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DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

S.F. State -- Hecklers' paradise

Debra J. Saunders

Thursday, February 8, 2007

WHAT IS San Francisco State University teaching that makes student leaders think that if they don't like what other students say, they can use student organizations to stifle those with dissenting views? Do they even know about the First Amendment?

This story starts with an "anti-terrorism rally" held last October on campus by the College Republicans. To emphasize their point, students stomped on Hezbollah and Hamas flags. According to the college paper, the Golden Gate (X)Press, members of Students Against War and the International Socialist Organization showed up to call the Republicans "racists," while the president of the General Union of Palestinian Students accused the Repubs of spreading false information about Muslims.

In November, the Associated Students board passed a unanimous resolution, which the (X)Press reported, denounced the California Republicans for "hateful religious intolerance" and criticized those who "pre-meditated the stomping of the flags knowing it would offend some people and possibly incite violence."

Now you know that there are students who are opposed to desecrating flags on campus -- that is, if the flags represent terrorist organizations.

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But wait -- there's more. A student filed a complaint with the Office of Student Programs and Leadership Development. OSPLD Director Joey Greenwell wrote to the College Republicans informing them that his office had completed an investigation of the complaint and forwarded the report to the Student Organization Hearing Panel, which will adjudicate the charge. At issue is the charge that College Republicans had walked on "a banner with the world 'Allah' written in Arabic script" -- it turns out Allah's name is incorporated into Hamas and Hezbollah flags -- and "allegations of attempts to incite violence and create a hostile environment," as well as "actions of incivility."

At an unnamed date, the student panel could decide to issue a warning to, suspend or expel the GOP club from campus.

Maybe SFSU should just put up a sign that reads: Conservatives need not apply.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group that stands up for free speech on campus, has taken up the College Republicans' cause. FIRE sent a letter to SFSU President Robert Corrigan that urged him to "spare SFSU the embarrassment of fighting against the Bill of Rights." The letter noted, "Burning an American flag as part of a political protest is expression protected by the First Amendment." And: "Speech does not constitute incitement if a speaker's words result in violence because people despise what the speaker said and wish to silence him or her.

"By punishing students on the basis of how harshly, violently or unreasonably others might react to their words," the letter argued, "SFSU would create an incentive for those who disagree to react violently, conferring a 'heckler's veto' on speech to the least tolerant members of the community."

The university's response? Spokesperson Ellen Griffin told me, "The university stands behind this process."

And: "I don't believe the complaint is about the desecration of the flag. I believe that the complaint is the desecration of Allah."

To which FIRE Vice President Robert Shibley responded, "It really doesn't make any difference whether it's the flag or a religious figure."

If the College Republicans had denigrated Allah, I would defend their right to do so, while noting I have no use for the gratuitous Islam-bashing endemic in certain circles.

But it is not the students' fault that Allah is on the Hamas and Hezbollah flags -- in a language they don't read.

Besides, every freshman should know that students have a right to say what they will about any religion, while believers enjoy the right to talk back.

"I'm confident that in the end of the day, the Constitution will vindicate us," SFSU junior Leigh Wolf of the College Republicans told me. Wolf is well aware of the double-standard on campus: Left-leaning students hide behind the First Amendment while trying to silence any conservative voices that

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Yumi Wilson, who teaches journalism at SFSU and previously worked at The Chronicle, told me, "My belief is that people should be able to have the freedom of expression, whether it is popular or not. That's what makes my country different from other countries." After all, she added, "If I don't like them, I can walk away."

As for the students who want to punish the College Repubs, they might want to consider how their actions reflect on SFSU. A university is supposed to be a place of learning and a forum made more vibrant by the free exchange of ideas, but this exercise makes SFSU look like a playground where bullies rule.

E-mail: dsaunders@sfchronicle.com.

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