

Watch the Watch List

Charles B. Strozier

I am a “dangerous professor” on the Watch List, but the honor I feel in that designation is a bit counter-intuitive. I wasn’t put on the list because any students reported me for teaching “anti-American values” or spreading “liberal propaganda” (the Watch List’s specific concerns). In fact, my City University of New York students—international, mostly black, brown, and ethnic — and I have a lot of mutual respect. My Watch List status has nothing to do with my students, and everything to do with global warming.

I am a history professor and a psychoanalyst—a dangerous combination in the eyes of neo-fascists and, perhaps, the people who run this list—and I am the founding director, since 2001, of the Center on Terrorism at John Jay College. Some years ago I began to get interested in the way global warming could have consequences for political violence.

The first piece I wrote along those lines was in the late summer of 2014. I argued that the drought in Syria from 2006 to 2011 was related to global warming, and in its severity unsettled the country politically. It had particular impact through a brutal dictator who ran the country, and it set in motion the forces that led to the civil war and eventually the dramatic appearance of ISIS in June of 2014.

That *Huffington Post* article http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-b-strozier/how-climate-change-helped_b_5903170.html caused a storm and went viral on the internet. Global warming is of course a hoax in the eyes of the conservatives like those who run the Professor Watch List, so to make a connection between it and ISIS was for them the ultimate in absurdity. They posted hundreds of angry comments filled with outrage. One said I was a “liberal, left-wing, nut job” (which my friends said was spot on); Bill O’Reilly railed at me on his big screen on Fox News (so my students told me); and someone wrote my college president to tell him he should fire me because I was clearly an idiot and had no business teaching students.

After the article was circulated, it seems that among a certain group of conservatives I continued to be registered as dangerous. Subsequent *Huff Post* pieces that I wrote caused less of a storm, but they were duly noted by all those angry white men in their basements with too much time on their hands watching Fox News. The profile of me on the Watch List only mentions my work on

global warming and terrorism. It seems to drive them to distraction that I would raise serious questions about global warming in the classroom and relate it to some of the most extreme forms of terrorism in the world. But this is exactly what we mean by critical thinking. That critical thinking would come under such an assault is worrisome.

I tend to mock the Watch List and all those who want to stifle intelligent inquiry. But I recognize I am also secure as a senior professor in a liberal city and a very good college. I worry about younger colleagues in those red states, and my contingent colleagues all over the country. They need to watch their backs.

That is why all of us need to speak out resoundingly against the Professor Watch List.