

Turmoil a hot topic in college classrooms

by Linda Borg
The Providence Journal

SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. - The course is Political Science 434. The topic, the American intelligence community.

But the real subject - the one that inspires students to put down their diet sodas and raise their hands - is America's war on terrorism, as CNN has dubbed the bombing of Afghanistan.

Marc Genest, who teaches American foreign policy at the University of Rhode Island, paces from one side of the classroom to the other, his voice booming.

"How did we get Pakistan to turn around and support us?" he says to a packed auditorium of attentive students.

"Money!" a student says.

"Military and economic aid," another student jumps in.

"Right," says Genest. "The people who were originally aligned with al-Qaida are now the people we are working with to defeat them."

The turmoil in the Middle East that was once a distant rumble on college campuses now occupies center stage, pushing out more parochial concerns such as underage drinking and fair wages for support staff.

Around the country, colleges are expanding classes on the Middle East, Islam, and foreign policy, in order to meet the demands of students who are desperate for information on a region

they knew little about before Sept. 11.

At Harvard University, students were standing in the aisles on the first day of Professor Nur Yalman's course "Thought and Change in the Contemporary Middle East."

At Stanford University, the course "Palestine, Zionism, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" was supposed to enroll 40 students. It drew 100.

This spring, Roger Williams University will offer a new course on terrorism, and it has changed the title of one course from "Foreign Policies and Selected Regional Powers" to the much sexier "Rogue States, Allies, and Regional Powers."

Genest says that several students sat in on his foreign-policy class after he appeared on local television and participated in a university-sponsored panel on the Sept. 11 attacks.

He says he has been inundated with e-mail from current and former students who wonder what prompted these attacks and how the United States should respond.

"One of the few positive things to come out of all of this," says Genest, "is heightened awareness of the importance of international politics. Pedagogically, it has sparked a lot of interest."

"This dovetails beautifully with what I teach - we've been talking about the geopolitics of our support in the Middle East."

At colleges across the country, professors of history and political science are using the terrorist attacks on

American soil as a teachable moment: an opportunity to make the connection between practice and theory.

Ken Osborne, a history professor and dean of the Metropolitan College at Roger Williams, says he is already getting requests for his course next semester on Vietnam, and plans to increase enrollment from 30 students to 40.

In his U.S. history class, Osborne is using the crisis to illuminate how the United States has faced external threats in the past, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor.

During a recent discussion on World War I, he drew comparisons between the way Americans felt about the use of submarine warfare on civilian targets with the way they feel now about biological and germ warfare.

"The average college kid grew up with Fortress America," says Osborne. "They barely remember the Soviet Union. This has been a whole new awakening for them."

Mark Sawonski, who teaches foreign policy and international relations at Roger Williams, says there has been a heightened level of intensity and seriousness in his classes, which begin with a discussion of the latest developments in the Middle East.

"I think there is a greater appreciation of the cost of our involvement internationally," says Sawonski. "Students realize that it's not a free ride - they understand now that we are being tested."

Beacon arrives in Afghanistan



Beacon, an F/A-18 pilot, suits up for a strike mission over Afghanistan. "After watching the twin towers fall to the ground and kill 6,000 fellow Americans ... It's a whole different set of resolve here," he said, comparing this mission to Bosnia.

PHOTO BY SAUL INGLEUS NAVY

Ritalin quickly becoming recreational drug of choice for college students

by Johnny Diaz
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Before he studies for a midterm or a final, a 20-year-old University of Miami pre-law student pops a Ritalin pill.

Called Vitamin R or the "cramming drug," the small white pill keeps him and some of his dorm mates awake and increases their concentration. But illegal and abusive use of the drug could also come with some serious side effects.

"I would go for hours studying when I took the Ritalin," said the student, who asked that his name not be used. "In college, there is so much pressure to succeed, and this is Miami, where people want to go out and have fun, too. Sometimes you have to turn to alternative methods to succeed."

Where college students in the past drank pots of coffee or popped diet pills to stay awake while cramming for exams, a growing number are now illegally using Ritalin.

Since 1995, the drug - widely prescribed to treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD - has ranked on the Drug Enforcement Administration's list of most stolen medications, said Gretchen Feussner, a pharmacologist with the federal DEA.

"It's like speed," Feussner said. "(Students) know it's going to keep them awake. They know they can party hardy. What they don't know (is) ... if you took cocaine and put it in a pill and took it at a low dosage, it would do exactly the same thing. It's a serious drug."

National statistics are not available on illegal Ritalin use among college-age students, partly because Ritalin abuse tends to be dwarfed by more visible issues, such as alcoholism, smoking, AIDS awareness and abuse of drugs such as Ecstasy.

But a 1998 University of Wisconsin-Madison survey found that one in five of 100 students who responded misused the drug.

Next spring, counselors at the University of Florida in Gainesville plan to ask students about illegal Ritalin use in an anonymous annual

survey given randomly to students on the campus.

During final exams this spring, University of Miami officials posted fliers and posters around the Coral Gables campus warning students of the negative effects of using unprescribed Ritalin as a late-night study aid.

In November, the school will e-mail a survey to all its students to try to determine how many are abusing Ritalin, Oxycontin, and other drugs, said Jennifer Brack, assistant dean of students. The students will be allowed to answer the survey anonymously. Results of the online survey, expected early next year, will help counselors design more specific drug-awareness campaigns, Brack said.

Dr. Jon Shaw, director of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Miami, said one of his college patients hides his Ritalin at night because he fears his dorm mates might try to swipe some pills.

"There is no question Ritalin is being misused by college students," Shaw said.

Students say they are given the pills by friends or buy them for about \$5 a tablet from people who have been prescribed the drug.

Dr. Eric Heiligenstein, clinical director of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Health Services, said he conducted his survey after hearing reports of misuse and thinks the abuse remains pervasive today on campuses nationwide.

"On most college campuses, you can go to the library and probably walk away with some (Ritalin) easily," Heiligenstein said. "It has become the medicine people want to have."

Ritalin, a powerful stimulant classified in the same category as cocaine and methamphetamines, is slowly absorbed into the blood stream, stimulating the brain and creating a chemical reaction that allows people who are distracted or hyperactive to keep their attention focused. Legal use of the drug has skyrocketed, with a threefold increase among children between 1991 and 1995.

But it can be dangerous if abused.

Since Sept. 11, comedians choose their targets carefully

by Dan DeLuca
Knight Ridder Newspapers

It's OK to be funny again.

But what is it OK to be funny about?

Despite reports that the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks marked a seismic pop-cultural shift away from smart-alecky irony, late-night talk-show hosts, stand-up comedians, and Internet satirists have gradually returned to the business of cracking wise and providing comic relief in a time of national unease.

For some, such as Jay Leno, a wartime footing means it's open season on the enemy, and subtle witniness be hanged. "Do you know what Osama bin Laden is going to be for Halloween?" he asked in a monologue last week. "A dead guy."

David Letterman, meanwhile, has addressed the tragedy only obliquely since his tearful return to the "Late Show" on Sept. 17. "When I come to work every day, there's a guy who sits outside who gives me the finger," he remarked recently, commenting on the positive spirit in New York. "Today, he gave me the finger and a hug."

Since the attacks, the rules of engagement have changed: With President Bush's approval ratings at record highs, slow-witted-chief-executive jokes are out. (As Leno quipped, "Bush is smart now.") And lines that might be construed as offensive to Arabs or Muslims are similarly taboo.

"You choose your targets more carefully," says Mo Rocca, a correspondent and writer for Comedy Central's "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." "We definitely need to use comedy smart bombs, not carpet bombs."

In an interview, Leno acknowledges the uncertainty of the comic terrain: "We don't do Koran jokes, we don't do Muslim jokes, we don't do World Trade Center jokes." But bin Laden is too inviting a target: "When the times are good, you make fun of

the king. When times are bad, you make fun of the enemy."

The "Tonight Show" host sees no need to hold anything back when it comes to the man suspected of masterminding the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. (Sample: "I have three words for this guy: Anna Nicole Smith. We send her over there, she'll get his money, he'll be dead in a week.")

"I think you can go after him a lot," Leno says. "The only time it was different during a war was in Vietnam, when it wasn't clear what our motives were. But here you have a clear and present enemy: a group of terrorists who have said they want to kill Jews and Americans. I don't think anything you could do to make fun of them would be too much. This is really Nazism."

Leno has led the way in lampooning bin Laden and Afghanistan's Taliban leadership. (He's got a million of 'em: "What do the Taliban and the Washington Redskins have in common? Neither of them will be around for the playoffs.")

"It's a tough time for humorists," says Daniel Kurtzman, who runs About.com's political-humor Web site. "But I've been surprised at how many people have been out there looking for a good joke. There are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people searching the Web for Osama bin Laden jokes. Some of the humor is a bit vitriolic, and some of it is racist and inappropriate. But there's also a lot of clever stuff out there that even a pacifist could laugh at."

One of the more popular Internet bin Laden bits is a nursery rhyme that suggests torturing him by giving him a sex-change operation and sending him to live in Afghanistan as a woman.

On TV, Jimmy Fallon of "Saturday Night Live's" "Weekend Update" reported, "Bin Laden is most likely hiding out somewhere remote and barren, where he will not encounter others. The FBI has

begun searching theaters showing the movie 'Glitter.'" And on "The Daily Show," Stewart displayed altered photographs showing bin Laden's alleged disguises, including one with a soul patch instead of a beard, one with a fake beard on top of his beard, and another looking fashionable in a Jennifer Aniston haircut.

"You can make fun of the enemy," says "The Daily Show's" Rocca. "It's the Charlie Chaplin model from (the 1940 film) 'The Great Dictator.' Chaplin made Hitler look like a dimwit. That kind of thing is not only funny, but it also gives relief and satisfaction."

Leno concurs: "If you believe that making fun of someone who is scary makes them less so, then maybe we're doing some good here."

For comics who use current events as fodder, these are tricky times.

"It's a fine line," Rocca says. "You don't want to dodge it. We use the news for entertainment. And if entertainment is supposed to be some sort of diversion, this is difficult news to use."

During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, humorists took aim at Saddam Hussein, taking particular joy in mocking the Iraqi leader's "Mother of All Battles" bluster. But Elayna Newport, a writer and performer for the Capitol Steps, a Washington, D.C., political musical-comedy troupe, says it's different now.

"That war didn't take place on our soil," Newport says. "This time it's tougher because it's closer to home."

Getting up on stage also can be difficult. "It's weird," she says. "You have to go out there and give the audience relief. But you're feeling what everybody else is feeling."

Lawrence Mintz, director of the Art Gliner Center for Humor Studies at the University of Maryland, says the effects of Sept. 11 linger because of the fear that there's more to come.

"We're not out of this thing yet," Mintz says. "That makes it a lot harder to laugh. It's a very uncertain situation."

Mintz says it's a mistake to think that people's ability to chuckle nervously at bin Laden jokes marks a return to comedic normality.

"There are a lot of things that you still can't make jokes about, and may never be able to, like terrorism itself," he says. "Bin Laden is a very convenient target; he's easy to caricature. Leno seems to identify with that kind of saber-rattling, 'we're going to get this guy' thinking. But that's almost too simple for Letterman. He's too sophisticated. He's not going to take that easy road."

Letterman and fellow New York talk-show host Conan O'Brien have refrained from yanking on bin Laden's beard. Instead, they've taken a more indirect approach. (An O'Brien example: "New Yorkers are friendlier now. Today I went and bought a hot dog and the vendor was nice enough to say, 'Hey, I wouldn't eat that crap if I were you.'")

A still more sophisticated, if often vulgar, take on the attacks flourishes on the Internet satire site of the Onion, www.onion.com. The weekly publication's most-viewed issue online addressed the crisis with stories under such headlines as "American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie" and "Hijackers Surprised To Find Selves In Hell."

"We didn't make any overt, 'O Some Big Loudmouth' jokes," says Tim Harrod, who wrote the issue's "U.S. Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We're At War With" story. "That's the domain of morning-radio jocks and T-shirt salesmen. Our task is to deal with what people have been forced to look at head-on. We are first and foremost a humor publication, but we really feel an article has to have a spin and a point and a message."