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Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 08

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Conflicts Involving Black Students Underscore Racial Divisions on 2 Campuses

At Penn, Blacks Vent Anger at Student Paper, Triggering Debate Over Free Expression

By Christopher Shea

PHILADELPHIA

FRICTION HAS BEEN GROWING all year between the undergraduate newspaper, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, and black students on the University of Pennsylvania campus here.

In the fall, the newspaper ran a photograph of a black man drinking cheap wine under the caption "West Philadelphian," angering students who saw it as a racist generalization about the area around the university. More recently, Gregory Pavlik, a fire-breathing conservative columnist, blasted Martin Luther King, affirmative-action policies, and black-student organizations.

Two weeks ago, a covert group that said it represented "the black community" expressed its dissatisfaction with the newspaper by removing nearly all 14,000 copies of one edition from campus distribution sites. In their place, the group left flyers that said it was "protesting the blatant and voluntary perpetuation of institutional racism" against black students by the newspaper and the university.

Now there is more friction—and more debate. Arguments about broad issues such as free speech, appropriate forms of protest, and the racial divisions on the campus here have replaced bickering over headlines and columns. And Penn's president, Sheldon Hackney, recently nomi-



Brandon Fitzgerald of the Onyx Senior Honor Society: "The Daily Pennsylvanian" has been grossly negligent."

ADDISON GEARY FOR THE CHRONICLE

nated by President Clinton to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is being criticized for wavering in his support of open expression.

Editors of the paper said they wanted a clear statement from the administration that removing the newspapers was wrong and assurances that the students who took them would be punished.

Many black students argued that the protesters—who have not come forward—were just expressing their frustration with the newspaper in a peaceful, even creative, way. *The Daily Pennsylvanian* is free to students, they point out. If students are allowed to take five or ten copies at a time, they say, why not 14,000?

The conflict between black students and the *DP*, as the paper is known, is only the latest of several battles on college campuses pitting a newspaper against aggrieved minority students.

PROTESTS AT MASSACHUSETTS

Last spring, black students at the University of Massachusetts stole copies of the campus newspaper—and later took over its offices—to protest what they saw as racist coverage of the black community. That paper also had a conservative columnist whom many students found offensive.

At Penn, the conflict has been clouded by an accusation that a campus police officer used unnecessary force to stop a stu-

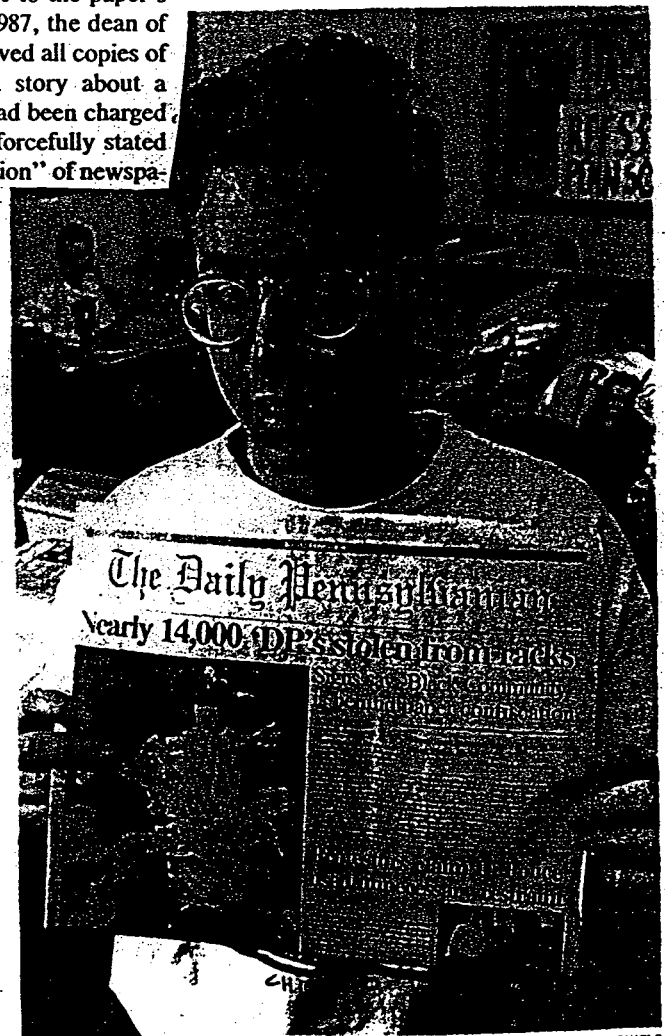
dent who was running off with a stack of newspapers. *The Daily Pennsylvanian* reported that the officer had twice struck the student on the leg with his baton, but the university has not released details about the incident. At least three other students were taken into custody, but all were soon released and no charges were filed.

VALUES 'SEEM TO BE IN CONFLICT'

President Hackney said in a statement that a committee would investigate the allegation of unnecessary force and that the university would review police procedures. But what enraged the paper's editors was what the statement said about the taking of the newspapers. It said, in part, that "two important university values, diversity and open expression, seem to be in conflict."

"He really straddles the fence," said Stephen Glass, the newspaper's executive editor. "He never once says that it was wrong for the protesters to steal the papers, or that they interfered with our right to free expression."

The editorial staff feels betrayed by Mr. Hackney because he came to the paper's defense once before. In 1987, the dean of the Wharton School removed all copies of an issue that included a story about a Wharton professor who had been charged with rape. Mr. Hackney forcefully stated at the time that "confiscation" of newspa-



Stephen Glass, the paper's executive editor: "We understand their opinions, we understand their complaints."

Angry Blacks Target Student Newspaper at Penn

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pers by anyone in the community contradicted everything the university stood for.

A special university committee, overseen by the vice-provost for university life, Kim M. Morrisson, is now looking into whether a violation of the campus's open-expression policy occurred in the most recent protest. Ms. Morrisson said the committee would take into account the fact that "students did not see their protest in the context of its being an infringement of free speech." It was inappropriate for the police to have intervened in a protest act, she said, although she acknowledged that the police could not have known that students were protesting when they grabbed the papers and ran.

In interviews, black students cited a long list of complaints about the student newspaper. They said that coverage of minority events had been rare and often inaccurate. They charged that letters and opinion pieces written by black students had been severely and unfairly edited.

CONTROVERSIAL COLUMNIST

"I think *The Daily Pennsylvanian* has been irresponsible and grossly negligent," said Brandon Fitzgerald, president of the Onyx Senior Honor Society, a black organization on the campus. Mr. Fitzgerald said the society was not involved in the protest, but would not say whether or not he himself was, personally.

Then there is Mr. Pavlik, one of about a dozen columnists on the newspaper's staff, who is not talking to the press about the controversy. He has written that, when it comes to evaluating black applicants, "admissions standards are thrown out the window." Earlier

this year, black students filed racial-harassment charges against Mr. Pavlik. After a brief investigation, Penn determined that the columns were protected speech.

Said Nicole Brittingham, a junior, who is editor in chief of *The Vision*, a black monthly newspaper: "There's the impression that because he's allowed to write the column, there's a willingness at the paper to let racism flourish."

EDITOR DENIES CHARGES

Mr. Glass, editor of *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, denied that submissions by black students were treated any differently from those by other writers, and said the paper was trying as hard as it could to be fair in its coverage. Concerning black students' opinion of Mr. Pavlik, he said: "We understand their opinions, we understand their complaints. But they are not achieving anything with their protest, only cutting off a forum for their views to be expressed."

He said the paper accepted virtually every opinion piece and letter submitted, and denied that discriminatory editing occurred. He conceded, however, that despite efforts to recruit black students, only "a handful" of the 60 or so core staff members were black.

Local newspapers have leaped to the defense of the student newspaper. An editorial in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was subtitled "When Ivy Leaguers act like fascists."

Members of the Penn community have weighed in on the protest, as well. "We feel it was an ingenious way to protest a range of concerns," said James W. Gray, a chairman of the African American Association, an organization for staff and faculty members. "The fact that the press has labeled this legitimate protest 'theft' is indica-

tive of the kind of racist descriptions put on blacks."

On Locust Walk, the main artery through the campus, students expressed reactions ranging from support for the protesters, to opposition, to total confusion about what the protest was all about. Bill Roberts, a black student wearing a shirt and baseball cap with the insignia of Alpha Phi Alpha, a black fraternity, said that he wasn't involved in the protest but thought it was "a tremendous effort."

Laura Gladstone, a freshman biology major, who is white, said she thought the protest had been ill-conceived. "They are complaining that the *DP* is unfair to them, but they made it unfair to everyone by taking away the paper," she said.

Warren Levinson, a sophomore majoring in biology, who is white, said: "We're not even sure who did it. It's all so hazy, how effective could it be?"

'CONFUSED AND FRUSTRATED'

In an interview, Mr. Hackney said he was "confused and frustrated" by the fact that people were charging him with waffling on the free-speech issue. "Although I have said we are trying to weigh different values that are important to the community, I have made clear that foremost among these is the value of freedom of expression," he said.

Not clear enough for some. Alan Charles Kors, a professor of history, said he was disappointed with Mr. Hackney's initial response to the protest. "Any notion that there is a conflict between diversity and freedom of expression not only contradicts the university's prior positions, but is an inherently dangerous concept," he said. "Diversity and freedom of expression go hand in hand." ■