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Do College Republicans Hate Allah?

Or are sensitivity mavens at San Francisco State a little too zealous?

Cathy Young | April 9, 2007

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The College Republicans at San Francisco State University recently found themselves under investigation for the offenses of flag desecration and blasphemy. While the disciplinary proceedings ended late last month with a decision not to punish the student group, the investigation itself points to a troubling trend.

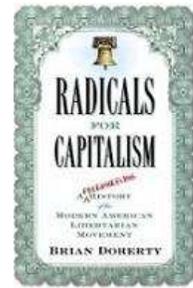
The alleged blasphemy was directed at Islam, and the desecrated flag contained no stars or stripes. At a small anti-terrorism rally in October 2006, several members of the College Republicans stomped on pieces of paper they had painted to look like flags of the radical Islamic organizations Hezbollah and Hamas, copying the designs from images on the Internet. A few days later, a Muslim student filed a complaint, on the grounds that the Arabic script on the Hezbollah and Hamas flags contained the word "Allah." The university pressed charges, accusing the blasphemers of "incivility" and creating "a hostile environment."

In the end, the Student Organization Hearing Panel unanimously ruled that the students should be cleared of all charges. Yet as the pro-free-expression Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which repeatedly urged SFSU president Robert Corrigan to drop the case, **has pointed out**, this was hardly a glorious triumph for free speech. The students were dragged through an investigation for engaging in political expression at a public university. As UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh pointed out on his blog, "If SFSU responded to an allegation that some group had insulted the President, or opposed the war, or criticized Christianity, by putting them through an extended investigation and a hearing, I take it we'd be quite troubled even if ultimately SFSU exonerated the students."

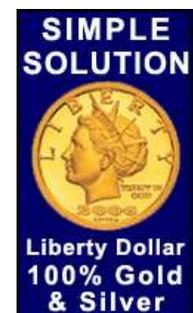
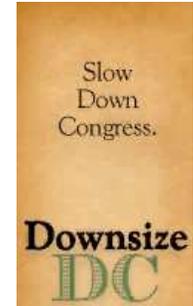
Curiously, some have defended the College Republicans on the grounds that they didn't know they were blaspheming. In a March 8 [article at National Review Online](#), *Washington Times* editorial writer Brendan Conway noted (from an account by Leigh Wolf of the SFSU College Republicans) that when a student of Middle Eastern background approached the demonstrators and told them that flags contained the name of Allah, they invited him to cross out the name with a magic marker. Conway conceded that "the objection to the trampling of the name of Allah is reasonable" and that "done willfully, it would be an act of religious intolerance." However, he continued, "San Francisco State is trying to hold students responsible for an offense which they didn't know they had committed...in the course of exercising a highly protected act of political speech."

This is a strange defense. Would the College Republicans' speech have become less constitutionally protected if they *had* known that the flags contained Allah's name? Perhaps Muslims ought to have a beef with terrorists who put Allah's name on their flags, not with people who stomp on those flags. (One unnoticed irony is that a Ku Klux Klan flag that was given similar treatment at the rally contained an image of the cross.)

This isn't the first time the authorities have rushed to protect Muslims from what alleged blasphemy. Last year the controversial Mohammed cartoons published in a Danish newspaper **were censored at several American colleges**. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the publication of some of the cartoons in the student paper *The Daily Illini* led to an apology and the dismissal of two student editors. New York University told the organizers of a panel discussion on the cartoon controversy that if they displayed the cartoons, they had to severely limit attendance by off-campus guests. The event ended up featuring easels with blank panels.



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The SFSU flag-stomping case continues this trend. It also seems to bear out the charges of double standards. Four years ago, the university took no action when **the campus was plastered with posters** that showed soup cans with pictures of dead babies and labels reading, "canned Palestinian children meat, slaughtered according to Jewish rites under American license."

It's hard to tell whether the selective deference to Muslim sensibilities stems from a politically correct regard for a minority group or from fear of violent protests. Just last month, in **another FIRE-championed case**, Michigan State University tried to hold the campus chapter of Young Americans for Freedom responsible for extra security costs for screening the documentary *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West*. (The administration eventually relented under pressure.) Whatever the motive, the push to censor blasphemy on campus in guise of "tolerance" is extremely bad policy. It is bad because it tramples on speech and expression, bad because it promotes a religious double standard, and bad because it is an invitation for other religious groups to seek the same protections. When Muslims claim the "right" to be free from insults to their faith, Christian conservatives won't be far behind.

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