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in the White House

April 13, 2001

**Review & Outlook****The Few and the Brave**

In a time of evasion and double-speak emanating from the heads of universities -- particularly when they're called on to address efforts to suppress free speech -- there haven't been many heroes. Nor many exceptions to the dismal ranks of those administrators steadfastly determined to do or say nothing that might run counter to ruling ideologies, or bring down on them, heaven forbid, charges of insensitivity, or demonstrators. Obedience to the prevailing winds is, to these ranks, what a university president's job is all about.

There haven't been, as we say, many exceptions to this pattern, but a few have emerged nonetheless -- most recently, and spectacularly, at the University of Alaska. There, President Mark R. Hamilton took the opportunity last month to speak out forcefully on the unassailable right to free speech and -- now came the spectacular part -- he acted accordingly. This came as the culmination of a now altogether familiar effort to seek punishment of a faculty member for expressing views a particular group deemed offensive -- the faculty member being in this case Professor Linda McCarriston, an accomplished poet and a feminist.

For publishing (in the magazine *Ice-Floe: International Poetry of the Far North*) a poem titled "Indian Girls" -- about child sexual abuse -- Professor McCarriston quickly became the target of protests from Native American groups on campus. Crowds of protesters demonstrated outside her classroom and, soon, as usually happens when colleges face protests, the administrators -- the Chairman of Creative Writing and Literary Arts, and the Chancellor of the Anchorage campus -- lost no time assuring the complainants that they were on the job, and had indeed already contacted higher authorities to see what action might be taken.

So far all was going as usual. The administrators paid careful lip service to the principles of free expression even as they were busy forwarding the complaint for action, but here all resemblance to the usual ended.

Informed that the department chairman and the chancellor were advancing investigations of Professor McCarriston's alleged offense -- and that they were promising to report to the complainants against her -- the president of the university fired a directive off to the chancellors of all three campuses. In it Mr. Hamilton made clear that there could be no toleration of attempts to assuage anger or to demonstrate concern that would in any way qualify the university's support for free speech. He took special note of a tendency to say things like "we

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support the right to free speech but we intend to check into this matter" or "but I have asked Dean X or Provost Y to investigate the circumstances."

This, said Mark Hamilton, "is unacceptable. There is nothing to 'check into', nothing to investigate."

Those who have watched the erosion of free speech on the nation's campuses have been waiting a long time to hear words like that: There is nothing to investigate. We must, he informed the chancellors, "remain a certain trumpet on this most precious of Constitutional rights." Then, with a dispatch whose crispness may have had something to do with his 31 years of military service, Mr. Hamilton directed the chancellors to see that the letter was widely disseminated. Professor Alan C. Kors, of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which took up Professor McCarriston's defense, suggested that freedom of speech was in peril on campus and that the university president was on watch. We'd say Mr. Hamilton proved a most admirable watchman.

Meanwhile, in December, the Undergraduate Student Government at Penn State University informed the Young Americans for Freedom that its mission statement referring to "God-given" rights was religious discrimination. Presumably, the reference to God reeked of the exclusionary to the advanced minds at Penn State, who figured it could only mean that YAF excluded people who didn't believe in God. This, too, would turn out to be a case for FIRE.

In January 2001, the student-faculty appeals board decreed that unless YAF dropped the religious reference it would lose its status as a student organization. To his credit, Penn State University President Graham Spanier decided to see to it that the student-faculty board reversed this decree, which it did early last month.

Also in the Department of Hope and Possibility, we might mention Sheila E. Blumstein, interim president of Brown University. On learning of the theft of an entire press run of the student paper, the Brown Daily Herald, by those protesting the now famous advertisement by David Horowitz, arguing against reparations for slavery, President Blumstein issued a clear statement opposing such efforts to silence and intimidate, and saying that the university supported the Herald's right to publish any material it chose.

He had fought for the Constitution, Mr. Hamilton said, and he was not prepared to see it trashed. We suspect there are more university heads, deans and other administrators out there who hold similar views. With luck they may find their voices.

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