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Today's News

Tuesday, March 27, 2001

U. of Alaska President Calls for Unambiguous Defense of Free Speech

 By [SCOTT SMALLWOOD](#)

The president of the University of Alaska has issued a strongly worded memorandum defending free speech and urging administrators to be unambiguous when protecting that right for faculty members, students, and employees. He acted, in part, because officials at the university's Anchorage campus responded to protests over a professor's poem by saying they were investigating the matter.

In the memorandum to the university's three chancellors, President Mark R. Hamilton specifically mentioned the case of Linda McCarriston, a creative-writing professor at the Anchorage campus, who has been at the center of a controversy since late last year. Her poem "[Indian Girls](#)" describes child sexual abuse; some at the university characterized the poem as racist hate speech.

Protesters wrote to Ms. McCarriston's department chairman, Ronald Spatz, demanding an apology. Mr. Spatz responded by telling them that he had forwarded the messages to Associate Dean Kerry Feldman, "the person in charge of resolving such matters." And Chancellor Edward Lee Gorsuch wrote an e-mail message to the protest leader saying that Mr. Feldman "is now actively dealing with the issues and events involved and is working toward a positive and appropriate result." Mr. Gorsuch also wrote, "It is the university's obligation to protect the rights of free speech and artistic license of both faculty and students, while at the same time fostering respect for the effects exercising such speech and license may have upon the

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values and rights of others."

But Mr. Hamilton said administrators needed to more clearly defend free speech: "Attempts to assuage anger or to demonstrate concern by qualifying our support for free speech serve to cloud what must be a clear message," he wrote in his memorandum to the chancellors. "Noting that, for example, 'The university supports the right to free speech, but we intend to check into this matter,' or 'The university supports the right of free speech, but I have asked Dean X or Provost Y to investigate the circumstances,' is unacceptable. There is nothing to 'check into,' nothing 'to investigate.' "

In a telephone interview Monday, Mr. Hamilton was even more direct about protecting free speech. "As soon as you [place a] caveat on it, you curtail it. And then you're going straight to hell," he said. Coincidentally, Mr. Hamilton, who is also a poet, had a poem in the same issue of the journal *Ice Floe* that carried Ms. McCarriston's controversial work.

Ms. McCarriston, who described the recent months as "harrowing," said she was relieved by the president's forceful defense. "I felt like I was hung out to dry" by administrators on her campus, she said.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group that opposes political correctness, had championed Ms. McCarriston's cause in a letter to the president, urging him to publicly acknowledge her right to free speech. The group noted that the case was "especially indecent" in a creative-writing program. "Basically, they started an investigation into a professor because of a poem," said Thor L. Halvorssen, the group's executive director.

Mr. Gorsuch was unavailable to comment on Monday, and attempts to reach Mr. Feldman and Mr. Spatz were unsuccessful.

Indian Girls

By Linda McCarriston

students in Russia

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I.

They come down all the ways
waterways or over snow and
frozen river, or come down
roads in pickups, getting
away, getting to town.
Many clans, tribes,
the Snail, the Raven,
many complexions, the thick
black hair. They learn
they are not my sisters
for I am white
though I would tell them -- have --
that my road into
this town, too, was long
and bitter and began
breathlessly, silently,
under a chief still
called wise one.

II.

Out in the low and
wind-shriven villages
winter is warming its
hands on the flat roofs.
Women are making
fire inside, and food, and
mukluks for the babies.
Women are making
light, trying, trying
to shine it over the
whole house, even
to the dark rooms of
cold, where savage
rights of the old
body over the
young, the great
body over the small

are preserved
as the oldest charter.

III.

They swagger out of the
Avenue Bar at midnight with
some tonight's Honey
laughter that's a dare to
make them scared of
you or any buddy. They
wear wallets on chains
and cowboy boots worn to
the cardboard heels
and their hair wants
washing. A few still
young -- too ripe too
early -- figure even
this picking is better
than being handed
over without so
much as beer. Who
might any of them
have become
in even the least
of the villages
had Christ not
come with his cross
and bottle
of vodka, his father's
god-awful rights
to
the daughter,
the sister,
the son?

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