

1993

Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 23

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Recommended Citation

Hentoff, Nat, "Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 23" (1993). *Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993)*. Paper 68.
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Nat Hentoff

'Victims of the Press'

For many years in New York's Greenwich Village, decorously dressed followers of poet and guru Eli Siegel ("Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana") used to wear buttons proclaiming themselves "Victims of the Press." Their perennial complaint was that the newspapers did not print their dense disquisitions on Siegel's philosophy of aesthetic realism, which they believed could solve most of our individual and collective problems.

Many other kinds of groups, of course, consider themselves victims of the press, even though they don't wear buttons with that message. On March 19, there appeared in the University of Pennsylvania's Daily Pennsylvanian a letter from "202 African-American students and faculty." It excoriated the staff of the paper for being without "a sliver of morality" as well as being ignorant of identities and cultures other than their own.

In particular, those black students and faculty were greatly offended by Gregory Pavlik, a junior science and engineering major whose column appears every other week. An unfettered conservative of the Pat Buchanan school, Pavlik has written critically, to say the least, of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, antidiscrimination laws that discriminate against whites and Univer-

sity of Pennsylvania admission standards that, he says, give preference to blacks.

The 202 greatly aggrieved senders of the March 19 letter declared: "We don't condone hiding behind the delicate laws of freedom of speech in order to slander, demean, harass and incite violence in those who don't share a Eurocentric upbringing."

The letter occupied a considerable amount of space in the Daily Pennsylvanian, but not enough, as it turned out. On April 15, a group self-described as "The Working Committee of Concerned Black and Latino Students" confiscated practically all of the 14,000 copies of that day's Daily Pennsylvanian and threw them into trash bins and dumpsters. This action by victims of the press, said the committee, was in protest against "the blatant and covert racism" at the university and its institutions, very much including the college paper.

As Mary Jordan reported in the April 17 Washington Post, these victims of the press saw nothing illegal in their raid because, they said, "the papers are free" and "there exists no explicit restrictions on the numbers of papers

that any given student may remove." (It is hard to imagine Dr. King or Malcolm X sidestepping, in this way, their responsibility for an act of serious protest.)

Following the stealing of the papers, an editorial in the Daily Pennsylvanian emphasized that the staff had been trying to

contact the leaders of the Black Latino Committee but nobody ever returned their calls. Intent on trying to get a dialogue going, the paper again invited calls from black leaders on campus. There have been none.

The editor of the Pennsylvanian, Stephen Glass, in his regular column "Enemy of the People," urged Sheldon Hackney, president of the university—and President Clinton's nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities—to clearly condemn what happened. Hackney had blandly said it was a seeming conflict between "diversity and open expression," and he didn't condone it. But it is not sufficient, says Glass, to simply "not condone" terrorism.

Nor have any members of the law school faculty been exercised enough to come forward. This is not surprising since, in recent years,

only a few professors—notably historian Alan Kors and physicist Michael Cohen—have been sufficiently politically incorrect to defend *everyone's* freedom of speech on campus.

In another recent editorial, the Daily Pennsylvanian says that it remains "strongly dedicated to presenting all sides of every issue." And those who are offended "can reply in kind" rather than engage in a "cowardly trashing of the First Amendment."

Still, writes Stephen Glass, the paper is going to try to find ways to get more "diversity of ideas, backgrounds and people." Starting in the fall the Pennsylvanian will ask to go to the first meetings of new students to try to enlist more varied journalists. It will also ask for help from the Philadelphia Black Journalists Association and high schools in the city.

But, the paper emphasizes, it continues to "vehemently, absolutely uphold Gregory Pavlik's right to write what he thinks—however offensive—and this paper's right to publish and distribute it."

It should be noted that other black students have made it clear that the destroyers of the issue of the newspaper do not speak for them. As a letter said, they "deplore" the theft of the papers and the community's First Amendment rights.

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