

FEATURE / Film Review

A sneak peek at ‘The Ideological War Against the West’

A new documentary wrestles with some of today’s toughest issues regarding free speech, the state of democracy, the debate on college campuses and more.

BY DEBORAH FINEBLUM

(May 24, 2018 / JNS) Buy a box of popcorn, find a seat, and then sit back and let your mind relax into Entertainment Land, where you forget about this troubled world for an hour or two.

If that’s your idea of a perfect night at the movies, you’ll probably wish to skip “The Fight of Our Lives: Defeating the Ideological War Against the West.”

But if it’s a different kind of experience you want—one that challenges your comfort zone—you might want to check out this latest release from Doc Emet Productions. That’s what 250 folks who gathered last week at a Boston-area movie theater for the film’s New England premier did.

This was the 14th screening in a series of theaters, community centers, synagogues, churches, museums and universities across the United States, Canada and Israel, for the production company’s fourth documentary wrestling with some of today’s toughest issues.

Producer/director Gloria Z. Greenfield set the tone of the evening with this Martin Luther King Jr. quote: “Our lives begin to end the day we remain silent about the things that matter.”

Within minutes, the film was rolling—a *tour de force* featuring 31 keen observers of today's global tumult, including academics, authors, think-tank executives, anthropologists and other experts.

Stitched together, the interviews (which took Greenfield as far east as New York and as far west as Palo Alto, as far north as Montreal and as far south as Dallas, as well as to Israel) create a patchwork quilt that challenges many of our core beliefs.

Greenfield said she set out on this film project to “to examine the broader context of the war against Western civilization and values, an ideological war that’s a persecution and assault on the Judeo-Christian tradition and on our freedoms.” So she went in search of the leading experts and scholars “who are looking at various aspects of the problem so, seen together, we can begin to see the broader context of the war against the West.”

‘The light fog of fascism’

In the film, Alan Dershowitz, who in addition to practicing high-profile law is an emeritus law professor at Harvard University and a leading constitutional expert, told Greenfield, “When I teach students, I don’t just see 150 faces. I see a future president of United States, a future chief justice, a future editor of *The New York Times*, a future senior partner of Goldman Sachs. And they are being miseducated in ways that completely undercut Western values. ... The kind of light fog of fascism that seems to be descending on many universities poses a tremendous danger for the future of Western values because it threatens to miseducate the future leaders who have to promote the values we cherish.”

The ivy-covered walls of academia are also familiar haunts for Peter Wood, who was a tenured anthropology professor at Boston University before becoming president of the National Association of Scholars. “The film underscores the fact that the university system was founded on intellectual freedom to pursue the truth, and once that freedom gets sidelined so young people no longer hear ideas and people they disagree with, it attacks the principles of Western civilization,” he says. “When you send your child or donate to a university where 90 percent of tenured faculty subscribe to one political and ideological belief, students never hear both sides.”

Greenfield says she’s had some of her more enthusiastic responses from small-town audiences. “Our church found it hard-hitting, and well-documented and researched,” says Pastor Philip Morris Jr. of Parkway Church of God in Sevierville, Tenn. Though his congregants “already had a sense of the dangers to Western civilization,” Morris says the film “exposed some issues not always visible to the rank and file, such as the anti-Semitism on college campuses and the attacks on Christians in Arab countries.”

For executive producer George Violin, “one of the strengths of the film is it makes it apparent to all that attacks against Israel do not end with Israel. History shows us that, although the Jews are the first to be attacked, they are never the last.”

‘A chilling effect on free speech’

Brooke Goldstein, who directs the Lawfare Project, which provides *pro bono* legal services to protect the rights of Jews the world over, told Greenfield that “what political correctness does is it declares war on the marketplace of ideas and says, ‘You can’t talk about that, that’s offensive.’ ... This has a chilling effect on free speech.”

This struck a chord with another audience member, Janet Stein Calm, who, as president of the American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants of Greater Boston, saw “disturbing parallels” between Germany of the 1930s and today’s America. “With pressures for self-censorship on the rise, we could end up in the same situation again if we’re not careful, especially with England removing the Holocaust from their curriculum so as not to offend Muslims, and the media holding Israel to impossibly higher standards than any other country.”

Greenfield notes that “it’s a time when divisions have gotten deeper and uglier in this country, with what’s happening in Europe as a decidedly cautionary tale. I hope this film connects the dots so we can be aware of the dangers of what it would be like to live in an environment that doesn’t ensure freedom of speech. Everything we learn from those interviewed forms a symphony of expertise that I hope will inspire deep conversations on campuses, at dining-room tables and in the public square.”

After the screening, longtime Boston-area Israel advocate Margot Einstein said when Niall Ferguson of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University says in the film that Western civilization owes a debt to the dead, the living and the unborn, “it hit me. Gradually, in our media, our schools and our universities, we’re noticing there are certain words we can’t say anymore—certain ideas we can’t express. What kind of future are we creating?”

So, unlike other films, it’s too soon to know if this movie will have a happy ending.

“We tend to concentrate too much on the wars already waged and won—against fascism in Germany and communism in the [former Soviet Union],” says author and former Harvard professor Ruth Wisse, now a senior fellow with the Tikvah Fund, and who was among the film’s featured experts. “But analogous dangers have re-emerged in at least equally threatening form.”

The film, she states, “clarifies the challenges that lie before us. I can’t imagine anything more important than identifying them and confronting them.”