

1993

Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 22

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Recommended Citation

Russakoff, Dale, "Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 22" (1993). *Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993)*. Paper 69.
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Two Words—'Water Buffalo'—Start Political Correctness Debate at Penn

By Dale Russakoff
Washington Post Staff Writer

PHILADELPHIA, April 30 — Four months ago, University of Pennsylvania freshman Eden Jacobowitz yelled from his sixth-floor dormitory window, "Shut up, you water buffalo!" at five black sorority members making loud noises on the sidewalk. It was midnight, Jacobowitz said, and they were disturbing his study.

Jacobowitz, 18, now stands charged with racial harassment under the school's speech code. If upheld, that could carry sanctions ranging from a warning to expulsion, although senior Penn officials and experts in black culture said in interviews that "water buffalo" has no history as a racial epithet. The case is to be heard by a student-faculty panel.

Jacobowitz's cause is being championed by critics of speech codes and "political correctness" on college campuses and by the Jewish press. He is an orthodox Jew.

In the process, Penn President Sheldon Hackney, President Clinton's choice to head the National Endowment for the Humanities and a supporter of the school's speech code, has come under heavy fire for refusing to intervene in the case.

"I'm quite sympathetic with Eden Jacobowitz," Hackney said in an interview today, "but I thought it was much better to let the process work. Our process is set up so that people who feel wronged, whatever the alleged wrong, can bring a complaint and have it adjudicated."

"Just because this gets the Wall Street Journal upset doesn't mean I should leap in and destroy the process." The Journal has published two editorials on the subject this week.

The case is the second recent instance of racial tension at Penn to receive national attention. Two weeks ago, a group of black undergraduates confiscated 14,000 copies of the student newspaper to protest alleged racism and, in par-

ticular, writings of a columnist viewed as hostile to blacks.

Jacobowitz's case began as five black sorority members stomped and yelled on the sidewalk outside his dorm as part of an initiation ritual. Numerous students hollered epithets, some of them racial. The women, incensed, summoned university police, and only Jacobowitz admitted yelling.

He said in an interview and told a university investigator that he meant nothing racial. Born in Israel and educated at Jewish schools, he said he was thinking of the Yiddish term, "*behema*," translated as "water oxen" and used as slang for "fool" or "stupid person."

"It's usually used Jew to Jew," Jacobowitz said.

But the investigator, assistant judicial inquiry officer Robin Read, ruled that the term was indeed a racial slur. Jacobowitz said she asked whether he was thinking of "a large black animal that lives in Africa." Water buffalo are native to Asia. Read is referring calls to the school's press office.

Read gave Jacobowitz a choice of leading a racial-sensitivity session and having the charge go in his record, or going to trial before a student-faculty panel. He chose a trial. Penn protects names of accusers, so the identities of the women who brought the charges are not available.

Several faculty members and students who asked not to be identified said the women consulted admin-

istration staff members who urged them to drop the charges. Elijah Anderson, a Penn sociology professor and authority on African-American language and culture, said he had agreed to testify as an expert witness for Jacobowitz. He said he knows little about the case but has "never heard 'water buffalo' used as a racial slur and epithet."

The case has drawn little attention among students black or white.

"People are spending all this time trying to figure out whether 'water buffalo' is a racial slur," said Martin Dias, a senior and former president of the Black Student Organization. "Black students have a lot of problems in this school. If someone calls me a water buffalo, I give them the finger and walk."

Jacobowitz said his parents have urged him to transfer to Yeshiva University in New York. But he wants to stay at Penn, having chosen it, ironically, because it offered diversity. "I wanted to experience life, people from different environments, not just Orthodox Jews," he said.

Hackney said he has called for procedural changes in the speech code because of this case but defended it generally as a way to protect diversity.

"The right wing will call this a reign of intellectual terror," he said, "but university campuses are trying to build a model of how a diverse society can live together with comfort and benefit from its diversity."