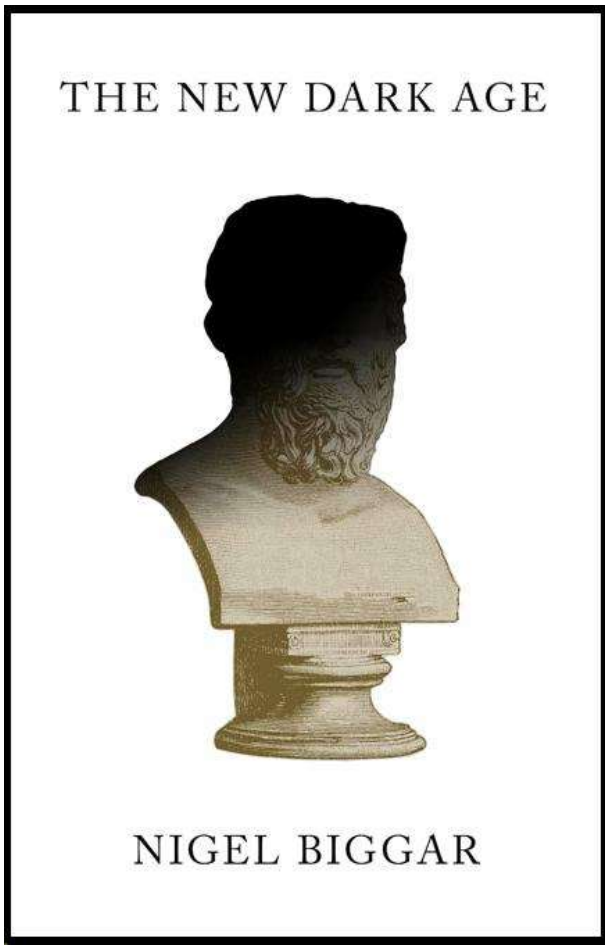
BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Nigel Biggar's 'The New Dark Age' challenges campus culture wars

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"The New Dark Age: Why Liberals Must Win the Culture Wars" by Nigel Biggar. Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2026, 192 pages, $25.00 (hardcover).



"What is at stake here is not just the freedom of individuals to speak their minds," Nigel Biggar argues near the beginning of "The New Dark Age: Why Liberals Must Win the Culture Wars," his timely new release on a topic that is front and center in contemporary civil discourse. "Nor is it just the testing of prevailing orthodoxies, which, if they are false and shape public policy, damage us all. What is at stake is the liberal temper of culture and politics. For that to survive, we need liberal citizens who have the strength of character – and virtues – that make them capable of responding to alien viewpoints thoughtfully and civilly. Universities have an enormously important civic responsibility to help student-citizens grow such virtues. But that is not a duty that academic institutions are generally inclined to own."

"Yet, when critics – from both the right and the left – of reigning 'progressive' falsehoods about transgender identity, race and colonialism have raised objectives, they have typically been met not with skeptical curiosity or robustly reasoned argument, but with repressive aggression – always intimidating, often abusive, sometimes career-ending," the author continues a little further into the text. "The shouting down of dissenting voices is illiberal; the knee-jerk resort to social and political force is antirational. The alarming consequence is a widening of the gap between opponents, polarizing them and fanning the flames of war out of the embers of disagreement."

So begins a fascinating and potentially paradigm-shifting foray into one of the more divisive dimensions of modern society. Biggar's critique of the impact the so-called "culture wars" is having on the environment at many colleges and universities is what initially piqued my interest in this exquisite little volume, although the implications of his assessment go far beyond the ivory tower. I grew up when universities were seen as one of the singular places where truth could be pursued in its purest form and bias of any kind was seen as inherently antithetical to the pursuit of knowledge. As illustrated convincingly on page after page, those of us in the academy – collectively if not necessarily individually – have veered off course over the last few decades. The good news is the author feels a much-needed course correction is possible.

"The New Dark Age" is one of the more extensively researched manuscripts I have had occasion to peruse recently, with 28 pages of sources notes reinforcing the introduction, six formal chapters and conclusion that form the main narrative. The literary style is authoritative yet remarkably

conversational. I found myself nodding in agreement at several points as I made my way through the formidable evidence Biggar presents to confirm his primary thesis. This is one that some critics may – and probably will - disagree with, but in doing so they will need to be well-versed in the ideas and concepts that form the essential architecture on which his assertions are grounded.

Probably due to the source of my livelihood, I was particularly drawn to "The Acquiescence of Academics," the third chapter, which provides an historical overview of the forces that combined to crack the foundation that once formed the heart of higher education. I also learned a few things that confirmed and reinforced my growing suspicion that all may not be well in academia.

"What am I saying by drawing an analogy between the history of German academics in the 1930s and the behavior of their counterparts in Britain and elsewhere today?" Biggar asks. "How does the one illuminate the other? First of all, it warns us that our antirational, politically activist intellectual culture has a very dangerous precedent. Then in reminds us, at least, not to assume that academics and intellectuals are liberal at heart, for they can be authoritarian, even totalitarian."

"Finally, academics are naturally concerned to keep their jobs, make a living and advance their careers," he continues. "Like everyone else, they need to choose their battles carefully, conflict being exhausting and hazardous. So, just like many others, most academics will avoid trouble and risk… At base, conflict-averse academics need to muster the courage to do their civic duty to defend liberal culture on campus. And since love is the mother of courage, they need to wake up and appreciate the value of what is at stake, namely, the future of a free society whose members feel able to challenge and test false orthodoxies, lest, in prevailing, they harm human beings. Those individuals who, for whatever reason – tenure, seniority, temperament, moral sensitivity – feel able to take the risks of speaking out, must do so."

One of Prospect magazine's Top Thinkers of 2024, Biggar is the Emeritus Regius Professor of Moral Theology at the University of Oxford, where he oversaw the Ethics and Empire research project. He is also listed as "one of the leading living Western ethicists" according to the New Statesman. Appointed Commander of the British Empire "for services to Higher education" in 2021, he entered the House of Lords as a Conservative peer in 2025. A much sought-after speaker and columnist, his previous books include "Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning" (2023), and "Reparations: Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt" (2025).

In the final analysis, Biggar is unapologetically straightforward about how we should proceed, as well as guardedly optimistic about our chances for success. Witness the following from the "Conclusion: Recovering Liberal Conviction," the last chapter:

"So, we will not all agree about the choice of virtues or the meaning of them. There will always be room for a plurality of interpretations and further debate. Consensus is usually tense in this sense, not entirely settled and relaxed. That said, we should not exaggerate our moral differences.… Regardless, universities cannot afford not to discuss the matter and reach whatever provisional consensus they can… One way or another, university leaders, managers and professors need to recover liberal conviction and assert it, throwing off the intensely passionate, illiberal tyrants currently riding on the backs of their acquiescence."

I tend to agree with David Abulafia, the recently deceased Professor Emeritus of Mediterranean History at the University of Cambridge, when he called the book, "a trumpet-call at a time when many people sense that they can no longer openly express their views about society, Nigel Biggar's new book brilliantly exposes the closing of minds in national institutions such as universities, making an irrefutable case that those who disagree with an often irrational consensus have every right to state their opinions without being bullied or cancelled."

Well-said. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.