipolarism," a foreign policy articulated by neo-conservatives like Charles Krauthammer, Paul Wolfowitz, and William Kristol and embraced by officials of the George W. Bush administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This doctrine, he argues, works in direct opposition to the positive aspects of globalization which promise greater international cooperation. A unipolar world is one in which the only remaining superpower, the United States, can and should spread its values across the globe, by force if necessary. Confronting the unipolar agenda should be the first order of business for anyone interested in international social work.

This provocative, though hardly incendiary, thesis was designed to start discussion in the two international social work meetings held this summer. But in the headquarters of the NASW it did more than that; it set off alarms. When the copy-edited manuscript was returned to its author, a number of the names of neoconservatives and Bush administration officials had been removed. Thinking this was just capricious editing, Jim asked that they be reinstated. He was told by NASW Press that a "final" decision had been made denying his request. He withdrew the manuscript.

Jorge Delva, the editor, had not been consulted on
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any of this and protested. He was told that a staff attorney was concerned about the effect of naming names, Bush administration-connected names, on the association's tax exempt status. The issue was raised at the June meeting of *Social Work's* editorial board and at a meeting of the NASW Board of Directors. In the course of discussion, it became apparent that this was not an isolated instance of administrative involvement in NASW journal publications. Review by NASW administrative staff, apart from editorial and peer review, is established procedure.

I cannot debate the issue of what threatens the non-profit status of an organization. As I understand it, the impropriety would not be in expressing a political opinion but in backing a particular candidate. Moreover, NASW and its leaders have taken political stands against government policies in the past. Given that, what exactly is NASW afraid of in this case? The Bush administration has a record of attempting to intimidate opponents, so the threat cannot be totally dismissed. Yet is simply connecting its officials with a policy they openly espouse cause for retaliation? And if the state of public debate has become this nightmarish, how should an organization which believes in social justice behave?

We don't know how long this administrative overview has been going on nor how many other articles have been modified because of NASW concerns. If other authors have been subject to this prior restraint, they have not complained publicly. One purpose in publishing this story is to see if it will bring other examples to light. However, even if this censorship has been imposed only a few times, and even if authors have consented to have their writing altered because of feared political repercussions, it is still censorship. Whether the fears of NASW's administrators are well grounded, exaggerated, or imaginary, to give into them is to accept a serious compromise with free inquiry and open discussion, all the more pernicious when we inflict it on ourselves rather than have it imposed by the government.