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Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 28

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When Being Politically Correct Makes a Mockery of Justice

CAMPUS CORRESPONDENCE

BY JORDANA HORN

PHILADELPHIA

Freedom of expression is under siege at the University of Pennsylvania. Ironically, leading the attack is the university's president, Sheldon Hackney, who is Bill Clinton's nominee for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Hackney's deliberate failure to stand up for freedom of expression and to condemn injustice in two recent incidents is frightening for the university. Such behavior portends catastrophic repercussions nationally if his nomination goes through.

The first incident exploded in April when members of a group calling themselves the Black Community stole most of the 14,000 copies of the campus newspaper, the Daily Pennsylvanian, tossing them in dumpsters. A note posted on the

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paper's dispenser bins said the move was intended to protest the "blatant and voluntary perpetuation of institutional racism against the Black Community by the [newspaper]."

Their complaints stemmed from the opinion columns of junior Gregory Pavlik. Pavlik's archconservative bimonthly columns have questioned whether blacks are treated preferentially in the university's admissions and whether Martin Luther King Jr. should be seen as a role model. The columns have been interpreted by many, especially members of minority communities, as bigoted; Pavlik insists that they are "reasoned discourse."

The second case is that of Eden Jacobowitz. Near midnight on Jan. 13, Jacobowitz was disturbed by African-American sorority women making noise outside his window. The 18-year-old student, who was up working on a paper, went to the window and yelled at them to be quiet, calling them "water buffalo."

Jacobowitz said the remark popped into his head, and seemed to describe the stomping and "woo, woo" noise he said the women were making. His defenders claim that Jacobowitz, who attended a

Jewish day school, used a spontaneous literal translation of the Hebrew word for water oxen, *behayma*, the idiomatic equivalent of "dumbbell."

Jacobowitz insists he meant no racial insult. Assistant Judicial Inquiry Officer Robin Read insists that he did. Read maintains that water buffalo are dark

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animals native to Africa, and that Jacobowitz is therefore guilty of racial harassment.

Jacobowitz was offered a settlement by Penn's justice system in March. The deal included his making a formal apology to the complainants, organizing a diversity seminar, being placed on residential probation and having a letter put in his student file noting "a violation of the code of conduct on racial harassment." He did not accept the "bargain," and is being put on trial behind closed doors by the school. He faces possible expulsion.

The real issue is freedom of expression

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for all—both problems arise from one group prescribing the morality and speech of another. In the newspaper theft, students objecting to the words of one student chose to silence that student rather than challenge him. In return for their criminal actions, they gained Hackney's ear and undivided attention. In the Jacobowitz case, Hackney has consciously turned a deaf ear to a student who has been accused, abandoning all notions of "innocent until proven guilty." Hackney, supposedly in the name of the ideal of tolerance, will tolerate theft, censorship and blatant injustice.

The University of Pennsylvania, during Hackney's tenure, has touted itself as a bastion of tolerance. Unfortunately, the primary concept deemed intolerable in this claustrophobic educational environment is freedom of thought.

Trashing several thousand newspapers does not and cannot dispose of any problem. In a letter on "recent events on campus"—i.e., the theft of the newspapers—Hackney did recognize that "serious and complex events" had transpired.

The day after the newspaper theft, Hackney said that "two important university values, diversity and open expres-

sion, seem to be in conflict." In an interview, he said he "did not condone" the theft, but he wouldn't condemn it either. In short, Hackney failed to take a firm stand in favor of freedom of expression. He chose to straddle the fence in both cases, making compromises, and thus compromising free thought.

Meanwhile, Hackney voices no objection to the treatment of Jacobowitz, who is being tried in a closed-door justice system devoid of justice. Hackney has not condemned this "justice" system at Penn which penalizes students for their words, but ignores their actions. In this new definition of justice, theft goes unpunished, and assumed thoughts are a vigilantly prosecuted crime.

These undeniable injustices prey on freedom of expression, supposedly for the sake of diversity and race relations. But in both cases, the concept of justice is virtually negated where race is an issue. Hackney has displayed an inexcusable inaction and moral inertia in both situations.

Hackney is ignoring what should be his highest priority as president of the University of Pennsylvania: to secure and defend freedom of thought.