

IDENTITY CRISIS AT MIDDLEBURY

By John Klar

In 2021, Middlebury College in Vermont decided to rename a Christian chapel originally named after former Vermont Governor John Mead due to Mead’s historical advocacy for the eugenics movement.

A family lawsuit led by the Estate’s Special Administrator, former Vermont Governor Jim Douglas, alleges that John Mead gifted the funds to construct the chapel specifically on condition that his family name be honored. The legal battle reveals a deeper conflict over culture and efforts to cancel aspects of the past to whitewash an institution. The irony is that Middlebury College has embraced a modern version of eugenics in its current critical race theory (CRT) policies and is creating a new legacy of wrong thinking for which it will one day have to atone.

Rectifying perceived past transgressions by the college does not address current shortcomings. No one approves of John Mead’s eugenics advocacy a century ago. Yet, canceling his name from a building as a scapegoat hardly rectifies past wrongs and fails to atone for current policies that perpetuate the same false doctrines as eugenics.

John Mead was a small player in the progressive eugenics movement compared to other Middlebury alumni. More prominent voices—not yet canceled—from Middlebury that supported eugenics included Middlebury Presidents John Martin Thomas (1908-1921) and Paul Dwight Moody (1921-1943). By removing Mead’s name, the Middlebury implicitly raises the question of why Presidents Thomas and Moody were not likewise purged. John Mead was merely an alum and donor, not a President. Moreover, Mead interrupted his Middlebury studies to serve the Union in the Civil War and merely counseled investigating eugenics. While serving as Middlebury’s President, Moody concurrently served as chairman of the committee that oversaw Vermont’s 1930 Eugenics Survey. Yet Mead is whitewashed while Moody is still vaunted.

Middlebury College is now famous for stifling free speech and discussion, most notably for failing to safely host scholars Charles Murray and Ryszard Legutko. These tragic incidents are a current stain of cultural Marxism on Middlebury, but instead, the long-dead John Mead is targeted.

Middlebury College is all-in for the modern eugenics movement, in which progressive social scientists have decided that they can order the world around race and DNA—white people are all supremacists; “people of color” are all victims of this oppression. Black conservative economist Thomas Sowell has thoroughly documented the direct connection between today’s CRT and eugenics theory, which Middlebury College and many public schools have uncritically adopted. MLK Jr.’s dream of judging people solely by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin is reversed. Instead of judging people as inferior for being black—eugenics—CRT holds simply that all whites occupy a superior status solely by virtue of their skin color, ignoring merit. Middlebury has launched itself into this latest progressive permutation: old eugenics in new CRT bottles.



Mead Chapel at twilight, on the campus of Middlebury College.

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Professor Legutko:

“My experience at Middlebury College brought back to me unpleasant memories of communist Poland, the gruesome time when the “reactionary” professors were intimidated and prevented from speaking, bullied by the young communist zealots. But the most shocking similarity between the communist university and Middlebury College was the corruption of the language, an unmistakable trademark of a totalitarian tendency. For someone like myself who spent years fighting for the language that conveyed the truth, it was almost unbelievable to find myself in a world where the concepts meant their opposites. Diversity, equity and inclusion ceased to mean what they always meant and now meant the opposite. They now mean rigidity, dogmatism, conformity, intimidation, control, arbitrariness and censorship. In Orwell’s world, war was peace, freedom slavery and ignorance was strength. At Middlebury, diversity is monopoly, equity bias, and inclusion censorship.”

Professor Murray:

“I thought that my experience in 2017 had to represent the nadir of Middlebury’s descent from the jewel of a college it had been in 2004. I was wrong. In 2017, Middlebury’s administration had at least not taken the initiative to keep me from speaking. Now, in renaming the Mead Memorial Chapel, Middlebury’s leaders are instigating a betrayal of its mission. The justification is that Governor Mead once expressed opinions that were widely held in that era by a broad cross-section of the nation’s most distinguished politicians, scholars and jurists. Whether they were right or wrong is as irrelevant as the political philosophy professor’s politics in 2004. The betrayal consists of teaching young people that we can sit in judgment on individuals

in the past and unerringly condemn those whose views are not those of an ideology that happens to be regnant in America’s colleges in the early 2020s. That position—“We at this moment in history are in possession of the truth, and everyone past and present who does not agree with us must be cast into outer darkness”—is the essence of the totalitarian mentality. It is diametrically opposed to the spirit of intellectual inquiry and moral generosity that must be conveyed to each new generation if a free society is to endure.”

Kentucky writer Wendell Berry has criticized this practice of condemning people of the past as “historical pride.” As Professor Murray explains, this very thing becomes the genesis of renewed totalitarianism. Middlebury College has not atoned for its failure to ensure the safety of speakers on its campus. Instead, it has stretched out its official hand to cancel John Mead. This effort does not erase Middlebury’s past support of eugenics, any more than re-writing news headlines in Orwell’s 1984—the epitome of “cancel culture”—changed underlying facts.

Erasing all records of slavery might help Americans create a painless fiction but hardly forge a truth-based future. Will Middlebury one day need to atone for its current support of race-based social justice ideology, itself indistinguishable from the eugenics initiatives for which Mead is being erased?

In the lawsuit, Middlebury College boldly argued that the Mead family had no standing and that there was never any conditional gift to the college: the family has procured documentation purporting to prove specific conditions attached to the gift. Middlebury also refused to disclose the process used to remove the former Governor’s name, seeking to seal those—current—records for 75 years!

Removing the Mead family name from a chapel only highlights Middlebury’s fallen state and shallow efforts to erase its past. Whatever the lawsuit’s outcome, Middlebury’s whitewashing has only just begun—like so many disgraced colleges, it has yet to address its current sins.

Mead Memorial Chapel

Lawsuit, motions, and exhibits can be found at Meadmemorialchapel.com

Paid for by John Klar of Brookfield, VT | Author, Farmer, Attorney | www.smallfarmrepublic.com