Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 24

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Civil Wars on Campus

No group is a reliable defender of free speech—although individuals within groups may be. During the 1970s, much of the Jewish Establishment in the United States was viciously attacking the Jews, including some rabbis—active in the civil rights and anti-war movements—and objected to Israel’s human rights violations in the Occupied Territories. I knew a rabbi in St. Louis who was treated as if he was a traitor to all the Jews who ever lived. And from vigilantes, I received death threats because of what I had written about Palestinian rights being violated.

Recently, a white conservative columnist in the Daily Pennsylvanian angered a number of black students at the University of Pennsylvania. Instead of writing an answer or picking up the paper or burning the paper, they denounced just about the entire run of an issue—some 14,000 copies—and threw them into the garbage.

A group calling itself the Working Committee of Concerned Black and Latino Students said the protest had been directed at “the blantly and covert racist continually perpetrated by both institutions and individuals on the University of Pennsylvania campus.”

If white students had done the same thing in furious reaction to what a black columnist had written, I expect these Concerned Black and Latino Students might have demonstrated just against such a disregard to the violation of the black columnist’s free-speech rights.

I’ve covered many campus stories around the country—by perpetrators on the right and on the left—and no one has ever been arrested. They all say they had the right to suppress speech that was harmful.

At the University of Pennsylvania, the Concerned Black and Latino Students not only class they had the moral right to try to destroy all the copies of the daily newspaper but they also insist that it was a “legal protest.”

Now dig this. This ranks as one of the lamest excuses for what was undeniably a deliberate suppression of speech. The Concerned Black and Latino Students—as many Jordan reported in The Washington Post (April 17)—declared that “not only did they not break any law but that the papers free, but there exists an explicit restriction on the numbers of papers that any given student may remove.

Can you imagine Malcolm X—if he had ever done anything like this, which he never did—diluting the impact of his act in order to swirl out of all real responsibility for it?

Meanwhile, the head of the University of Pennsylvania, Sheldon Hackney—who is the very model of a politically correct university president—publicly said he regretted that because of this hijacking of the papers “two important university values—diversity and open expression—seem to be in conflict.”

This is a man with the courage of a Bill Clinton. Hackney will soon be in charge of the National Endowment for the Humanities—chosen by Clinton. Some opponents of his predecessor, Lynn Cheney, thought he was an ignorant and heartless man. They will instead be in the presence of a cautious company man. Unorthodox applicants for grants—indeed and irreverent in their views and research—are not likely to be welcomed.

Now look at what Hackney implied in his statement on the black papers. If you have diversity on campus—more blacks, more Asians, more Latinos, etc.—then there’s going to be a conflict with open expression. Where the hell does Hackney get the idea that all blacks, Latinos, and Asians want to suppress expression they don’t like? Some do. Some Jews do. Some Catholics do. But to reach the utterly shallow notion that diversity and open expression are in conflict is to set up yet another prejudicial stereotype of blacks and Latinos.

What Hackney should have said, if he’d had the courage, was that in this particular instance open expression in the newspaper had been treated with destructive contempt, and the culpability should be the same for the Concerned Black and Latino Students as it would be for any white group that destroyed a day’s run of a newspaper.

Hackney and some other college presidents are engaging in a form of patronizing paternalism. These young black students—so the reasoning goes—cannot be expected to take full responsibility for such acts as preventing other students from reading their newspaper. The black students are the equivalent of a younger child, and we understand that.

Many of them are indeed frustrated and angry, but the answer is to deal straight—do something real about the roots of the frustration and anger. Not treat them as if they were “special” kinds of people. That’s not respect. That’s a con game.

I’ve lectured at a lot of colleges, and with very few exceptions—as at Oberlin in Ohio and Kenyon College in New Jersey—yesterday I met an ignorant of how to get people who do not look like each other to see “the others” as individuals. You don’t have to like all of them, or most of them, as individuals. But it’s a start to breaking down group stereotypes.

Depending on the size of the college and the composition of the student body, there are a number of ways to begin direct, uninhibited dialogue among diverse students: between diverse students and faculty; and between diverse students and administrators.

A couple of years ago, I saw truly open expression among students during a nearly three-hour meeting at a college with blacks, whites, Asians, gays, and lesbians. There was rage and parody and hurt and frustration and cleansing anger, among many other emotions. But there was no longer any mistake of individuals for groups, although there was, to a large extent, group loyalty. I hope those kinds of meetings continued there. They ought to take place at every campus.

Some months ago, I was in Washington at a meeting of the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation Center for Campus Study. Among those speaking were student leaders at the Hillel centers of their colleges. They were talking about Jewish-black tensions on their campuses.

Shai Held of Harvard said: “One of the things we’ve done—on campus is ideological. We act as if we were...then be it to invite everyone group we can find to have dinner at Hillel. Sit in a room privately and just talk as human beings and students about what our lives are like. We’ve never managed through that to make some serious friendships. I have an active relationship with the leaders of all the eight major ethnic groups, including the Jewish Students’ Association.”

Andi Miles of Washington University in St. Louis said she became friendly with officials of the Association of Black Students, and then told of this incident: “A Jewish student on campus is a blatant racist. In response to a book sale where one of the black sororities was selling an obviously anti-Semitic book, he had a watermelon sale. Another Jewish student intervened, talked to the black students and said, ‘Look, he doesn’t speak for us.’ And I called up my friend from Students and said, ‘What do you want me to do? You know he’s a racist, and that we’re anti-Semitic. What do you want me to hear from you?’” He told her, and she issued a Hillel statement saying just what she told him. The Jewish racist got worse, putting up flyers falsely quoting black speakers. Andi Miles and her friend from the Association of Black Students confronted, and he suggested that a letter be printed in the paper “from many Jewish organizations as possible saying that this person doesn’t represent the Jewish community.”

Two Jewish organizations signed the letter, and it was remarkably clear, throughout. It said that the Jewish racist represented only his xenophobic self.

Then came the notorious ad that appeared in a number of college papers around the country. The ad that: the Holocaust never taken place. It’s like telling blacks that slavery had never taken place.

The Jewish students at Washington University held a protest—a protest against the ad, not against the college paper’s right to print it. There were Christian organizations at the protest, along with the Gay and Lesbian Community Alliance. But what about the Association of Black Students? Andi Miles called a leader of the association, and she said, “Tell us what to do. That’s it.” Members of the Association of Black Students had the protest, and in its leaders spoke. He emphasized that racism and anti-Semitism go hand in hand, and you can’t fight one without fighting the other.

At Washington University and at other campuses where Hillel students and black students are in conversation, all is, of course, always harmonious. Jewish students, for instance, are hardly enthusiastic about some of the speakers some of the black groups invite. One, Conrad Mohammed, a representative of Middle Eastern Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, spoke at Harvard and was received—I’m surprised, even making the evening news—that Jews are responsible for the deterioration of the ozone layer. An acquaintance, Jewish, understands that black students have no patience with anyone telling them whom they can or cannot invite, Some black students tell the students from Hillel, “You want to protest, go ahead. But don’t tell me whom I can’t invite.”

And Jewish students have indeed protested the appearance of—among others—Leonard Jeffries at Harvard and other campuses.

Andi Miles said at the Hillel meeting in Washington: “We’re learning that the black students and the Jewish students have very different agendas. They’re doing their own thing, and we have to respect that.”

That respect, however, is not synonymous with blase passivity when black students invite an anti-Semitic speaker to campus. You can respect the right of a black student group to invite whenever they want what they might not have your own self-respect by passing out leaflets—as Jewish students did at a recent Leonard Jeffries at Duke University—saying “We’re against racism!” Against prejudice directed at anyone on campus.

Ron Weisner of the University of Virginia said of the administration there that it seems it “very interested in maintaining peace and order...Black students have taken a few individuals within the administration who are actually dedicated to working out some of the deeper underlying problems—and trying to create a climate so that it seems to me that the university is often interested in window-dressing in addressing many of the intergroup relations problems.”

To begin to end the civil wars on campus, blacks, Jews, and others can only count on themselves. Not on the administration or the faculty. The administration has to form alliances based on mutual understanding and respect.” It’s as easy and simple and effective as that.