

1993

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

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Recommended Citation

Hentoff, Nat, "Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 24" (1993). *Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993)*. Paper 67.
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Nat Hentoff



Pennsylvania University president Sheldon Hackney: patronizing paternalism

OTTO DANOSHEL/JOHN F. PENNIST/VIRWAN

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 vicious in attacking those Jews, including some rabbis—active in the civil rights and antiwar movements—who 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 picketing the paper or boycotting the paper, they confiscated 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 blatant and covert racism 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 against so raw a violation of the black columnist's free-speech rights.

I've covered many censorship stories around the country—by perpetrators on the right and on the left—and no one has ever admitted being a censor. 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 claim 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 Mary Jordan reported in *The Washington Post* (April 17)—declared that "not only are the papers free, but there exists no 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 swivel out of any 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—tepidly 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, think Hackney will be open of mind and heart. They will instead be in the presence of a cautious company man. Unorthodox applicants for

grants—independent and irreverent in their views and research—are not likely to be welcomed.

Now look at what Hackney implied in his statement on the stolen 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 chronic 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 frustrated and angry, and we must understand that.

Many of them are indeed frustrated and angry. But the answer is to deal *straight*—to 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 Kean College in New Jersey—the presidents I meet are 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 mistaking 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 Foundations 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—as corny as it sounds, it seems to work—has been to invite every group we can find to have dinner at Hillel. To sit in a room privately and just talk as human beings and students about what our lives at Harvard are like. We've 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 Black Students Association."

Andi Milens 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 in the Association of Black Students and said, 'What do you want me to do? You know he's a racist, and that we don't ascribe to his beliefs. What do you want to hear from me?' 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 Milens and her friend from the Association of Black Students conferred, and he suggested that a letter be printed in the paper "from as many Jewish organizations as possible saying that this person doesn't represent the Jewish community."

Ten Jewish organizations signed the letter, and it was resoundingly clear, throughout the campus, that the Jewish racist represented only his noxious self.

Then came the notorious ad that appeared in a number of college papers around the country. The ad said that the Holocaust had 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 Milens called a leader of the association, and he said, "Tell us what to do. That's it." Members of the Association of Black Students came to the protest, and one of 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

SAID THE BLACK STUDENT: YOU CAN'T FIGHT RACISM WITHOUT FIGHTING ANTI- SEMITISM—AND VICE VERSA.

not, 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 Minister Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, spoke at Harvard and revealed—I'm surprised it didn't make the evening news—that Jews are responsible for the depletion of the ozone layer.

At some campuses, Jews understand 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 and can't have."

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

Andi Milens 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 bland passivity when black students invite an anti-Semitic speaker to campus. You can respect the right of a black student group to invite whomever they want while also maintaining your own self-respect by passing out leaflets—as Jewish students did at a recent Leonard Jeffries appearance at Duke University—saying, "We're against racism!" Against prejudice directed at anyone on campus.

Ross Weiner of the University of Virginia said of the administration there that it seems "very interested in maintaining peace and calm. However, I have found very few individuals within the administration who are actually dedicated to working out some of the deeper underlying problems—and trying to create a less segregated university. It seems to me that the university is often interested in window-dressing, not in addressing many of the intergroup relations problems."

To begin to end the civil rights wars on campus, blacks, Jews, and others can count only on themselves. Not on the administration or the faculty. They have to form alliances based on mutual understanding and respect. It's as corny and simple and effective as that.