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Suppression of speech on campus

The speech most under attack is pro-American speech

By Michael Barone

When the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were attacked September 11, the overwhelming majority of Americans immediately felt, "We have been attacked." A very small number of Americans immediately felt, "They had it coming." Of the 500-plus members of Congress, all but one or two felt, "We have been attacked." Similar majorities of Americans in every occupation, economic class, ethnic group, political party, and institutional affiliation felt the same way.

With one exception: the faculties of our colleges and universities. There the cries of "They had it coming," were fierce and frequent. "Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon gets my vote," said University of New Mexico history professor Richard Berthold. George Wright, a political scientist at California State University at Chico, accused the Bush administration of wanting to militarize the Middle East, colonize the Arab world, and gain access to oil for the Bush family. Jennie Traschen, a physics professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, called the American flag "a symbol of terrorism and death and fear and destruction and oppression" the day before September 11, but she held to the same view afterward.


Naturally, some Americans are calling for dismissal of such professors. Others are arguing that there should be no penalties for the exercise of free speech. Among the latter is the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education: "Across the nation, in response to the atrocities of Sept. 11, 2001, and to the debates and discussions that have occurred in their wake, many college and university administrations are acting to inhibit the free expression of the citizens of a free society. Some administrations continue selective repression as if nothing had occurred: In the name of preventing 'offense,' they seek to stifle the views with which they disagree. Other administrations, more careerist in times of crisis than at other moments...want to avoid scandalizing broader public opinion. In both cases, they are willing to continue to sacrifice American liberty." What is interesting about the attempts to suppress speech, which have been chronicled by FIRE, is that almost all of them have been directed not against those who celebrated the attacks of September 11 but against those who take the same view as the overwhelming majority of Americans. The speech most under attack is pro-American speech.


Can this really be true? Here are some examples.

A. Zewdalem Kebede, an Ethiopian-born U.S. citizen and student at San Diego State University, received two letters from the university's misnamed Center for Student Rights, one stating that he had been "verbally abusive to other students," the other warning him that "confronting members of the campus community in a manner that is found to be aggressive or abusive" will result in severe disciplinary action. His offense: On September 22, after

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overhearing a group of Saudi students saying in Arabic how pleased they were with the September 11 attacks, Kebede, who is fluent in Arabic, said, "Guys, what you are talking is unfair. How do you feel happy when those 5,000 to 6,000 people are buried in two or three buildings? They are under rubble or they became ash. And you are talking about the action of bin Laden and his group. You are proud of them. You should have to feel shame."

Orange Coast Community College instructor Ken Hearlson, in a class the week after September 11, called Muslims who condone terrorism "terrorists," "murderers" and "Nazis." Muslim students complained, and one student E-mailed administrators that a Muslim classmate had said, "Don't hold your breath [that Hearlson's coming back]. He might not live." College president Margaret Gratton relieved Hearlson of his teaching duties but not his pay.

At Central Michigan University, Emmons Hall resident Don Pasco was told to remove from his dorm room door "an American eagle, a picture of the World Trade Center exploding, and a column." Residence hall director Al Nowak explained, "We look to create an environment conducive to academic study. If people choose to put something in their room, it's OK. But the common areas have a posting policy. If offensive, defined as anything that degrades other individuals, verbally inappropriate messages, explicit pictures, nudity, or any type of profanity, it is not allowed. We look to make sure people feel comfortable. CMU has people with different ethnic and diverse backgrounds, and we want them all to feel comfortable going down the hall."

Charles Fairbanks, then director of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, in a panel presentation September 14, argued that the United States should direct its response to September 11 not only at Osama bin Laden but also against governments that supported the attack. He said the U.S. wouldn't be able to find bin Laden, and "I'll bet anyone here a Koran on that." He went on to identify Iraq, Pakistan, and the Palestinian Authority as likely sponsors of the September 11 attacks, and said, "Unfortunately, Palestinians hate us and that's a painful fact." At which point a woman in the audience stood up and accused him of "innuendoes intended to encourage and to assist people in conducting hate crimes ... toward Muslims." On September 18, Fairbanks was fired as head of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. He was later reinstated, but a message was sent.

The University of California-Berkeley student Senate in early October called for punishment of *The Daily Californian*, the campus paper, for running a cartoon on September 18 showing two Muslim terrorists roasting in hell. The suggested penalty: The University should raise the paper's \$8,000 per month rent unless the newspaper staff underwent "voluntary diversity training." The student government also called upon the paper to issue "a printed apology, and a new record of dedication to truth in editorial and news content...to rectify its complete insensitivity to the needs of its campus and its values."

What is behind this lunacy? The speech codes that some two thirds of the nation's colleges and universities have imposed on their faculty and students. And they are justified with language that could have come out of George Orwell's *1984*. The Berkeley student Senate prefaced its call for "voluntary diversity training" with a statement saying, "Berkeley remains one of the few places in the world where a thoughtful, critical exchange can occur from people across a spectrum of backgrounds and races, without fear of reprisal or hatred." That is, factually, utterly wrong. Berkeley is a city whose government banned pictures of flags on its fire trucks on the theory that they would provoke hate crimes. Berkeley is a university where 1,000 copies of the *Daily Californian* were stolen from newspaper racks on Sproul Plaza October 24 by a group offended by an advertisement titled "End States Who Sponsor Terrorism"—supposedly an offense to the Iranian community. The university, as usual, took no action against those who stole the newspapers.

Berkeley and hundreds of other colleges and universities today are some of the few places in America where free exchanges of ideas *cannot* take place

because some ideas--most of them ideas shared by the great majority of the American people--are systematically suppressed. Colleges and universities are the least free places in America.

Speech codes were put into place to stifle criticism of the racial quotas and preferences employed by colleges and universities to produce "diversity." In the name of diversity, they impose uniformity of opinion. They are aimed at any speech which is deemed, by anyone, to be offensive to blacks or other minorities; hence their use to suppress speech that is offensive to those who excuse or cheer the attacks of September 11.

Why has this free society allowed its colleges and universities to systematically suppress speech in this way? Partly because most of us turn our heads away. When I talk of suppression of speech on campus, most people of my acquaintance, of whatever political persuasion, say this simply can't be true, or it can't be this bad. The response to September 11 shows that it is true and it is this bad. At this time, when liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans take exactly the same view of the September 11 attacks, it should be easier for those beyond the small number who have been concerned about suppression of speech on campus to see it for what it is. The institutions that should be the setting for the free exchange of ideas have become institutions that are the setting for the greatest suppression of the free exchange of ideas.

It is time for the taxpayers and tuition-payers and alumni contributors of this country to demand that college and university administrators dismantle their odious apparatus of speech suppression. This is a cause on which liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans can agree. This is not a call for suppression of the speech of campus radicals; quite the contrary. But it is a call for ending the days when the campus radicals can suppress everyone else's speech.

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