

A Knock on the Door: My Experience Writing for AR
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I published my first article with a racial theme in the October 2001 issue of this magazine (*American Renaissance*). The article was about the way some racially conscious parents are parenting and educating their children. I entitled it "Rearing Honorable White Children: Instilling Racial Identity and Responsibility in Today's World." As it turned out, publishing this piece resulted a bit of an adventure for me, one that I think did me some good personally. This is the account of that tale.

After "Rearing Honorable White Children" appeared in AR I used it in an education course I teach at the University of Vermont (much of the article dealt with homeschooling). It was the first time I had assigned a reading that reflected a white racial perspective in a class. I can't say much came of it, however. I distributed the article amid a flood of disclaimers: "This is a controversial article." "Even though I wrote this, that doesn't mean I support what these parents say." "Don't feel you have to go along with the ideas in it." Looking back on it, I think about what made me assume I had to all but apologize for handing it out. The faculty that have students read material that rails against "white racism," "white privilege," and "white oppression" don't feel they have to go into this kind of shuffle. Where did I pick up the idea that I had to?

As for my students, all of them white, whatever reactions they had to the article they by and large kept them to themselves. The majority of them stared into the floor and basically waited the uncomfortable experience out. I didn't help the process along, as I stood in the front of the room shifty-eyed and nervous and, I'm sure, giving the appearance that I felt there was something underhanded about the whole enterprise. I didn't press students to explore the claims made by the parents I quoted in the article, and I didn't offer any analyses myself. Both the students and I were relieved to move onto other matters as quickly as possible.

One afternoon late in the year, there was a knock on my office door at the university. I opened the door and there was a large college age young man who told me he was from the campus newspaper. Behind him was another good-sized fellow holding a camera. The reporter had a copy of "Rearing Honorable White

Children” in his hand and said that someone had contacted the paper saying I was using it in class.

I asked the reporter who told him about the article (as if it mattered), and he said he wouldn’t say. I assume it was a student in the course in which I used it. My response to the presence of these two young men, who seemed to fill up the entire doorway, was as if they were the police and I had been caught committing a crime. I was fearful and flustered.

The two of them inched their way into the office and I backed up. “This is a controversial article to be using in a class,” said the reporter. “Can I interview you?”

“Right now?” I gasped.

“Yes.”

I froze. The two of them were blocking the doorway, so it appeared to me. I didn’t invite them into the office, but they kept drifting farther inside and I kept backing up. Eventually I sat at my desk while they remained standing looking down at me.

The reporter went on: “You had in here that these parents you talked to think their culture and race are ‘hammered relentlessly,’ is what you said. And then you said that they have legitimate concerns.”

“Well, actually,” I quivered, “I didn’t write that about them having legitimate concerns. That was an editor’s choice. What I wrote was that these parents are convinced they have legitimate concerns, and the editor took out some words to tighten the sentence and made it sound like I was saying that.” Which was a lie; that sentence was exactly as I wrote it.

It never dawned me at that time to have responded to the reporter saying this is a controversial article with: “Some people, including you, may think this is controversial, but the key issue as far as I’m concerned is whether or not the article is true, whether or not it reflects accurately how these parents view things and how I view them, and the article *is* true. And anyway, what’s so controversial about wanting to raise honorable white children? Would you be here if the article had been about black parents who want to raise honorable black children?”

And instead of the editor-changed-the-meaning fabrication, I could have said simply, “I believe these parents have legitimate concerns.”

And I could have been calm and proud and confident and acted like I have a right to be in the world and say what I think, and I could have looked this reporter in the eye.

But in late 2001 I did none of that.

“Could we take your picture?”

“No, no!” I pleaded. “I don’t want my picture taken. I’m a very private person. I don’t want any pictures of me in the paper.” I ask myself now, what was the speech about being a private person all about? Did I have the idea that other people could go public and I had to stay in the shadows? The answer is yes, I did. Where did that come from?

Finally, looking up at the two of them and trying desperately to compose myself and at least do a reasonable imitation of a university professor, I said, “This is a really sensitive topic and I’m not very good at extemporaneous talk [where’d I get that?], so how about if you e-mail me some questions and I’ll e-mail back the answers?”

The reporter said that would be all right with him, and he and the photographer left my office. I immediately went home and ate junk food and read sports magazines and didn’t answer the phone, my long-standing strategy for coping with threat and fear.

The article in the student newspaper was published in January of 2002 on the front page with the headline “UVM [the University of Vermont] Professor Publishes Controversial Article on Raising White Children.” I’m reading now carefully for the first time. Back when it came out I’d skimmed it and hid it away, another coping strategy: pretend something doesn’t exist. Really, as I read it now, the article is quite benign. It quotes me as saying, “I wouldn’t presume to tell white parents—or black parents or Native American parents or Jewish parents or Amish parents—how they should raise their children. I believe strongly in the freedom of conscience, and I think all parents have a right to raise their children with their own traditions or not. To me, that right is at the core of what America is all about, in contrast to a totalitarian society. Increasingly, the schools feel mandated to reshape the hearts and minds of students to conform to their own favored ideologies, ideologies that are contrary to these families’ [the ones I describe in the article] deepest convictions.” Nothing all that wrong with that, but as I say, I just now read it carefully for the first time.

The campus newspaper article engaged in what I've learned is standard practice when writing about anybody suspected of being politically incorrect: it quoted "watchdog groups." These are organizations that keep an eye on the bad guys and let the rest of us know what they are up to. Of course, in this instance I was one of the bad guys. The Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League in particular stand ready by the phone with a list of pejorative labels and negative characterizations and associations to attach to anyone and anything they don't like. In my case, a representative of the ADL termed *American Renaissance* and its web site "racist" and "insidious." Since that time, I haven't found a reporter who asked for evidence of these sorts of attributions, or who questioned the motives or objectivity of these "watchdogs."

But even taking into account the obligatory watchdog smear, the story on me in the campus newspaper was even-handed. My experience with it conformed to a pattern I started to recognize in myself: I anticipate the sky falling and, as it turns out, it doesn't fall. I asked myself, where did I pick up the notion that something terrible is going to happen to me if I get caught speaking favorably about white people or advocating for them?

And more, where did I get the assumption—which I had—that I am helpless and unable to do a thing in my defense or strike back at anyone who attacks me, that I simply have to endure anything any representative of the "legitimate" world wants to dish out? With that kind of thinking, it is no wonder I hid out for so long in my life. Laying low makes sense if you believe others can hurt you whenever they want to, and in whatever way they want to, and you'll just have to take it.

About a week after the campus newspaper article, a reporter from the Burlington, Vermont newspaper contacted me about the AR piece—he'd read the campus newspaper article. I was a little stronger this time, but basically I repeated the pattern that I used with the campus newspaper: I'll only reply to e-mail questions, and no pictures.

The article that appeared a couple days later, "Professor Examines Race-Based Education," was quite fair to my views as I read it now carefully for the first time. There were the "watchdog" quotes, this time from someone else at the Southern Poverty Law Center who pointed out that *American Renaissance* is at the "intellectual racist end of things" and "paints a little sunnier face on

hate.” But the article quotes me accurately saying my parenting article would not have been published in a mainstream academic journal: “The rules of the game in scholarly publication is that if you write about people who have a strong white, or European American, racial consciousness, make sure you point out how off-base they are, and whatever you do, don’t say anything positive about them.” Fair enough. And I made a step forward with my declaration that I agreed with the families’ “basic contention that their heritage and race have been under siege over the last generation and more.”

A radio call-in show appearance and then a television interview the next week went still better (the media people all key off one another; this all came out to the AR article). Not great—I babbled and played “nice guy” in both instances (trying, I guess, to get across that anybody who wags his tail like I do is too innocuous to be a threat and evoke any abuse)—but the television interview was a little better than the radio shot, so I was coming along. As Aristotle once said, you learn things by practicing, and I was getting some practice. I was learning something basic: to affirm my right to unapologetically and without restraint, and without equivocation, and in spite of fear of the consequences, speak my truth to the world.

A few months later, I received a call from a John Dicker, nobody I’d ever heard of, who wanted to write an article for *Seven Days*, a widely-read free weekly “Vermont news, views, and culture” tabloid. This time I agreed to set up a face-to-face interview and pose for pictures. The result was a ten-by-fifteen-inch photo of me looking stern on the front page of the May 8th, 2002, issue of *Seven Days*. Dicker’s article was called “The White Stuff: Professor Robert Griffin: Open-Minded Academic or Aryan Apologist.”

In the article, Dicker pointed out that “Rearing Honorable White Children” appeared in *American Renaissance*, a journal he said “links inferior intelligence, criminal activity and sexual depravity to non-whites” (I wonder where he got that?). He noted that AR’s editor, Jared Taylor, “heads a nonprofit foundation that has been classified as a hate group by the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).” And he quoted African American Vanderbilt professor, Carol Swain, as noting that Mr. Taylor “is more sophisticated than your average Klansman” but is in the same basic category. I feel sorry that Jared had to take hits to

get me discredited.

Dicker quoted me accurately as saying "I want everybody to realize the promise of America, [and] that includes a white boy from rural Vermont." (Again, I'm reading it carefully for the first time.) And he quoted me accurately as saying that I didn't want any child turned away from his heritage: "I don't want him to feel that he has to be deferential or sacrificial to some other group or step aside. . . . You could say, if you were black, 'I identify with my race and I care about my people and I'm going to live my life committed to their well-being and I'm going to join with others. I don't think it would play very well if you said, 'I'm white, I'm proud of being white, I feel in solidarity with other white people and I'm committed to furthering the well-being of my people. I think that would be labeled as neo-Nazi or racist.'" He also quoted me correctly as saying that the writing I had been doing "has made me more conscious of race from a white perspective. It has become a lens that I see the world through much more than before." Pretty good. Getting stronger.

A couple of weeks later, *Seven Days* printed a letter to the editor from Lorrie Smith, a resident of Burlington (ellipses in the original):

As a teacher and scholar of race studies and African-American literature, and as a white ally in the struggle against racism . . . I read with interest the article by UVM education professor Robert Griffin ["The White Stuff," May 8]. I have no idea what Professor Griffin's politics may be . . . but I heartily support the principles of academic freedom and free speech that protect his right to study self-proclaimed "white nationalists."

. . . I am troubled, however, by the suggestion that white supremacy can be studied for its "integrity and courage and dedication" without reference to its moral depravity. White supremacy and neo-Nazism are not neutral "lifestyle" choices, but ideologies with long histories and complicated contexts. To imply that the separatist affirmation of "white" or "European American" heritage (as if such a thing were monolithic or racially pure in the first place) is equivalent to the affirmation of "black" heritage . . . is not only a

distortion of history and a misleading appropriation of multiculturalist language, but disingenuous cynicism of the worst sort . . .

[I]t is important to recognize the enormous costs of race-based practices designed to preserve the supposed superiority and power of “white” culture: from the Jewish Holocaust to African slavery . . . “White nationalism” can never mean the same thing as “black nationalism,” an ideology of self-determination and pride in response to centuries of racist oppression. I am concerned that the work of scholars like Professor Griffin erases these distinctions and bestows dignity and legitimacy upon organizations founded in fear and hatred.

The next week, *Seven Days* printed my reply (ellipses in the original):

Lorrie Smith’s letter of May 22 in response to an article about my research at the University of Vermont (“The White Stuff,” May 8) is yet another example of the way definitions are used to demonize and suppress expressions of white racial consciousness and commitment. In her first paragraph, Ms. Smith reveals her agenda—which is, I’ll do the defining, thank you very much—when she refers to my study of “self-proclaimed ‘white nationalists.’” Her meaning is clear: who are these people to label themselves in such a non-pejorative way? I get her point, but then again, some of these same self-proclaimed white nationalists might think her announcement that she is “a white ally in the struggle against racism” is itself a self-proclamation. “She can do it and we can’t, is that it?” they might ask.

That is exactly it. In her remaining two paragraphs, self-proclaimed “teacher and scholar of race studies and African-American literature” Smith manages to smear the people I have been investigating with every negative label and association in the standard mud-slinging repertoire (except the KKK, she missed that one): among them, racism, white supremacy, neo-

Nazism, the Holocaust, hatred, moral depravity, and oppression. . . . If you buy her line—and I must say, many people do—you’ll accept the double standard that the minority pride and self-determination she affirms in her letter are good, but the very same things in white people are bad.

The late comedian Lenny Bruce used to tell a joke about a guy who, when caught in the act of cheating by his wife, says to her, “Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?” I’d like to think that in matters of race more and more white people are getting past the Orwellian newspeak that has been coming at them for decades and starting to look hard at reality for themselves. That is what I’m doing.

Standing up for myself. Not bad. I remember after the two from the school newspaper left my office that first time thinking, “I wish I’d never written that damn AR article.” Looking back on it now, I’m glad I did.

“A Knock on the Door” is adapted from Robert S. Griffin’s book, *Living White: Writings on Race, 2001-2005*.