

Held to the FIRE

Foundation crusades to stamp out absurd assaults on free speech

Saturday, March 15, 2008

In the tumultuous 1960s far-left student radicals launched the "free speech movement" at the University of California-Berkeley. Cruelly exploiting anti-Vietnam War and civil rights sentiments, the movement soon spread across the country to other campuses, often resulting in violence, property damage and shutdowns of universities and colleges -- at least temporarily until police were finally called in.

These young thugs, who were christened the "New Left" by generally friendly national media, were no more interested in free speech than they were in signing up for a stint in Vietnam. What they really sought was free speech for themselves, but not for anybody else -- especially those who disagreed with them.

As New Left radicals aged, many carved a niche for themselves in academia and are now professors or administrators, or hold other levers of power. And their contempt for free speech, other than their own, hasn't changed one whit over the decades.

This is what has given rise to political correctness and speech codes that not only affect college campuses, but to a large extent have spread beyond the campuses into the broader culture. One horrendous example of free speech intolerance was the recent firing of a professor at a San Jose, Calif., community college for leading a discussion on the controversial "nature vs. nurture" debate regarding sexual orientation. All it took was one student complaint to get her booted out.

She has a good chance, however, of getting her job back because she has enlisted the help of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. FIRE, as it is more widely known, is a nonprofit organization that has successfully mounted strong legal challenges against campus speech codes.

Just this month FIRE got San Francisco State University to scrap speech codes that, in effect, muzzled campus Republicans. Right here in Georgia, FIRE currently is battling a preposterous Valdosta State University regulation that permits free speech for only two hours a day at a tiny venue that must be reserved days in advance.

Before Berkeley's free speech movement, American universities were bastions of free speech and, in fairness, some still are. But all too many are overtly opposed to free speech, open inquiry and controversial discussions. This not only is inimical to the mission of higher education, but as FIRE has often proved in court, restricting speech clearly violates the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

It's a shame that it takes an outside entity such as FIRE to go to court to enforce that fundamental right. Free speech should be flourishing on all the nation's campuses -- challenging and inspiring young minds -- not subjecting them to Stalinist restrictions. Thank heaven for FIRE. It is establishing important strategic beachheads in trying to keep campuses open and free.

From the Saturday, March 15, 2008 edition of the Augusta Chronicle