Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 69

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...
environments for minorities, Penn, like ola, has since narrowed its speech code. Even as paramount but...thought, views and expression.”...the most fun-

Joseph Jacobowitz, a white freshman, faced on charges that he committed racial harass-

On a January night. Penn Afro-American...“water buffalo” has no racial connotations,

...from Rush Limbaugh to...to let Journal editors, all charging “pocr-

Ewish alumni have threatened to stop contribu-

a letter to Hackney saying...closed. It was insensitive under his predecessors. He plans an aggres-

wrote, “struck at...school. Jacobowitz, an Orthodox Jew, said

races to be exacerbating tensions. “The pro-

when black students, identifying themselves

the right,” referring to Penn’s display of explicit photo-

alarms to be exacerbating tensions. No one says

Black students...for minorities. “The...sents: Penn’s publication of a columnist who

university treats them. Black students said the speech policies do not begin to address their concerns. Penn is in a p

university should foster...policies on open expres-

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There are tensions...be more comfortable when they are segregated. But that’s not the way we want the country to be in the future.”

Rusakoff reported from Philadelphia.