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The Campus Culture Wars in Two Videos

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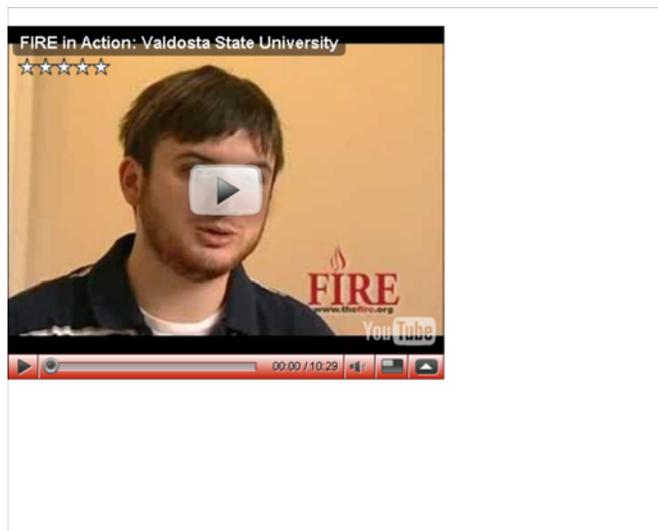
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Two weeks ago, I was working as a staff member at a Buddhist retreat in New York City. On the way to lunch, I was discussing with our instructor for the weekend the passions and anger often ignited when fighting for free speech on campus. He was surprised to hear that sometimes my work is poorly received by my fellow New Yorkers. In his words, "everyone must just assume you're a white hat," meaning the good guy in a Western movie. (Not much a Western fan myself, I needed that one explained.) But I told him that was not always the case. In fighting free speech battles on campus, I have been caught up on the front lines of our country's bizarre and cantankerous culture wars. I have found that if I'm doing my job correctly, someone is always angry at me for something.

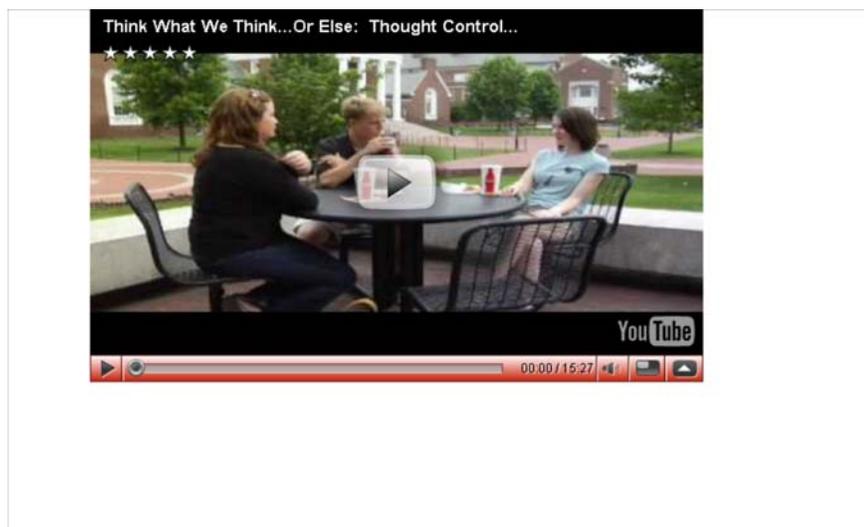
Let's take two examples.

First, watch this video. It involves my organization's ([the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\)](#)) defense of former Valdosta State University student Hayden Barnes. Barnes is not just a student - he's a decorated Emergency Medical Technician. In other words, he's a "white hat." But when Hayden protested the imminent construction of a \$30 million parking garage on campus for environmental reasons, this is what happened:



Everyone seems to "get" this case. It's easy to see why it is outrageous, and the patent absurdity of quarantining free speech to a single stage for two hours a day is readily apparent. That's a good thing. If folks didn't get the problem with Hayden's treatment, I would be seriously worried for the Republic.

But take a look at this video:



As the video makes clear, the issue here was the violation of freedom of conscience promulgated by the shockingly unconstitutional program (actually called a "treatment" in their own materials) imposed upon all 7,000 students in the University of Delaware dormitories. The program's many objectionable aspects include compelled speech, invasion of privacy, a speech code, mandatory pseudo-psychological counseling, and mandatory activities designed to out and ostracize people with the "wrong" political points of view. You can read even more about the University of Delaware's stunning Residence Life program in my colleague Adam Kissel's article "[Please Report to Your Resident Assistant to Discuss Your Sexual Identity--It's Mandatory!](#)," which won first prize this year from the Education Writers Association in the "Magazines" category.

Disappointingly, when FIRE brought this crazy program to the world's attention, some people scrambled to defend it, dismiss it, or pretend it was some other kind of program entirely. It was amazing--and depressing--to watch. The arguments (at least the ones worth repeating) were along the lines of *But it was implemented with noble intentions!*

This is something that I think people rarely understand when it comes to invasions of basic rights, particularly censorship: it's almost always done by someone who thinks they are, to a greater or lesser degree, saving the world, their country, or humanity's eternal soul. The Victorians thought they were saving us from damnation, the hawks of the red scares thought they were saving us from revolution and then, later, nuclear annihilation, and even the [Senators who investigated the comic book industry in the 1950s](#) thought they were saving the psyches of a whole generation. Indeed, it seems that someone in every generation of Americans comes up with their own argument or cause that they believe is so important that the Bill of Rights should not stand in its way. Fortunately, our history has shown the wisdom of not giving in to those impulses.

Attempts to achieve liberal ends by illiberal means often do--and, indeed, should--meet with failure. Far from encouraging tolerance, as was presumably the intent, the program at the University of Delaware engendered resistance, resentment and distrust. But even if the program was "successful" in some way, it still would have been hostile to the basic moral ground rules of our society: you can disagree, you can argue, but you cannot coercively use power to make your fellow citizens adopt your worldview.

This should be obvious, but in the culture wars many of us tend to break down the world to an "us versus them" dichotomy, with anything used to attack "them" being, at the very least, "understandable." I spoke at the University of Delaware shortly after the school abandoned this invasive program and some resident assistants were absolutely furious, despite my attempts to explain that nobody should want to live in a country where agents of the state have the power to quiz you on sexual identity and practices or political beliefs with the goal of browbeating you into changing them. I tried to explain that just a few decades ago, such a program would doubtless have been used to rout out suspected homosexuals and communists. But having once again given in to the passions ignited by the culture wars, those who truly believed in this program wanted to hear none of it. That is why you can rest assured that this is not the last time we will see resident life officials taking it upon themselves to turn the dormitories into reeducation centers.

I have much more to say from my peculiar vantage point for the culture wars, but I will save that for future posts.

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