



Episode 808: Deplorable NYU Professor Wins Victory Over SJWs

Guest: Michael Rectenwald

WOODS: This is a great story here, and as we were saying just before we went on, I think professors like you have got a great book contract that could be lined up with somebody for this, because I think, yeah, people got impatient with political correctness years ago, but on campuses it's vastly worse than it used to be. I mean, I graduated from college in '94, and it was pretty annoying, but it wasn't to the point where it is now, where you've got the students who are being coddled, the faculty who should know better who are encouraging this behind the scenes, and there really is a chill over speech that I didn't really feel as a college student. I mean, I think we were exaggerating in the early 1990s, but it's real now.

RECTENWALD: Oh yeah.

WOODS: First of all, tell me about your background. You don't identify as a right-winger, and you're not Milo Yiannopoulos.

RECTENWALD: Not at all. If you want to know my political background, I mean, I've gone from basically a liberal activist at one point around 2000 to being more left and being a leftist of late, and then with this whole crisis that I've undergone here, I'm rethinking everything, to be frank with you.

WOODS: Wow. Wow, that's a really, really honest response. Very rare to hear somebody say, "Maybe I'm rethinking something."

RECTENWALD: Yeah, I wish people would say on Facebook and everywhere else, "I don't know." How about that?

WOODS: Yeah.

RECTENWALD: So I'm sort of agnostic with reference to my own politics at this juncture, but I will say I know who my enemies are, and they're not exactly the people that I thought they were.

WOODS: Now that is fascinating. Let's talk about what you did. Just give me a couple sentence description of what you did with Twitter. We'll get back to that in a minute, but then what I want to talk about is what got you to the point that you felt you needed to do that.

RECTENWALD: Okay.

WOODS: So what was the thing you did on Twitter, first?

RECTENWALD: First thing I did on Twitter was after a certain episode took place, I decided to create a handle called @antipcnyuprof. That's the strict name of it: @antipcnyuprof. I use a Nietzsche icon as the face for this, and I said, "Exposing political correctness and the erosion of academic standards — " blah, blah, blah. And I made some tweets. One of them was about Halloween, because the students had sent me this thing that they were sent regarding Halloween costumes and to be careful what they wear and so on and so forth, and I tweeted about that. I just tweeted about some of these events or this whole milieu and phenomena of social justice warrior, PC tribalists that have overrun the universities and that are so frightening.

And I made some posts, and a reporter from the NYU student newspaper, *Washington Square News*, contacted me, said my tweets had somehow gotten her attention, wanted to interview me. I agreed to the interview. After the interview I decided to put my name on it, because I had liked what I had said. I didn't think anything I had said was that objectionable, frankly. It was just a different perspective. It's not against diversity or against any peoples, per se; it's about a political perspective.

And I was roundly attacked, immediately. A committee in my program penned a letter in response. It was two deans on this committee and several faculty members. They penned a response to my interview as if I was talking to them, which I wasn't. If they haven't gotten that message yet, they should get it. I wasn't talking to you. You mean nothing to me. And they roundly condemned me in this letter. Meanwhile, I had said in my tweets that I was afraid to come out and identify, because I thought the PC gestapo would come after me, and sure enough, they did. This was an official letter from an official committee of diversity, inclusion, and something else — a complete misnomer for that committee, by the way. It's nothing of the sort. It's a Stalinist or a wannabe Stalinist attack group, in effect, and they proved that through their response to me.

Then the same day that that letter came out in the paper responding to me, I was called into the dean's office. He said he wanted to speak with me very shortly. And I got in there, and suddenly he pops on me that there's a NYU human resources person that's going to join us. And I'm not allowed to say that anything except that what came out of this washing machine was I was going to have a leave of absence, a medical leave of absence that would begin immediately.

WOODS: A medical leave of absence? Because of your mental illness for disagreeing with these people? Or was "medical" just a cover?

RECTENWALD: Listen, Tom, there's lawyers listening to this.

WOODS: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I heard you the first time. (laughing) I'm sorry.

RECTENWALD: (laughing)

WOODS: All right, carry on. I don't want to get you thrown in jail here.

RECTENWALD: There is no connection between my opinions and my leave of absence.

WOODS: We've got that officially on the record. Okay. What I want to know before we get further into that is: you've been a professor at NYU for how many years?

RECTENWALD: I'm on eight and a half years now.

WOODS: Okay, so what have you been observing there that made you as somebody on the left say something's wrong here; I've got to do this.

RECTENWALD: Well, unlike some of my colleagues apparently, I pay attention to academia at large, not just my immediate environment. I'm reading about what's happening at these other universities, and strangely it's all trickling down from the Ivies and other elites into the general population of universities, and I'm just seeing this craziness going on. I mean, the stories are myriad. I can't even begin to enumerate them. And then there was a cancellation of Milo Yiannopoulos at NYU. There was the institution of a bias reporting line. So I see the encroachment of this SJW ideology into NYU, and I start to get nervous, frankly. The bias reporting line disturbs me greatly, because to me this turns the university into what Jeremy Bentham called a Panopticon, an all-seeing, all-observing, super surveillance system.

And that's what I saw this as, and I wanted to say something against it, because I don't think it's — First of all, it has nothing to do with undoing biases or overthrowing prejudice or racism or sexism or homophobia or transphobia. No. It won't do anything of the sort. This is simply a way of locating and controlling individuals who may be aberrant, and then punishing them and making the whole system feel better about itself that it's doing so. But it has no effect on racism at large. As a matter of fact, it produces its opposite. I've said this several times. The alt-right is really a reaction to this lunacy, and they're just producing what they exactly oppose.

WOODS: So you leave the meeting with the dean on the understanding that —

RECTENWALD: You're on leave.

WOODS: Yeah, you're not going to be teaching for a while.

RECTENWALD: I'm not going to be teaching for at least the rest of the semester on a medical leave of absence. Naturally people start telling me, Oh, that's suspicious, and I started getting paranoid. Okay, maybe they're right. I took everybody at their word: this has nothing to do with my opinions. And then people started being like, Are you kidding? But then I have to buy back into this idea that it has nothing to do with my opinions. So I accepted an interview from *The New York Post*, and they wrote the article, it went out, and then all of a sudden I'm flooded with requests for interviews, and tons of stories start appearing all over the place. I couldn't keep up with them, frankly. And then the fallout has continued. It's stabilized with reference to my workplace, although I am being shunned as far as I can tell by my colleagues.

WOODS: Yeah, of course, of course, who all are open-minded and believe in diversity of opinion. You know, I'll tell you something. I would not describe myself as a Donald Trump supporter —

RECTENWALD: Right.

WOODS: — but after the election when we got all these lectures about the need for openness and toleration, I thought to myself, how many of these protestors have sat down around a table with some Trump supporters to try to have a meeting of the minds and try to understand why people might have voted for him? Of course the answer to that is zero, because they already know these people aren't even human beings to them; they're just human garbage not entitled to an opinion.

RECTENWALD: That's right. It's — eh. And also, based on who they are, rather than what they do, they're being condemned morally. This is a huge moral condemnation that's going on. I was morally condemned — just a little aside here — recently, minutes ago in effect, for saying that I thought the idea was ludicrous that Trump was going to set up death camps.

WOODS: Yeah, can you believe there are people saying this?

RECTENWALD: Yes, they're saying it. These are very intelligent people. People that have been friends of mine are now disavowing me and condemning me for saying that I thought it's ridiculous, that this idea is completely outrageous that Trump is going to set up death camps and start putting people in them. Come on.

WOODS: Yeah, what I've been saying on the show is: profit from stupidity. I want you to make bets with these people. Tell them that in four years — You know, make a bet, and if in four years there have been no camps, the guy owes you \$500 or something. And you just do this.

RECTENWALD: No, Tom, you can't trust them, because anything could be construed as a death camp.

WOODS: (laughing) That's a good point. That's a good point.

RECTENWALD: They'll just change the terms, you know? The left is an hysteria machine. It produces hysteria. It's an hysteria generator, and so you can't talk to this. I mean, you know, you see it in these screaming students on campus, screaming at administrators and faculty over things that, you know, you'd think they had killed their whole family and so on and so forth, but all they had done is write an email about Halloween costumes. And for this they're being basically screamed at, condemned, MFed up and down. I mean, I'll tell you what: if any students come after me like this with screaming and so forth, they're doing it with the wrong person. They don't want to do that with me; let's just put it that way.

WOODS: But Michael, I've got to ask you, as somebody who has identified with the left in the past —

RECTENWALD: Yes.

WOODS: — what has changed in your view?

RECTENWALD: It moved. I don't know. See, I don't know whether it has just moved towards this totalitarianism or this totalitarianism was always already lurking — to put in some Po-Mo, postmodern jargon — whether this totalitarianism was always already lurking under the surface, but it's sure out. It's out. And I am very wary of saying this, but I think the reaction to Trump is going to be much worse than Trump.

WOODS: Oh, I agree completely, especially because, for one thing, you're panicking people unnecessarily based on absolutely nothing the guy said.

RECTENWALD: Well, it's crying wolf like I've never seen before, you know? Death camps, this, that, and the other thing, and if you disagree you're somehow anti-Semitic. Listen, I'm not anti-Semitic if I say I think you're imagining things. I'm sorry. Listen, I know these things happened in the past, but this is the United States of America. Let's be real. This is a vastly diverse culture with numerous apparatuses and institutions that ensure all kinds of perspectives are able to survive and so on and so forth, and also that nothing like that kind of extreme hatred gets institutionalized in the state. I just don't see it. I'm sorry. I don't see it happening domestically. I mean, we've had our international disasters and fiascos, but I just don't see it happening in the domestic sphere.

WOODS: You used the phrase "afraid to come out" a little while ago, and it made me think, on college campuses today I don't think there's anybody who thinks, Good heavens, I can't reveal to anybody that I'm homosexual on this campus, or I'll be shunned. You'll be celebrated and welcomed. Like, Caitlyn Jenner was the bravest person in the history of mankind for saying something that got the entire media, academic, and political establishment all out in favor. Whereas somebody who disagrees is going to have his career ruined and be shunned.

RECTENWALD: Right, I'm much more at risk for being straight, white, and male. I mean, there's no question about it. That's the endangered species. They have taken the so-called hierarchy and inverted it such that — what, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first," only it's an earthbound political hierarchy that's been inverted such that the top, what they conceive to be the top, is now the bottom and must just sit there and be kicked, and must take it and not say anything back and then drag themselves around in shame. That's the straight, white male. This is the demon. This is the devil. This is the ethical abject, if you will, that which is thrown out. So it's very curious that the so-called — I call it marginalized hegemony.

WOODS: Yeah.

RECTENWALD: That is to say, those that are supposed to be on the margins are actually the hegemonic. It's something that's a very tricky thing. They're saying they're on the bottom in order to be on the top.

WOODS: Yeah, it's absolutely true. It's a bizarre situation. Now let's get back to the events that occurred, because apparently after this meeting, sometime after, in November — am I reading this right? It was announced that you were being appointed full professor, promoted to full professor?

RECTENWALD: Yes, I got a promotion in November. I think it was like November — just a day or so before the election, I think, I was promoted to full professor from assistant, so that's two —

WOODS: Whoa, you skipped associate.

RECTENWALD: I totally skipped associate and was pushed up to full professor. This led people to speculate that in fact I had been — that NYU was nervous about the publicity and so on and so forth —

WOODS: Wow (laughing).

RECTENWALD: But I think perhaps I'm wanting to give myself credit here, but the promotion, I applied for it in April, so it took all those months for it to come through, and I was promoted in a batch of other people who also got the promotion. Had I not gotten the promotion, given the people they did promote, I would have had a massive case for discrimination, you see. So I'll leave it at that.

WOODS: Yeah, sure. No, believe me, I'm sure I know what you're talking about.

RECTENWALD: I had four books — This is not to boast, but my colleagues — and I've rubbed their faces in this a little bit, since they're such cowards. I had four books published in one year, okay? So there.

WOODS: Look, I love stuff like that. I'm not in academia anymore, but I'll tell you, I've written a bunch of books myself, and half the time people who would come after me, if you put them all together, they hadn't done half of what I had done —

RECTENWALD: Oh yeah.

WOODS: — which I just, for some reason — I don't know, maybe it's the little boy in me. I relished that.

RECTENWALD: Awesome.

WOODS: But when you applied for promotion, were you applying — It's pretty audacious just to apply for full professor. Were you just applying for the next step up?

RECTENWALD: I thought I was reaching, to tell you the truth, but I did it anyway, and I thought —

WOODS: Okay, good for you. And you got it. Man.

RECTENWALD: I got it, yeah.

WOODS: Okay, so that's a very interesting thing. So you got promoted. Was there any campus reaction to the fact that the guy who's in the crosshairs gets a promotion – almost unprecedented promotion?

RECTENWALD: I have no idea, because I wasn't there. You see, I've been off campus entirely on –

WOODS: Oh, because you're on leave (laughing).

RECTENWALD: Yeah, I don't know what's going on or what's being said about me. The only thing I know is people don't answer my emails at all.

WOODS: That is unbelievable.

RECTENWALD: People that I have been friends with, that I've helped, that I've done things for, that I have been buddies with have turned their backs on me for my expression of a perspective which is certainly anything but despicable. It's just a perspective. Give me a break. I mean, it's unbelievable to me.

WOODS: But they're committed to a diversity of opinions, Michael. I'm sure you'll be welcomed back with open arms – unless they're total hypocrites with no principles, and I find that impossible to believe.

RECTENWALD: See, the thing is, though, somebody did point out to me, since I'm coming back from a leave of medical absence, that I actually now am a protected category (laughing).

WOODS: Oh, indeed, that's right.

RECTENWALD: So they can't abuse me or anything, because I can just report them.

WOODS: They'd be creating an unsafe work environment for you. Oh man, you could turn it on them. This is such a tremendous story, because usually these days you get professors – in Canada they get beaten down and brought before the human rights commission, and they can't talk about the case for two years. But in your case, you actually came out swinging, and you won. What do you attribute that to?

RECTENWALD: I'm super human. (laughing) I'm kidding. I don't know; it's just the confluence of events that turned out that way. But you know, I mean, I've had some – I've won the war apparently, but I've lost some battles. But it seems that I'm in tact, so that's the good news, right?

WOODS: The trouble is, though, when you go back, you're going to go from what I assume was a somewhat congenial environment to a cold and frosty one. Does that concern you?

RECTENWALD: Oh, at the very least, if it's not one of vituperation and people actually screaming at me, so I'm very, very reticent and quite apprehensive about the return.

So I'm thinking of — irony of ironies, and I'd like to hear some feedback from listeners about this: should I ask for a safe space office?

WOODS: Yeah, maybe you should.

RECTENWALD: (laughing)

WOODS: Yeah, that's right. "I demand my coloring books and my puppies."

RECTENWALD: Because I feel in danger by the environment of people that are — you know, these social justice warriors and their fierceness and their attack mentality.

WOODS: Of course in your case you actually need it, unlike the drama queens. I want to ask you: did you approach *The Washington Post* about writing that article, which by the way —

RECTENWALD: No, they approached me.

WOODS: They approached you. All right, because I'm going to link to that. I want people — This is Episode 808, so this will be linked at TomWoods.com/808. People should read your article. I love when you quote what your opponents at NYU said, and it's all this gobbledygook, and they're making it look like they're being magnanimous, and at the end you wrote, "Thanks?" Perfect (laughing).

RECTENWALD: All they were doing was spewing memes. What they do is, as I've said in other interviews, they have plug-and-play language that they pick up, things like gaslighting, which was utterly inept in terms of a description of what I was doing. I didn't gaslight anybody. I didn't even know they were there. Gaslighting is an intentional method and an intentional going after somebody and attempting to drive them crazy based on simulating a false reality, okay? I didn't even talk to them. I don't even know what they're talking about. They said I was silencing them. That's interesting, since they spoke after me. How can you silence somebody when they're speaking next? Meanwhile, they were trying to silence me. So I mean, just this nonsense verbiage that's just plug-and-play, PC, mean garbage. It's not thought. They don't have thoughts; they just have, like, memes.

WOODS: Well, *The Washington Post* gave you its column space to tell your story. That at least must have been gratifying.

RECTENWALD: It's a very gratifying story, and I hold on to that with a — That essay helps me a lot, because it shows that, listen, *The Washington Post*, which was completely in the tank for Hillary Clinton and utterly opposed in every respect to Donald Trump, understood my perspective and that I had something valuable to say and that what I was saying was not outrageous at all. It's not *Breitbart* or some other alt-right website or something like that giving me space; this is *The Washington Post*, a very liberal, Democratic-leaning institution of the media. So yeah, it was very gratifying, the fact that they let me have that space. They were saying that what I was arguing actually had some validity, right? And their readers mostly agreed in the comments.

WOODS: Oh, I'm sure. Sometimes the comments sections of articles like this are not utterly demoralizing, so that's good. But now NYU has come back and tried to in one way or another dispute your version of events. Can you comment on that?

RECTENWALD: Well, that just goes back to this thing where they're saying that my leave of absence had nothing to do with my opinions.

WOODS: Oh, so it's just that?

RECTENWALD: Basically, yeah.

WOODS: All right, so they're trying to make — it's a tempest in a teapot, then.

RECTENWALD: And also that the media, every time I got — every media seemed to try to frame the narrative that way. They wanted me to be the NYU professor who was thrown out for having these opinions, whereas — and I couldn't stop that framing, and so I had to tell people to stop framing it that way. Then they lost interest, sort of. But I told them it's the media that's doing this, not me. I can't control the headlines that people use, you know?

WOODS: Was there any point, by the way, at which you were tempted to shut down the account? Because I see it's still up and running. You can follow you on Twitter. I'll put that at TomWoods.com/808 also.

RECTENWALD: Thank you very much, and if you will, my new service that I founded a while ago, LegitGov.org, we put out a great newsletter — if you don't mind.

WOODS: Not at all.

RECTENWALD: And it's real good exposure of things that are not found anywhere else, LegitGov.org.

WOODS: Oh, all right. We will definitely — Oh, that looks good. I'm looking at it right now. In fact, here it is in my notes, as a matter of fact. I hadn't looked at it in advance. All right, that's great, so TomWoods.com/808 will have LegitGov.org. It'll have your Twitter account, which all you folks listening in who are on Twitter, for heaven's sake, follow Michael. You're not going to be disappointed, obviously.

But I guess I just want to ask you one other thing: in the course of this, I bet you have gotten correspondence from professors who have had similar experiences. Am I right about that?

RECTENWALD: I have gotten some correspondence from a lot of people that have supported me: emails, direct messages on Twitter. Not all from academia. I haven't had a lot of academic support, to be quite frank. A couple here and there, and not necessarily people in the same situation. I've had some graduate students contact me, saying that they understand where I'm coming from. And in fact, I've had a person that's involved in psychology; he's a therapist, and he really understood where I was coming from. But not a lot of so-called peers. It's very surprising.

WOODS: Well, I'm curious about, because he's at NYU in the business school, I'm curious about Jonathan Haidt. He has to know about your case.

RECTENWALD: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah.

WOODS: Because he's very prominent about this stuff.

RECTENWALD: Oh, okay. Maybe I'll reach out to him.

WOODS: Oh, you should. You should. He's part of this HeterodoxAcademy.org, where it's a variety of faculty. It's not just like a right-wing swamp or anything; it's all different sorts of people who just believe the way you do.

RECTENWALD: I think that's a good way of putting it. I'm heterodox with reference to all this. I'm apostate with reference to the left. There's nothing I can do about that now.

WOODS: Right, right, wow. And it's their fault. They did it.

RECTENWALD: They moved.

WOODS: Right.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, they turned into hysterics. What can I say? I'm sorry. I can't talk to this. This is insane. I'm sorry about that.

WOODS: Well, I hope people will check out what you're doing. I'm linking to all of it at TomWoods.com/808, and I appreciate your willingness to come out and tell your story. It's great. I'm sorry that life could be difficult for you in the future, but I don't know; you seem like a clever guy. You'll figure some way to turn this to your advantage, I hope, somehow.

RECTENWALD: Thanks so much, Tom. It's great to have likeminded and very congenial people to talk to about this.