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Saint Xavier professor defends his right of free speech

Sunday, August 7, 2005

With more than 1,820 American soldiers killed in action and 123,000 Iraqi civilian casualties in an unjust, criminal war, I am glad, despite efforts from readers such as Jim Murphy (Public Forum, Aug. 3), that I have not been silenced. And with even greater resonance, I can protest this neo-conservative crusade to expand American geopolitical hegemony throughout the Muslim world. It violates the laws of war and the U.N. charter; it was justified with falsified and criminally negligent intelligence against a defenseless nation, and President George W. Bush is a war criminal in my estimation. In Dan Lavoie's otherwise balanced and artfully written article (Insight, July 31), I would like to correct his reporting of my comments with regard to the political rehabilitation of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. I suggested that allowing him — and I might add his deputy prime minister and former foreign minister, Tariq Aziz — to serve as part of a grand coalition of Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish elements might quell the insurgency and provide for some type of governmental legitimacy that could lead to the removal of our soldiers from this Vietnam quagmire.

I do not believe that the Sunni component of the insurgency will be defeated through military means alone. There has to be a political settlement where former Baathists and Sunni revanchists generally are given a stake in the constitution and the government that hopefully will be constituted after the December elections. If Saddam's presence in a coalition government could avert more death and injury among American troops and Iraqi civilians, that would be a price well worth paying. It is one thing to put yellow ribbons on one's autocar and pronounce oneself as a supporter of the troops, it is another to seek creative solutions to ending the violence, saving lives and moving toward a geostrategic reconsideration of our foreign policy.

I think Mr. Murphy might consider the following with regard to my sanctions for an antiwar e-mail sent to a cadet at the Air Force Academy. One parameter in dealing with offensive or unpopular speech is to

condemn the speech. That was done widely and on a national basis in my case. That is legitimate, and I welcome it. Another parameter is to silence that speech through sanctions. Antiwar professors Ward Churchill, Nicholas De Genova and Richard Berthold were not sanctioned for unpopular antiwar utterances. When a university begins to silence speech through suspensions, reprimands and even more draconian actions, it constitutes an abuse of power and creates a chilling orthodoxy on a campus. From a student standpoint, I was removed from four courses with four weeks remaining in the semester, not six as the article states. Students had classes canceled, replacement professors brought in on an emergency basis and many were upset with the academic dislocations that ensued.

The American Association of University Professors document, "Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure," states unambiguously that a suspension can only be effectuated "if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened." That was never stated as a rationale for this action; instead, public clamoring for punishment for highly provocative antiwar views was the precipitating factor in my opinion. Conservative groups and individuals such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the National Association of Scholars and Hoover institution research fellow Stanley Kurtz argued that my suspension was an inappropriate violation of my academic freedom. The St. Xavier University AAUP chapter published a widely circulated document that concurred with that assessment.

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