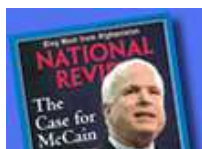


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## Brendan Conway

March 8, 2007 10:30 AM

### The Protected Flag

These College Republicans are no wavers.

By Brendan Conway

*San Francisco* — What is quite possibly the strangest flag-desecration controversy in American history is afoot right now at San Francisco State University. It's strange for several reasons, firstly because the right to torch, stomp, or otherwise annihilate a flag was asserted nearly 18 years ago by the Supreme Court in *Johnson v. Texas*, and should be pretty much settled by now.

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Not here, though, where a chapter of College Republicans could be disbanded for allegedly inciting hostility via an act of flag desecration. Their hearing is this Friday.

The whole event is stranger still because the flags in question are not American flags, but copies of those of the terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas—which helps explain why the university's administrators are treating the case differently.

The story begins last October during an “antiterrorism rally” held by a dozen or so students from the school's chapter of the College Republicans. As group president Leigh Wolf explained over coffee in a Borders bookstore in this city's Union Square recently, the students wanted to send a gesture which the two Islamist terrorist groups could understand. So they downloaded images of the flags from the Internet and drew handmade copies on butcher paper to stomp on—flag burning being disallowed by the school for

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safety reasons.

And stomp they did, trampling the “flags” while denouncing terrorism and terrorists in all their forms: Not just Hezbollah and Hamas, but also the Ku Klux Klan and various historical and contemporary monsters.

What they didn’t know at the time is that the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah bear the name of Allah. They didn’t know, says Wolf, because they don’t read or speak Arabic. They just copied the script, apparently doing a sufficiently poor job that they expected laughter, not outrage. (Some in the College Republicans do speak Arabic, Wolf says, just not the ones who made or stomped the flag.)

But outrage they got. As Wolf describes it, an incensed student of Middle Eastern origin pointed out the offense to Islam they had just committed by stomping on the name of Allah. The group considered the point for a moment and decided to invite him to find a magic marker with which to cross out the name. He did.

A short while later, another group of obviously angry students who weren’t satisfied approached the scene and, according to Wolf, wanted to fight. A university official who was present made sure that that didn’t happen. The rally ended without altercation. The tense exchange was widely noted, of course.

Later, a number of Muslim students and students of Middle Eastern backgrounds were quoted in the school newspaper, the *[X]press*, saying that they were offended, and some non-Muslim and non-Middle Easterner students wrote in to the paper to the same effect.

The objection to the trampling of the name of Allah is reasonable. Done willfully, it would be an act of religious intolerance. The problem is, this wasn’t willful, at least not as religious disrespect. The erasure of the name shows it.

The school isn’t buying this, and also apparently isn’t persuaded that the act is constitutionally protected. It has placed the College Republicans under scrutiny for “attempts to incite violence and create a hostile environment” and “incivility.” The organization could be punished, and possibly disbanded, depending what comes of Friday’s hearings.

“Please spare SFSU the embarrassment of fighting against the Bill of Rights, by which it is legally and morally bound,” wrote the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has been all over this case, to university president Robert Corrigan in late January.

So far, the university hasn’t budged.

Last week, the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California was drafting a letter of support for the students. No wonder: San Francisco State is trying to hold students responsible for an offense which they didn’t know they had committed, which they rectified once it became known, in the course of exercising a highly protected act of political speech.

San Francisco State should just drop the case. The offense was unintentional and the underlying act is constitutionally protected. The whiff of the whole thing is just wrong.

— *Brendan Conway is an editorial writer at the Washington Times and a fellow at the Phillips Foundation.*

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