

Heckler's Veto

Nat Hentoff on the Heckler's Veto

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In reporting on incidents of college students' theft and burning of conservative campus newspapers, and the shouting down of visiting speakers, I have noted two deficiencies in these students' education. They scorn debate, dismissing it as a wimpish tactic. And because few of their professors ever protest their contempt for free speech, the righteous students are encouraged to continue being privileged bullyboys.

On Nov. 14, Accuracy in Academia began a conference at Columbia University on "Conservative Ideas in Higher Education." Among the evening's speakers were to be Ward Connerly, Dinesh D'Souza and columnist John Leo. Connerly, the initiator of Proposition 209 in California, has had difficulty finishing speeches at a number of universities, including the supposedly liberal Emory University in Atlanta. While in favor of affirmative action, those students oppose diversity of ideas.

Outside Columbia's faculty house, some 150 students tried to shout down Connerly and the others, focusing particularly on Connerly, whom they greeted with cries of "race traitor." The demonstration was nonviolent, and the scheduled speakers were heard over the din.

One of the demonstrators allegedly urged that the faculty house be stormed, but he failed to gather support. Nonetheless, Columbia administrators decided -- as the campus paper, the Columbia Spectator, reported -- to mandate extraordinary security requirements for the second day of the conference.

Only Columbia students and faculty were to be admitted to that session. But many of the barred participants did not have the good fortune to be affiliated with the university. They included students from other colleges who had paid a registration fee in advance.

As the Columbia Spectator pointed out, these rules resulted in an "effective ban" on having the rest of the conference on campus.

The next morning, the speakers and their audience moved to an alfresco setting -- nearby Morningside Park. There, without sound equipment, the speakers were subject to vigorous attempts to squelch them by raucous hecklers, and indeed D'Souza was not able to finish his remarks. One of the signs held aloft proclaimed: "Racists Not Allowed at Columbia."

In the days following, there was a lively exchange of articles and letters in the Columbia Spectator. Jesse Sanford, a senior studying anthropology, insisted that "it's not possible to discuss rationally matters of life, death, equality and hatred . . . the [conservative] groups' agenda exacerbates human suffering, and we therefore have an obligation to stop it by any means necessary."

Jasper Cooper, a sophomore, went to hear Ward Connerly out of curiosity, and as he entered faculty house, he was greeted by some fellow students with the taunt, "Racist go home!"

Cooper wrote, "They didn't care who I was or what my reasons for coming were. They just assumed that anyone who heard Connerly's speech supported his cause." Cooper added that Columbia should "get speakers who will challenge our beliefs and values."

According to a letter placed in all the students' mailboxes by Chris Columbo, dean of student affairs, the reason for confining the Saturday event to Columbia students was "to ensure the safety of our students."

The hecklers had indeed won. Long ago, the American Bar Association addressed the threat to free speech from rampant disrupters: "It is the duty of the officials to prevent the threatened disorder instead of timidly yielding to threats." Columbia University succumbed to what is called in law a "hecklers' veto."

In the campus newspaper, I saw no protest from faculty members against Columbia's limiting free speech. The editor of the Spectator informs me that no faculty members wrote. I called Columbia history professor Eric Foner, author of a valuable new book, "The Story of American Freedom." He had been out of town, Foner told me, but he would let me know if he found that any of his colleagues had dissented from the decision of the university -- including its president, George Rupp -- to let the hecklers triumph. Prof. Foner has yet to call me back.

A Columbia University brochure declares that the university "prides itself on being a community committed to free and open discourse and to tolerance of differing views."

When it was all over, a heckler's sign proclaimed: "ACCESS DENIED! WE WIN."

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