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Critics of Al-Arian firing see parallels to segregation

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Abstract:

Advocates of academic freedom say [Judy Genshaft]'s decision to fire [Sami Al-Arian] actually is just a variation on a theme that harkens back to segregation.

She also has gotten some tough questions from faculty members with their own concerns about academic freedom and free-speech rights. And Genshaft can expect a letter from the American Association of University Professors, an organization whose principles of academic freedom Genshaft has repeatedly cited in the Al-Arian case.

[Mary Burgan] added that Genshaft's stated reasons for firing Al-Arian are a "new variation - and an extended and tortured one - of a theme we've heard before."

Full Text:

Copyright Times Publishing Co. Dec 22, 2001

University of South Florida president Judy Genshaft has referred to the controversial case of suspended professor Sami Al-Arian as unique, with "no strong precedents to guide us."

But advocates of academic freedom say Genshaft's decision to fire Al-Arian actually is just a variation on a theme that harkens back to segregation.

"Saying that the controversy is disruptive to the campus . . . that logic was used to prevent the integration of colleges and universities in the '50s," said Thor Halvorsen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

Genshaft continued to receive feedback - this time, much of it positive - for moving to fire Al-Arian, the engineering professor who federal authorities have said has links to terrorists.

"A lot of people are saying, 'Thank you for finally having the courage to take a stand and act,'" Genshaft said Friday. "They're saying, 'I'm an alum, I'm a student, I'm a parent. Thank you.'"

She also has gotten some tough questions from faculty members with their own concerns about academic freedom and free-speech rights. And Genshaft can expect a letter from the American Association of University Professors, an organization whose principles of academic freedom Genshaft

has repeatedly cited in the Al-Arian case.

"We're sending a letter . . . to the president of the University of South Florida, who quotes extensively - but selectively - from our principles of academic freedom," said Mary Burgan, general secretary for the AAUP. Burgan said she wanted to point out to Genshaft that a university professor retains the right to "speak on matters of general public interest."

Burgan added that Genshaft's stated reasons for firing Al-Arian are a "new variation - and an extended and tortured one - of a theme we've heard before."

Genshaft gave several reasons Wednesday for Al-Arian's dismissal, including his failure to make it clear that he spoke for himself and not the university.

When he appeared on the Fox News Channel's The O'Reilly Factor Sept. 26, the show made it clear that Al-Arian was a USF professor. That association led to a flurry of hateful and threatening e-mails and telephone calls to the university.

And that led to Genshaft's other reason for firing Al-Arian: campus disruption.

"We are experiencing a level of disruption that no university anywhere is set up to deal with on an ongoing basis," Genshaft told her Board of Trustees. She spoke of a climate of fear on campus, and an adverse effect on fundraising.

"I know this university has been harmed greatly," Genshaft said Friday. "When the dean of engineering characterizes his department as ground zero . . . we have a very different situation here."

But critics of Genshaft's decision point to its echoes of controversial decisions of the past.

"There would be loss of revenue to our . . . institutions from grants, from activities on the part of the alumni of those institutions in support of their financial affairs, and from students moving out of dormitories."

That is from a 1957 Florida Supreme Court decision barring Virgil Hawkins from becoming the first African-American to attend the University of Florida Law School. The court cited the threat of campus violence and disruption, the interruption of fundraising and loss of grants. The decision had wide popular support but is now considered wrongheaded.

"USF is applying the same logic," said Halvorsen of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. The disruption and threat of violence was quite real, as was the public pressure, Halvorsen said. But the value of integration outweighed those problems.

Genshaft dismissed the parallels.

"We have never received so many death threats," she said. "If you only knew what we have been dealing with. The disruption has been tremendous."

Steven Uhlfelder, a member of the Florida State University Board of Trustees, also rejected the parallels.

Uhlfelder, who is familiar with the Hawkins case, was UF student body president in the early 1970s when then-president Stephen O'Connell ordered 71 black students arrested during a sit-in at the administration building.

"The difference is that Virgil Hawkins could never control his skin color," Uhlfelder said. "This man could control his opinions. What did he think would happen when he went on that television show?"

[Illustration]

Caption: Sami Al-Arian; Photo: PHOTO

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