

SATURDAY
NOVEMBER 30
2002

WORLDNETDAILY COMMENTARY

On-color jokes

Posted: November 30, 2002
1:00 a.m. Eastern

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Humor has long been used as a powerful tool to get a message across. And racial humor, when used appropriately, has its own unique role in American culture and the ever-evolving state of race relations.

Consider the film "Undercover Brother" (2002), the adept, comedic Malcolm Lee farce (described by one reviewer as the black man's answer to Austin Powers) that uses biting humor to tackle racial stereotypes head-on. As a senior writer for Salon.com remarked about "Undercover Brother":

It's the kind of racial humor (not to be confused with racist humor) that completely ignores race divisions, leaving no group unskewered. This is a movie that explodes the racist shorthand that we see everyday in a world where well-meaning liberals and closet bigots alike sometimes find themselves bumbling their way through the forest of racial awareness.

However, while many moviegoers found the film's extremist caricature of uptight whites and stereotypical blacks entertaining, university officials at campuses across the country are showing zero tolerance for any

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kind of student speech or expression that might be construed as offensive or inappropriate racial humor.

For example, when three white students tried for their own laughs by dressing up as African Americans (one as Uncle Sam in blackface, the other two as tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams) for a fraternity costume party, few administrators at the University of Virginia were amused.

The public reaction has run the gamut from amusement at a sophomoric attempt at humor, to a laissez-faire "boys will be boys" attitude, to mild discomfort at white students having acted in such a politically incorrect fashion, to outrage at what some consider to be blatant racism.

Far from being an isolated incident, the flare-up at UVA over the blackface costumes follows a string of blackface controversies at college fraternities elsewhere in the country. For example, two fraternities at Auburn University in Alabama were suspended after students attended a Halloween party dressed in blackface, do-rags and Afro wigs; at another party, one fraternity member came dressed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and another came as a black man with a noose around his neck. After ruling that the school had violated the students' right to free speech, however, a circuit court judge lifted the suspensions.

In another incident, the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity at the University of Louisville in Kentucky was tried by a school hearing panel and found guilty of conduct that "seriously alarms, intimidates or harasses others and serves no legitimate purpose" after several of its members wore black face paint to dress as characters such as Snoop Dogg and the film character Shaft at an off-campus Halloween party. Another fraternity member, an African American, wore a white sheet and came in a Ku Klux Klan costume, which he later burned at the party.

The University of Tennessee suspended the Kappa Sigma fraternity after complaints arose over several students who wore black paint on their faces, dressing

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as the Jackson Five for an "air guitar" competition at a campus party; another student attended as Louis Armstrong.

One member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon at Syracuse University faced disciplinary charges of harassment and disorderly conduct after attending graduation costume parties at several local bars dressed as golf celebrity Tiger Woods.

The University of Mississippi suspended the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity after a Halloween party where a student who was dressed in a police uniform pointed a toy gun at another member who had painted his face black and was wearing overalls and a straw hat.

And in a seminal case involving fraternity members at George Mason University in Virginia, a federal court of appeals ruled that the Sigma Chi fraternity had the freedom to exercise its First Amendment rights after school officials suspended the fraternity for holding an "ugly woman contest." In the competition, individuals dressed "as caricatures of different types of women, including one member dressed as an offensive caricature of a black woman."

In debating how best to deal with these kinds of incidents, university officials have demanded "sensitivity training," a form of coerced deprogramming that seems to run counter to the dogma of tolerance and diversity espoused by the academic community.

But no matter how many students get suspended for offensive speech or to what extent America's cultural history gets rewritten and revised, it won't make the real problem of race relations go away; it will just send it underground. Indeed, such censorship creates a pressure-cooker situation. And the more you deny the pressure an outlet, an escape valve, the more it builds under the surface, until it turns into a ticking time bomb. Ignorance and racism don't disappear in the face of social taboos against expression – they simply go underground and fester like a sore.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education adroitly sums up the issue: "Friends of liberty often find expressive acts – across the full spectrum of politics and beliefs – outrageous or in bad taste, but they understand that free people do not abandon the Constitution or freedom of expression when faced with the bigot, provocateur, or satirist."

The truth is that these students and fraternities have a First Amendment right to express themselves, no matter how tasteless or bigoted that speech might be. And while I hope that we can someday realize Martin Luther King's dream of blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics joining hands and singing the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" until that time, we must work to educate, not indoctrinate, and keep our democracy intact.

Constitutional attorney and author [John W. Whitehead](#) is founder and president of [The Rutherford Institute](#).



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