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Halvorssen Fights the PC Fire With FIRE

By Stephen Goode

Fourteen months ago the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) opened its offices in a building opposite Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It's a fitting site for an organization whose watchword is liberty and which monitors violations of First Amendment free-speech rights on campuses all across America.

FIRE was started after the enormous positive response to The Shadow University [see "Those PC Clowns," Nov. 16, 1998], a book by Alan Kors, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania and longtime outspoken foe of the politically correct, and attorney Harvey Silverglate, his closest friend since their student days at Princeton. Kors and Silverglate subtitled their book The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses. Many regard it as the best work ever on the ravages wrought by political correctness and multiculturalism at U.S. colleges and universities.

Insight interviewed Thor L. Halvorssen, FIRE's irrepressible executive director and a former student of Kors, in his office by Independence Square. FIRE started with a staff of two, but now employs eight full time. Still very young, it's nonetheless taken on an impressive list of giants, including Columbia University with its draconian sexual-harassment code (an ongoing case) and Brandeis University (on behalf of a student FIRE and many others believed had been denied due process in a sexual-harassment case). Its also has involved itself in the cause of Christians at Tufts University (where the 70-member Christian Fellowship was banned after it refused to allow a homosexual to play a leadership role in the group). Tufts, thanks to FIRE, rescinded the ban and now the Christian group is thriving on the campus.

Anywhere free speech is challenged on campus, FIRE may take up the cause. It makes for a busy life at FIRE offices since speech codes and the politically correct remain rife on America's campuses these days. Halvorssen tells Insight that FIRE's ultimate goal is to be successful enough that the group "extinguishes itself" because it has no more wrongs to right. At present, though, that's not the case and FIRE plans an expansion of its current office space to acquire sufficient room to deal

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INSIGHT: How did you come up with the name FIRE?

THOR L. HALVORSSEN: We're fond of saying, "Sunlight is the best disinfectant," meaning let's be open about what really happens on campuses. But SUNLIGHT sounds like the Save the Children Fund, a bit too nice. We thought FIRE AND BRIMSTONE, but that was too long, and maybe we couldn't come up with a word for every letter in the acronym?

FIRE was good. When we call up on the phone, it seems almost to put fear into the [college and university] administrations we are trying to change.

INSIGHT: So what ignites FIRE's interest?

TLH: FIRE focuses on three topics, mainly. The first is speech codes, with a national rollback effort, the first part of which is a national database on speech codes. Every school in the country will be in the database. The goal is to have a Website where you can go and plug in the name of the school and know exactly what its speech code says. We've already purchased speechcode.org.

Say you go and punch in for Regent University. Is there a speech code? Yes. But that university lets you know up front and ahead that it has certain views guided by religion and here is what it expects of students. You go to a place like Yale and it says, "We love everyone and we are committed to free speech." And yet there are codes.

By focusing on speech codes, we're looking to change the discussion about campus rankings and to change the minds of parents and students about where they want to go.

Our second big issue is "thought reform," which they call orientation and diversity training. In 1980, 2 percent of schools in the United States had freshman orientation that had a training component about race or sexuality. Today it's 85 percent of colleges. They're tendentious: "Thought Reform 101."

The third issue we focus on is due process, very nonpartisan, when students aren't given the rights to defend themselves that otherwise are open to all Americans. We get support from across the board on that one.

INSIGHT: Part of FIRE's work is to provide campus speakers about its mission, isn't it?

TLH: Last year we spoke at about 60 different colleges in debates and discussions. It's another way of identifying new cases and making a really big change because some of the students start paying attention to what's been going on and suddenly something happens. They create a committee on campus and go to work to roll back PC abuse of free speech.

We've had situations where with one appearance on campus we've

started a little wave. Otherwise, people who think independently of the PC template feel abandoned and alone on campuses. If you let them know that what they're thinking and doing is morally right, they will respond.

Christian and conservative students grow up with an understanding of order and authority so, when they're placed in the hands of a university, they typically follow the rules and do what an administrator tells them. But all it takes is one student who stands up and says this is not right. When they do that, the administration almost always crumbles. A student who is informed of his rights and willing to stand up for them is the biggest threat to bullies at any university.

INSIGHT: FIRE goes after both private and public colleges and universities, doesn't it?

TLH: Conservatives and libertarians involved with FIRE sometimes express discomfort that we also are challenging private schools. But most of these private schools advertise themselves as wonderful places to go for college because they have created a learning environment where diversity really matters. Of course they never mean real diversity. Certainly, they never mean they will tolerate religious diversity. The fact is that if you advertise your school as offering a liberal-arts education and you advertise that you will treat all students equally, then, if you don't, that's false advertising.

They could do what they should do, which is to change all their admissions material and all of their brochures to read: "We believe that all students should be treated equally - except, of course, evangelical and other Christians who are politically incorrect. We will treat them unequally and not allow any of them to pray on this campus." If the colleges and universities have the guts to do that, we have no beef with them.

INSIGHT: Sometimes you publicize the cases you're involved with; most of the time you don't. How do you decide to approach the cases that come your way?

TLH: Sometimes publicity is important if the university is unwilling to bend, or if it's unwilling to listen to a reasoned and informed argument, unwilling to step back and see the error of its ways. If we have permission [of those involved], we will take a case public to make an example.

First, we have to give the university the opportunity to do the right thing. We want to be known as an organization with which they can work. It really doesn't help if all you do is sit back and point at what's wrong at a university.

We will take things as far as necessary because we believe in what we do. We've had situations where the university acts very quickly. They either do a Nexis or a Web search and discover that we have been very successful in these cases.

INSIGHT: Do you have a good example of how FIRE has been able to help?

TLH: Yes, at a well-known school. [At Halvorssen's request, Insight has disguised references to the actual college.] A black, Pentecostal student in the divinity school of this institution held a prayer service at an off-campus church. During his prayer service he said, "I think it's important that we pray for homosexual students."

It was off campus, a place with no affiliation at all with the school, but someone who heard this prayer reported it to school authorities. A couple of days later, the dean of students at the divinity school called the student in, sat him down, brought out the student handbook, turned to the speech-code section and started reading from it. Without having even a sham of a hearing [about the student's guilt], the dean said, "In your prayer, you violated the rule against sexual harassment and I'm putting a letter in your file letting it be known that you are a sexual harasser. If you ever pray like that again, I'm going to bring you up on formal charges with notations on your transcript."

This student read about FIRE in a newspaper, called us and said: "Can you please help me?" It was an extraordinary case and I thought, "Do they really want to find him guilty of sexual harassment because of something between God and him?"

The time the school's administrators received FIRE's letter, decided what to do and got back to us by telephone took two hours. Their message was, "We want to solve this right away. What can we do?"

So we basically told them this: "First, the letter is to be removed from his file." They said we have a policy of no destruction of documents so we can't do that. So we said, "Okay, you can keep a copy of the letter as long as you add a second letter saying that everything in that first letter is false, that praying to God is not sexual harassment according to your school's student code and that this student is in good standing. That letter is to be attached to the other one, sealed and kept in the general-counsel's office. It can only be opened with permission of both the general counsel and the student involved."

INSIGHT: That seems thorough enough. And, of course, you have had other victories. For instance, Tufts University rather quickly welcomed back the Christian Fellowship as soon as FIRE got involved.

TLH: The public-relations department at Tufts woke up one morning to a PR nightmare. They had no idea it was coming as FIRE did it over a long weekend. But Tufts University quickly went from one extreme to the other, so that Christian Fellowship is alive and thriving on that campus. The irony, of course, is that some of these student groups we represent really are the most diverse groups on campus.

INSIGHT: It's not just conservatives and Christians that FIRE's concerned about, is it?

TLH: Our appeals cross the political spectrum. A respectable chunk of our funding comes from liberals who are very embarrassed about what's been happening on the campuses and who want to change a bad situation.

Most people think that it's wrong that students are forced to mouth loyalty oaths and forced to endure horrendous diversity training in which their parents, their religion and their roots are talked about as being evil and something they must overcome if they're going to be acceptable human beings.

As for the speech codes, it's very difficult to find someone who cannot understand that "offensive" jokes are something that you simply cannot legislate against. Protection against comments that someone might find offensive also is not something you can legislate.

FIRE would represent any student group that is treated unequally. If we had a homosexual-student group, for example, or a student who said something truly offensive, or a radical Malcolm X group were denied funding because of its views, we would defend them. Of course, find me a case like that and I'll find you the Easter bunny. It does not happen.

INSIGHT: The Monterey Peninsula College case was one in which you were involved.

TLH: At Monterey Peninsula College in California, Requirement 14 obligated all professors to address diversity and multiculturalism in their courses. If a public college demanded that all courses include patriotism or spirituality, the cry of tyranny would be heard across the land. But Monterey Peninsula College got by with this and might still be getting by with it except for English professor David Clemens. He contacted FIRE, which mounted a campaign that included letters to trustees and the administration.

All it took was one professor and a little sunlight and the administration's requirement came crashing down under the pressure. The publicity that ensued led a professor at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania to alert us to a similar situation - except there it's a broader requirement of multiculturalism and diversity. This extends to hiring decisions and even is in the employment forms. We have started a campaign there and are awaiting an official response.

INSIGHT: Re-education is one of the most pernicious programs on campuses these days, isn't it?

TLH: Parents should beware whenever students are put in the hands of someone called a trainer or a facilitator. Those are code words for people who mean to "re-educate" students - a notion right out of Soviet psychology or Mao-think. They're out to re-educate students on the basis of political correctness. They teach minorities that they are totally helpless victims, and they teach whites that they are guilty of oppressing others. They teach students that nothing their parents taught them is right.

INSIGHT: Is political correctness on the decline?

TLH: It really frustrates me when opinion columnists - and even a lot of conservatives - write about how the cultural war is being fought and won on the campuses and that political correctness is a thing of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is worse now than it ever has been. It's extraordinary how bigoted and intolerant the PC people are on

campuses these days.

We'll probably get close to 1,000 individual cases this year and seek to resolve between 300 and 600. Those numbers confirm that some things are seriously wrong on campuses. Every day we get dozens of letters and e-mails detailing new cases, asking for help and urging that we keep doing what we do.

*****PERSONAL BIO*****

CURRENTLY: Executive director, Foundation for Individual Rights (FIRE), Philadelphia.

BORN: March 9, 1974, Caracas, Venezuela.

EDUCATION: University of Pennsylvania, B.A. and M.A., joint program in history and political science.

FAVORITE READING: Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Just finished Louis de Berniere's Captain Corelli's Mandolin.

FAVORITE FILM: Cinema Paradiso.

HOBBY: Recently returned to sculpting in clay, after dropping it a decade ago when he was 16 years old.

FAVORITE CITY: Philadelphia.

OBSERVATION: "The people under attack on college campuses today are Christians and conservatives. They undergo the most extraordinary insults, which is fair because of our free-speech laws. But they are treated unequally when they respond, which isn't fair."

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