



3-16-1994

Campuses and Common Sense

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Recommended Citation

Campuses and Common Sense, *The Baltimore Sun*, March 16, 1994

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Campuses and common sense

March 16, 1994 | By Kenneth Lasson

THE reason that academic politics are so sordid," they used to say, "is that the stakes are so low."

Would that that were still the case. The current flaps over Louis Farrakhan and Anthony Martin are only the latest and loudest instances of wholesale hatred spewed forth against various ethnic groups and individuals under the protective guise of academic freedom and the First Amendment.

When it comes to group defamation and free speech, American campuses are increasingly on the cutting edge of high social consequence. Too often, however, the Ivory Tower tilts to the wrong side.

More examples from many:

* Last year Leonard Jeffries, the openly anti-Semitic chairman of black studies at City College of New York, told a packed house at Johns Hopkins University that Jews dominated the slave trade, that they continue to control the nation's power and wealth and that the white man of any faith represents the devil. His appearance was sponsored by university funds.

* When Dr. Martin, a tenured professor at Wellesley, was criticized for assigning a blatantly anti-Jewish textbook (with no listed author) to his African-American history students, he reacted with an even more venomous broadside titled "The Jewish Onslaught." Wellesley officials waited six months before mildly rebuking him.

* Since 1991 college newspapers around the country have been bombarded with "scholarly" essays and advertisements which dispute that the Holocaust ever happened. They are financed by the Institute for Historical Review -- actually a one-man operation run by radical revisionist Bradley Smith, who has succeeded in convincing a number of campus journalists that they'd be abdicating their free-press responsibilities by refusing him access to the marketplace of ideas.

In fact, the past few years have seen hate mongers of all kinds invading college lecture halls, newspapers and faculties - - passing off perniciously adulterated bigotry as legitimate intellectual inquiry. University administrators are the last to see masked malice or purposeful provocation. For the most part, they bend over backward to accommodate all comers -- unable to distinguish between blind principle and common sense, unwilling to draw the line between legitimate challenges to established doctrine and hard-core rabble-rousing.

Much of this academic pussyfooting is done in the name of "multicultural diversity" or "political correctness." Far too often, though, such ideals are misguided and absurdly applied. We're not talking about civil liberties here, but common sense and civility.

In allowing Dr. Martin to speak at a Baltimore public high school Saturday night, Superintendent Walter Amprey said it was a freedom-of-speech issue. But he backed off when asked whether he'd permit the Ku Klux Klan the same opportunity. Dr. Amprey should know better; he can't have it both ways. If a classroom is going to be considered a public place after school hours, then anyone (even Klanners) should have equal access to it.

How should universities -- which have never been as accessible as public schools -- treat the Jeffries, Martins and Smiths of the world? Much the same way we'd expect them to treat pornographers or demagogues: Tell them to go away.

Each case, of course, is different, but it seems clear that the ones noted above could have been handled with a good deal more common sense than that applied by the highly educated minds at Hopkins, Wellesley or Brandeis.

The Homewood administrator who authorized Dr. Jeffries' use of campus facilities was unaware of his long-standing reputation as a vituperative racist. She should have done her homework, after which she could and should have refused to pay him from university funds and denied him the use of the lecture hall. Hopkins should have instructed the student group clamoring to hear Dr. Jeffries to book him elsewhere.

Wellesley president Diana Chapman Walsh rightly told parents and alumnae that, though Dr. Martin's views could not be censored, his diatribe should be condemned as offensive and divisive. But the lady doth protest too little and too late. Coming many months after Dr. Martin's first foray into blood libel, her rebuke was tardy and tepid; not once did it refer specifically to his anti-Semitism.

And student editors should be given to understand the difference between journalistic integrity and First-Amendment responsibilities. College newspapers have no greater obligation to print Holocaust-denial literature than they do to publish smut. The commercial press always picks and chooses editorial matter on the basis of arbitrary standards -- usually decency and community sensibilities. That's why you won't see X-rated films reviewed in The Evening Sun, nor essays by Bradley Smith in the New York Times.

Even hate mongers have an absolute First-Amendment right to say whatever they want -- but not wherever and whenever and to whomever they wish. As Justice Holmes once said, the Constitution need not be construed as a suicide pact.

Likewise, no institution of higher learning -- private or public -- should confuse the legitimate goals of diversity and academic freedom with having to offer funds or forum to defamatory ruffians. Although once a professor has been granted

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tenure, however mistakenly, he can't (or shouldn't) be told how to handle his course, the moment his teaching denies historical fact or defies the law he should be quickly and thoroughly censured by his peers and superiors. College newspaper editors should be better schooled in journalistic ethics and obligations, and taken to task if they act irresponsibly.

Our traditional notion of civil liberty does not require that we listen to malevolent racists, only that the government cannot prohibit them from saying their piece.

But universities can -- and should.

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore.

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