

No exit

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

Daniel Klaidman made a naïve comment about special prosecutor Kenneth Starr in *Newsweek* (April 12). I assure you this is not a column about Starr; I don't do politics on this page. It's about Klaidman's assumptions, evident in this comment: "Starr would like to return to the comforts of a prestigious law firm or the tranquillity of academia."

Let's investigate that scene of tranquillity. Though I was able to escape factionalism and fighting for the third of a century that I taught the University of Chicago Divinity School (it really was as encouraging to teaching and learning and as distanced from feuding and fussing as I recall it), clips from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other magazines prove that campuses are sometimes more like ivory turrets than ivory towers.

Here's a sample from two weeks' worth of magazines piled on my desk. A cartoon shows an alligator walking past a sign: "Carnivore University." Headlines: "Accreditation of On-Line University Draws Fire." "MIT Acknowledges Bias Against Female Faculty Members." "2 Held Hostage at Seattle College." "Student Wounded at Modesto College." "University Lecturers Demand Unionization." "At Stanford, a Neighborhood Feud Over 'Infill Housing.'" "N.Y. Governor's Proposed Cuts for Higher Education Draw Fire from All Sides." "The War Against the Faculty." "Animal-Rights Group Ransacks Minnesota Labs." "Leaders of California State U. Faculty Union Vote to Authorize a Strike." "Michigan State Rioters Face Punishment." "Taming the Rampant Incivility in Academe."

Campus nontranquillity is an old theme. Medieval universities survived rowdy students. Nowadays American critics talk about "the '60s" as if the decade had been about nothing but turmoil, with the campus being its main scene. A difference between the '60s and the '90s is this: back then much of the unrest had to do with the outside, off-campus, extramural world: Vietnam, Watts, Selma. This time it confines itself to inside, on-campus, intramural feuding.

Where else but academia or a law firm could someone seeking to escape the discomforts and tensions of Washington look to find comfort and tranquility? Can we counsel such a person to find serenity and civility in the church? Let us observe the denominational conventions in the months ahead. Denominations knew turmoil in the '60s over Vietnam, Watts, Selma, world peace and justice and social policy. They experience turmoil today over denominational policies and other internal matters. News reports on these gatherings will also use words like fire, bias, hostage, wounded, demand, feud, fire, war, ransacks, strike, rioters and incivility.

"Ken's ready to focus on coming back to the real world," a friend of Starr's says. People used to claim that those who work in ivory towers or behind stained glass windows are sheltered from the real world. But we know they are very much in it.

Years ago the great American philosopher Bob Hope, upon receiving an honorary degree at a state university, responded with the shortest such speech on record: "Young men and women, I have one bit of advice to you as you go out into the real world. Don't." He wouldn't have to say that today. They are already in it.