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Dale Russakoff

Mary Jordan

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At Penn, the Word Divides as Easily as the Sword

By Dale Russakoff and Mary Jordan
Washington Post Staff Writers

The University of Pennsylvania has become a symbol of increasing racial tension on the nation's campuses after black students threw away nearly every copy of the student newspaper one day and a white freshman was charged with racial harassment for calling five black women "water buffalo."

While Penn is hardly alone, its troubles have national significance because its respected president, Sheldon Hackney, is President Clinton's nominee to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities. His compromising response to the incidents has provoked rancorous national debate.

Also, Hillary Rodham Clinton is to be the keynote speaker at Penn's commencement Monday, sharing the podium with Hackney.

The unrest at Penn has counterparts on many predominantly white campuses where minority students have become increasingly militant about alleged insensitivity and outright racism and white students complain loudly that university administrators pander to minority unease at the expense of other university values, including free speech.

Earlier this week, Mexican-American students staged a violent protest at the University of California at Los Angeles about a decision not to establish a Chicano studies department.

Meanwhile, in separate federal court actions this week, racial incidents that caused deep divisions on two campuses—an "ugly woman" skit featuring a white, male George Mason University student dressed as a fat, black woman, and racially charged speeches by former City College of New York professor Leonard Jeffries—were deemed protected by the First Amendment.

At the University of North Carolina and Ohio State University, black students have staged protests and rallies involving black cultural centers.

"There is a sense of people generally on tenterhooks and extraordinarily sensitive to anything that could be seen as an affront," said Herbert Morris, a UCLA provost. "On issues of race, ethnicity and gender... all that has to happen is a gnat lands on the shoulder, and they shoot from the hip."

In the late 1980s, scores of universities established anti-harassment or speech codes to foster
students frequently are stopped by university police and told that they meet the description of a crime suspect. "We walk into buildings, we have to show our i.d.," she said. "Whites don't."

Walter Benjamin, a senior, said white students literally run from black students who cross their path at night, "assuming they're somebody from the neighborhood." He and Fox said neighborhood youths steal bikes on campus and have assaulted white women, which Fox said "adds fuel to the fire, big time, because [whites] see black kids doing this."

Michael Chang, a black student leader, said he attended a predominantly white prep school in New York and "was cool with white kids then, but now I really don't want to be around them." He said society, not just Penn, changed him, starting when his parents gave him a car and New York police repeatedly demanded to see his license and registration.

Now, he said, white students at Penn often accuse blacks of self-segregating but "people gravitate toward people who share similar experiences. No one says anything when white students congregate in dining halls." He said white students have thrown eggs and poured water onto blacks walking by their dorms and made anonymous calls saying, "The only reason you're here is that you're black."

Chang said blacks are "going to be a lot more politically active about getting things done at this university," indicating that the newspaper protest and charges against Jacobowitz are only the beginning of a campus-wide campaign.

White students were more reluctant to give their names. One junior said he was upset about confiscation of the paper, considered himself a liberal and "never expected to find myself on the opposite side of black students, having my views championed by Rush Limbaugh. But more and more, I'm beginning to think I'm a libertarian. I just feel the administration bent over backwards to let black students get away with what whites can't."

Stephen Glass, a white junior and executive editor of the Daily Pennsylvanian, said he believes that the paper was insensitive to his predecessors. He plans an aggressive campaign next fall to recruit "students from all ideologies and races." But he said he cannot find common ground with black students who complain that simply publishing the work of a columnist who criticizes affirmative action and the Rev. King abuses free speech.

Glass said he was enraged when Hackney did not strongly condemn seizure of the papers. "He's quick to defend free expression when the attack comes from the right," referring to Penn's display of explicit photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, "but when it comes from the left, he doesn't defend it." Glass said.

Hackney disputed the charge but said he believes that "precisely because we are trying so hard to be inclusive and to make everyone feel a real part of the place, we are more likely to have both black and white sensitive to slights on the one hand and [whites'] inability of giving offense by saying something wrong."

Many critics of speech codes, including the American Association of University Professors and the ACLU, said they stifle communication and create just such polarization.

"These are very complex problems, and you're not going to be able to solve them by telling people to stop shouting at each other," said Deborah Leavy, executive director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania. "Telling people to stop saying it when they're still thinking it is not the solution."

Chang said he opposes the speech code as a "fig leaf" that leaves most racism unaddressed. However, he also said he believes that Penn should bar columnists whose writing blacks perceive as derogatory: "All you're going to do is do more tension and hurt people."

Roger Wilkins, a history professor at George Mason and longtime civil rights leader, says the polarization is inevitable and believes that many universities are struggling commendably with it.

"If you are going to seek diversity, you are going to have problems," he said. "There are tensions that cause many people are more comfortable when they are segregated. But that's not the way we want the college to be in the future."

Russakoff reported from Philadelphia.