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## Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 14

Richard Cohen

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Richard Cohen

# Sheldon Hackney's Dangerous Balance

Gregory Pavlik is not my cup of tea. The 21-year-old former columnist for the University of Pennsylvania's student newspaper is a mighty conservative young man. He thinks Martin Luther King is unworthy of a commemorative holiday and does not like affirmative action one bit, especially as it has been applied at Penn. Some who have read him regularly say he's an acolyte of Pat Buchanan—one of those guys who punctuates his writing with a sneer.

Pavlik is about to become famous. He figures in the controversial nomination of former Penn president Sheldon Hackney to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Pavlik's columns so infuriated many of Penn's black students that in April they seized the entire press run of the Daily Pennsylvanian and trashed all 14,200 copies of it. In letters and statements, the black students explained why—their feelings had been hurt.

Hackney understood. He condemned the seizure of the newspaper but commiserated with the black students. "Two important university values now stand in conflict," he said in a statement released after the papers were trashed. One was freedom of the press, and the other was Penn's attempt to make minority students feel "comfortable." Penn must uphold "freedom of expression as the supreme common value," Hackney wrote, but it must also become "a diverse and welcoming community." With that, he took no action against the students who had seized the newspaper.

The statement falls only a tad short of the outright supine. It is hardly a ringing defense of the First Amendment—a constitutional right, not a "value"—nor a vociferous condemnation of what amounted to a fascistic snit. The balance that Hackney attempted—he twice referred to the "pain" felt by the black students—is a bogus one. It's immaterial that someone's feelings were hurt.

What matters is truth or, at minimum, the attempt to get at it. This is what a university is all about. After all, opposition to affirmative action is hardly limited to white racists. Arthur Ashe was similarly disposed. As for the suitability of Martin Luther King as a national hero, I happen to disagree with Pavlik—but so what? The offended black students ought to ask themselves what would have happened if King's speeches and writings—offensive to many whites at the time—were censored. Freedom of the press is not

a protection afforded the press; it's a protection afforded the people.

The black students seemed not to appreciate that point. Fine. They are young, and angry and have little historical perspective. That's where the university steps in. It is a custodian of our culture. Its role is to instruct, to show that a bad idea is rebutted by a better one—not by what amounts to violence. Bruised egos are often the collateral damage, as the Pentagon might put it, of a frank exchange of ideas. But in a letter to the Philadelphia Inquirer, 202 black students and faculty members expressed only one concern: Their feelings were hurt, and they did not feel welcome on campus.

Hackney's tour de force in other-handedness, coupled with some other genuflections in the direction of political correctness (his passive acceptance of speech codes, for instance) has made him the target of conservatives. This leaves me perplexed: How did conservatives become the sole guardians of our First Amendment rights and intellectual inquiry in general?

The answer is this: Too many liberals, steeped in a knowledge of racial injustice and its consequences, have crossed the line from empathy with the plight of minorities to a sympathy for whatever they do. I understand what the black students are saying, but my empathy with their wounded feelings does not extend to sympathy for their actions. The kind of "pain" Hackney mentioned is not life-threatening and is subjective. As any newspaper reader knows, pain—along with the comics—is part of the package.

Sheldon Hackney is a virtuous man, the personification of a cliché: both a gentleman and a scholar. But his nomination to a prestigious federal post presents liberals with the opportunity to assert that the values they held dear during the McCarthy period and Watergate, the ones they fought for when the government abused its power during the Vietnam era or, to be almost quaint, when it censored books and movies, are still part of our ideological creed.

Hackney's refusal to vigorously condemn the seizure of the paper and to punish the offending students creates an insurmountable hurdle to his nomination. A longtime civil rights advocate, he meant well, but by being so solicitous to the black students, he patronized them as people and failed them as their teacher. He is an odd choice for a post whose title contains the word "humanities." In fact, he is the wrong choice.