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The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution
 Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. [ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT >](#)

News Story

University won't punish College Republicans for anti-terror rally

By Melanie Bengtson

First Amendment Center Online intern
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San Francisco State University's College Republicans will not face sanctions after hosting a rally during which students stepped on pieces of paper they had painted to resemble the Hezbollah and Hamas flags. The anti-terrorism demonstration on Oct. 17, 2006, prompted another student to file a complaint because the flags contain the Arabic word for "Allah."

The complaint alleged that the Republicans had attempted to "incite violence and create a hostile environment." SFSU administrators held a hearing to evaluate the charges, which could have resulted in sanctions to force the group to apologize or even remove their organization from campus. The hearing panel announced on March 19 that there would be no sanctions against the organization.

"We were actually very surprised," said Leigh Wolf, president of the SFSU College Republicans. "They had dragged it out for so long. We were under the impression that they fully intended to drop sanctions on us."

Associated Students, the student government of SFSU, unanimously passed a resolution condemning the College Republicans on Nov. 15. That resolution prompted the Office of Student Programs and Leadership Development to investigate the incident. That investigation led to a hearing before the Student Organization Hearing Panel, which had the power to punish the group.

Samantha Harris, the director of legal and public advocacy for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said, "This was really one of the most egregious free speech violations we've seen."

The situation drew the attention of national media and interest groups. FIRE and the American Civil Liberties Union petitioned the school's administration on behalf of the College Republicans and their constitutional right to free expression.

According to Wolf, SFSU has failed to protect free speech in the past. In 2004, while celebrating the reelection of George W. Bush, the College Republicans were surrounded by students who tried to quiet them by throwing soda cans and other objects at them. Then charges were filed against the College Republicans, though they were later dropped.

"It's the epitome of 'free speech if it is our speech'," said Wolf.

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The Student Organization Hearing Panel announced on March 19 that no punishment would be imposed on the College Republicans. Associated Students also voted unanimously to recall their resolution condemning the organization.

“Students and faculty who find themselves facing censorship really need to stand up for their rights on principle. As much work as FIRE put in the case, we couldn’t have done it without the students ... they stood up for what they knew was right and they stood up for the First Amendment,” said Harris.

Asked if the College Republicans intended to file a lawsuit against the university, Wolf said, “All options are on the table at this point.”

Calling the university’s actions against the First Amendment an “embarrassment,” Wolf said, “It’s the very essence of our country ... the ability to disagree and still live in a civil society where everyone still functions even if they disagree with each other.”

Melanie Bengtson is an intern at the First Amendment Center and a sophomore studying developmental politics at Belmont University.

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