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## *Corporate Censorship*

### **The Real Imus Lesson**

By DIANE WACHTELL

One lesson we should *not* take away from the Imus debacle is how great it was that CBS pulled the plug on Imus once General Motors, American Express, Sprint Nextel, GlaxoSmithKline, TD Ameritrade, and Ditech.com threatened to yank their corporate sponsorships. Although the corporate cards may have been played in the public's favor in this case, the recent dance of the corporate initials, in which GM pulls the strings and CBS jumps, is nothing to celebrate.

For each rare instance when media conglomerates swat down a bigot, there are dozens and dozens of examples when a different kind of censorship occurs. At The New Press, an independent not-for-profit book publisher, we were contacted a few years back by a whistleblower at a cigarette manufacturer about a box of internal memos indicating that cigarette manufacturers had long been aware of the detrimental health implications of smoking. We were ultimately unable to publish these "cigarette papers," because we were advised that the litigation sure to ensue from the cigarette companies would probably have exceeded the maximum payout of our libel policy.

Just last month, a college in the Northeast notified The New Press that our book [Literature from the "Axis of Evil"](#) had been selected by a committee of professors and deans as a required book for all 750 incoming members of its Freshmen class next year, as part of a Freedom of Expression initiative. We ordered a new printing, only to learn two weeks later that the college president had vetoed the committee's choice. He apparently was worried that the title of the book, which is an anthology of literature from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, might put off potential funders of the university.

And next month we'll be publishing a book that examines a race-based miscarriage of justice in Columbus, Georgia. The book, which impugns the reputations of some stalwarts of the Columbus legal and social establishment, was scheduled to be launched at a reception at a major Columbus cultural institution. Then, some stalwarts of the Columbus legal and social establishment threatened to pull funding from the local cultural institution, and the event was abruptly cancelled.

The point is that the First Amendment too often exists at the pleasure of monied and politically powerful interests, from corporations to university fundraisers. (In fact, other efforts to enjoin New Press books from publication have come from sources as disparate as the US Treasury Department, the US Supreme Court, and Alan Dershowitz.)

To celebrate the demise of Don Imus is to endorse a selective approach to free speech in which the advertisers become "the deciders" and get to run the editorial department. Modern forms of censorship are insidious and often obscure to the public, a public who naively rejoice when "the marketplace" rejects an Imus. We may be pleased not to have Imus in the morning, but what happens to that report on GlaxoSmithKline's payments to doctors in the afternoon?

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