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GMU Disinvites Moore

Speech, \$35,000 Fee Drew Criticism

By *Amy Argetsinger and Lisa Rein*
 Washington Post Staff Writers
 Friday, October 1, 2004; Page A01

George Mason University canceled a scheduled speaking engagement by liberal filmmaker Michael Moore yesterday after two conservative state legislators and others complained that public money should not support an overtly political event.

Moore, the outspoken director of the movie "Fahrenheit 9/11," was to have received about \$35,000 for his Oct. 28 speech at the Patriot Center on the Fairfax campus -- an event that university officials had arranged a week ago and had not begun to publicize.

Word spread quickly, and after complaints from the legislators and some members of the community reached the office of President Alan G. Merten this week, the school announced that the event, coming so close to the presidential election, would be "an inappropriate use of state resources."

Moore, in a telephone interview last night from his home in Flint, Mich., said he intends to speak at George Mason anyway. "I'm going to show up in support of free speech and free expression," he said.

It is the second time in recent weeks that a public university has canceled an appearance by Moore, currently on a 20-state "Slacker Uprising Tour" of college campuses that has drawn sellout crowds as well as heated criticism at almost every stop. The president of California State University-San Marcos, near San Diego, canceled a \$37,000 campus appearance by Moore, who is still scheduled to speak this month at a nearby fairground.

Moore may have seemed an unlikely choice of speaker for George Mason, the fast-growing public campus whose leadership has included Edwin Meese III, attorney general in the Reagan

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Filmmaker Michael Moore says he will still come to George Mason. (Douglas M. Bovitt, Courier-Post via AP)

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administration, as longtime rector of the Board of Visitors. University spokesman Daniel Walsch said the idea to have Moore speak came from administrators who thought "that he would be interesting and stimulating to students of the university community."

But the decision quickly drew a backlash from Del. Richard H. Black (R-Loudoun), one of the Virginia legislature's leading conservatives. On Tuesday, Black sent Merten a letter asking him to rescind the invitation on two grounds: The fee was too high and the

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also contacted Merten's office.

Black said, "I have a problem with anyone being paid \$35,000 for one speaking engagement at a publicly financed institution."

Del. Vincent F. Callahan Jr. (R-Fairfax), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and considered a moderate on many issues, called Moore "a sleazebag of the first order."

"They should have Democrats and Republicans speak, but not somebody whose living is libel and slander. . . . That's not appropriate for a first-class university," Callahan said.

Moore's publicist said that by speaking at public and private colleges in key battleground states, the filmmaker hopes to encourage college students to register to vote -- and to persuade them to vote against President Bush. The tour began this week and will end in Tallahassee on Nov. 2, Election Day.

At numerous campuses, including the University of Arizona and the University of Michigan, plans to book Moore have generated an uproar and demands for another speaker as a balance. Officials at the University of Minnesota announced that they would consider having Moore speak, but only if no public funds were used. The outcry at Utah Valley State College -- where Moore will speak this month -- led officials to line up conservative broadcaster Sean Hannity as well.

George Mason officials said Wednesday that they were reviewing the Moore agreement to make sure it did not violate any state law but added that they hoped the engagement would continue as planned.

Yesterday, Walsch said that they had found nothing in state law to prevent them from hosting Moore -- "it would have been well within our right to do so" -- but that Merten decided it "was not the wisest use of state money." He said the contract with Moore had left both parties the freedom to cancel up to five days before the event and would not obligate the university to pay Moore anything. Moore said he believes he is owed the money under the terms of his contract.

The cancellation drew criticism from some Virginia Democrats.

"What are the Republicans afraid of?" asked Sen. Janet D. Howell (Fairfax County). "Would they try to silence Rush Limbaugh? The whole purpose of a university is to have an open debate, with all perspectives being aired and discussed."

But Matt Orr, 21, of McLean, a senior majoring in communications and a member of the campus GOP, said the problem for him was the financial arrangement with Moore. "If he was speaking for free, I would have no problem with him coming here," Orr said. "I don't like to see my tuition going to someone who I don't support."

Staff writer Timothy Dwyer contributed to this report.

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