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# Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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## NPR's *All Things Considered*

September 10, 2002 Tuesday

HEADLINE: Richard Berthold's comment blunder one of several prompting review of academic freedom policies at universities

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ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

Like most of us, Professor Richard Berthold will never forget where he was last September 11th. That morning he walked into his classroom in New Mexico and he blurted out something that he will regret the rest of his life. It was one of several incidents on college campuses that sparked an angry debate over free speech and academic freedom. NPR's Claudio Sanchez reports.

CLAUDIO SANCHEZ reporting:

Richard Berthold, a tenured professor of Greek history at the University of New Mexico for the past 30 years, has railed against a lot of things in class--political correctness, affirmative action, feminists and politicians left and right. Professor RICHARD BERTHOLD (University of New Mexico): Cracks about contemporary society mostly or the administration, and that's part of the package. Students seem to love that.

SANCHEZ: Nothing was off-limits until September 11th rolled around. That morning Berthold walked into his freshman history class knowing that two commercial airliners had hit New York's



Read excerpts from *The Shadow University* by Alan Charles Kors & Harvey A. Silverglate.



Read *Thought Reform 101* by Alan Charles Kors.



Read *Memo to Free Speech Advocates University of Wisconsin-Madison* by Harvey A. Silverglate.

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World Trade Center, that both towers had collapsed and that the Pentagon had also been hit.

Prof. BERTHOLD: There was a need to say something about this, and that's when I said something very stupid. 'Anybody who blows up the Pentagon gets my vote.' Now the callousness of that remark did not occur to me until later that afternoon.

SANCHEZ: By then, Berthold had repeated the comment in another class. Angry e-mails and phone calls started pouring in.

Prof. BERTHOLD: In fact, I think the first one I got was from Washington. Somebody who apparently knew somebody in one of my classes who immediately, 'Hey, you know, my professor just said blah, blah, blah,' and then I don't know at what point somebody told the media and then the (censored) really hit the fan. How unpleasant this is to relive this whole thing.

SANCHEZ: Death threats started coming in fast and furious. At least one New Mexico state legislator demanded that Berthold be fired for treason. Berthold, a short, gaunt man in his mid-50s with long graying hair, once voted professor of the year, got on his motorcycle and went home, stunned. The University of New Mexico, under enormous pressure to fire Berthold, opened an investigation. By the week's end, similar incidents around the country had made headlines. Thor Halvorssen is with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

Mr. THOR HALVORSSSEN (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education): There is a moral crisis in higher education when in a free society two-thirds of colleges and universities have speech codes. Universities should be places where all sorts of debate and discussion occurs, not where professors have to mind their words and be careful that they're not going to have charges against them for something they said.

SANCHEZ: In the weeks and months following 9/11, Orange Coast College in California reprimanded a political science professor for posing the following question in a class: Why do Muslims condemn the terrorist attacks in New York but never denounce the terrorist attacks in Israel? The University of Texas denounced a journalism professor for suggesting in an Op-Ed column that the US prompted the attacks because of its Mideast

policy. And just last month, the University of North Carolina was roundly criticized for introducing a scholarly text about the Koran as required reading for first-year students.

As for Berthold, a week after blurting out, 'Anyone who bombs the Pentagon gets my vote,' he returned to campus. Students packed his classes.

Prof. BERTHOLD: They spontaneously applauded me, and I broke down into tears. I mean, it was exactly what I needed because I'd just been taking shi--I'm getting nothing from my colleagues except crap. You know, what I expected was, 'What a stupid thing to say, jackass, but, hey, we're your colleagues. We'll defend your right to be a stupid jackass at least occasionally. It's called free speech.'

SANCHEZ: The faculty senate eventually defended Berthold's right to say what he did, but denounced what he said. Berthold eventually apologized. But he has severed his ties to his department. Today his small office on campus sits suspended in time, his door plastered with year-old political cartoons, President George Bush as Rambo, and articles critical of Israel and US foreign policy. Students who now call his home to set appointments are greeted with this message.

Unidentified Voice: (From recording) The al-Qaeda network. If you need something blown up, press one. If you wish to speak to a mullah, press two. If you wish a copy of our free 'I love John Ashcroft' bumper sticker, press three. (Beep heard)

SANCHEZ: Berthold is bitter and still railing about a lot of things, including September 11th.

Prof. BERTHOLD: I start to become a little nervous when every car and every house on the block has an American flag out in front of it.

SANCHEZ: The University of New Mexico has banned Berthold from teaching freshman history ever again. 9/11, meanwhile, has forced colleges across the country to review their free speech policies and rethink whether academic freedom has its limits. Claudio Sanchez, NPR News, Albuquerque.

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