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Graduation Speech Riles Sacramento

■ Discourse: Remarks at Cal State about terrorism and civil rights were cut short by boos. Some suspect growing intolerance for divergent views.

By GEOFFREY MOHAN, TIMES STAFF WRITER

SACRAMENTO -- The grumbling started when speaker Janis Besler Heaphy strayed from the safe format of commencement cliches and began juggling terrorism with civil rights. Within minutes, the publisher and president of the Sacramento Bee was booed into silence by the thousands who packed the Arco sports arena to see their sons and daughters graduate.

That rough reception at the Cal State Sacramento ceremony Saturday, and the subsequent attention it has drawn, have rankled students, faculty and academic observers nationwide. Many interpret it as a troubling example of rising intolerance for public discourse that questions the nation's response to the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

"This is a sad example of a heckling veto," said Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has defended 1st Amendment rights for academic speakers. In her speech, Heaphy lauded a newly recovered sense of patriotism nationwide but noted that the practices of racial profiling, secret military tribunals and government vetting of videotapes of accused terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden raise constitutional issues.

"No one argues the validity and need for both retaliation and security," Heaphy told the graduates and their relatives. "But to what lengths are we willing to go to achieve them? Specifically, to what degree are we willing to compromise our civil liberties in the name of security?"

Those who jeered or quietly agreed with the hecklers say the crowd simply wanted to honor the graduates and forget about the tragedy and the issues it provoked.

"I feel it was appropriate to bring up something about Sept. 11, but as far as doing a nine- to 10-minute speech about it [is concerned], that was inappropriate," said Britt Randall, a Sacramento alumna who attended to watch a friend graduate.

Randall, who graduated in May with a government and communications degree, said she was shocked and embarrassed at the response but didn't like the speech, either. "You kind of wondered when it would get to the part about graduation," she said. "We've been hearing about Sept. 11 for four or five months, and it's on people's minds, but they're trying to move past it."

Indeed, despite some expressions of support for Heaphy in a flood of letters and e-mails to the Sacramento Bee, most of the missives denounced the speech as inflammatory, off-topic and inappropriate to the venue.

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Others lambasted Heaphy and the paper for a perceived liberal bias.

Local conservative talk radio had a field day excoriating Heaphy and the Bee on the same charges.

Acquaintances say Heaphy, a former senior vice president of advertising for The Times, was mortified at the speech's reception. Except for a written response and publication of her full speech in the Bee, she has been silent.

"Free speech in America involves saying what you believe," Heaphy said in the written remark. "That's what I set out to do at the graduation and why we published those remarks in full in the Sacramento Bee. My speech speaks for itself. As I have said, nothing that happened Saturday changes my mind about the importance of raising these issues or continuing to support those values and to call for vigilance in defense of liberty."

Heaphy's text shows she intended to make the same point in her speech, imploring students: "Be inquisitive. Remember, asking questions about government policies isn't disloyal. It's your duty."

By then, despite an attempt by University President Donald Gerth to quiet the boos and synchronized clapping from the galleries, Heaphy had chosen to sit down.

Gerth, along with several students and faculty members who were in the arena, which holds about 18,000 people, says the disturbance came almost exclusively from the upper sections reserved for family members. That, said Gerth and others, showed the student body to be generally tolerant.

As for the rest, "I wouldn't use the word intolerant," Gerth said Wednesday. "We're at a point in history where a lot of people aren't willing to listen to anything critical to the way actions on terrorism are being carried out. In one sense, that's not surprising."

Academic and civil liberties groups have chronicled backlashes against such speech at campuses ranging from the City University of New York to Johns Hopkins and the University of New Mexico. The troubling element, said Ruth Flower, spokeswoman for the American Assn. of University Professors, is that the bullying or censorship is coming not from official academia but from the public.

For example, the New York university's teach-in on terrorism was attacked by the public after a New York Post account called it a "blame-America" forum, she noted. Calls to fire the professors quickly ensued.

The Sacramento audience's unwillingness to hear Heaphy out "shows a sense of what kind of tolerance we have as a country for different ideas," Flower said. "It's disappointing to see there are some number of people who do not want to hear ideas other than the ones they've already formed."

Gerth insisted that his campus will remain receptive to a wide array of opinions. Beyond a few vulgar anti-Muslim graffiti, he said, the campus has had no visible controversy since the terror attacks.

"I think to generalize about the campus on this is to head in exactly the wrong direction," he said. "I think it is probably inaccurate to characterize this incident as having something to do with the climate and tone of campuses."

Still, said Halvorssen, "this is a disgraceful example of the mentality that universities have been promoting for years, which is, when something offends you, you silence it."

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