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CATHY YOUNG

The Boston Globe

A new wave of PC on campus

By Cathy Young | December 12, 2005

ALAN TEMES, an assistant professor of health and physical education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, was getting good reviews on the job until his politics became an issue. Temes, who opposes the war in Iraq, began posting updates of the body count of US soldiers and Iraqi civilians on a bulletin board near his office. Last April, department chair Elaine Blair e-mailed Temes advising him to stop posting the notices. Then, Temes claims in a lawsuit, she warned him that continued antiwar protests would hurt his chances of getting tenure. Later, he was denied tenure, despite apparently meeting the qualifications for it.

This is one of several recent incidents in which colleges penalized faculty and students for expressing antiwar views.

In September at George Mason University in Virginia, a student and Air Force veteran, Tariq Khan, stood near a military recruiters' table on campus with a "Recruiters lie" sign taped to his chest and handed out leaflets. Another student assaulted him and took away his sign; the campus police then arrested Khan for violating a university policy that bans distribution of leaflets without prior approval from administrators. Charges were eventually dropped after Khan's case was taken up by the American Civil Liberties Union and by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

FIRE, co-founded by Boston civil rights attorney Harvey Silverglate and University of Pennsylvania professor Charles Alan Kors, is a nonpartisan organization that champions free expression on college campuses. When the organization was launched in 1998, its main focus was "political correctness" from the left -- attempts to curtail speech regarded as racist, sexist, or otherwise injurious to diversity. Such censorship still endures. But alongside it, FIRE is seeing more cases in which speech is suppressed by political correctness on the right.

Sometimes, the repressed are not particularly sympathetic. At Warren Community College in New Jersey, adjunct English instructor John Daly got an e-mail from Rebecca Beach, head

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of the campus chapter of Young Americans for Freedom, publicizing a talk by an Iraq war veteran in support of the war. Daly responded with a rant that denounced the conservative group's anticommunist literature as "fascist propaganda" and promised to "expose your right-wing, antipeople politics until groups like your won't dare show their face on a college campus." He added that "real freedom will come when soldiers in Iraq turn their guns on their superiors."

Beach went public. Initially, Warren Community College President William Austin called Daly's comments "repugnant" but defended his right to free expression. Later, however, the college began to consider dismissing Daly, and he resigned before he could be fired.

Daly's statements were indeed repugnant, ignorant, and not very tolerant toward others' ideas. Yet there was no evidence that he used his position to harangue students or penalize dissenters. While Beach claimed intimidation, Daly's only threat was to use speech to "expose" her group. The answer to that is not suppression, but speech that exposes *his* hateful politics.

In the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives rightly criticized the left's suppression of speech on college campuses in the name of "sensitivity." Today, the right has adopted many of the same tactics to target speech it finds offensive. Temes was told that his posting of war body counts was insensitive to students with loved ones serving in Iraq. Young Americans for Freedom used the language of the left-wing thought police to accuse Daly of "harassment" and creating a "hostile environment." Conservative talk show hosts such as Fox News's Sean Hannity clamored for Daly's head, though they would have been the first to denounce the college if Daly had been in trouble over e-mail denouncing a gay rights group.

The double standards aren't just on the right. How many liberals would defend a professor who sent a prochoice student an e-mail promising to vilify her group until it could no longer show itself on campuses, and expressing sympathy with abortion-clinic bombers?

Back in 1992, civil libertarian Nat Hentoff wrote a book titled, "Free Speech for Me -- But Not for Thee." Unfortunately, that sums up the typical approach on the right and the left. It's not always easy to defend freedom of speech when the speech deeply offends you. But that's the true test of commitment to liberty.

Cathy Young is a contributing editor at Reason magazine. Her column appears regularly in the Globe. ■

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