

October 15, 2007 — Homecoming

## Free speech rights don't end where offensiveness begins

FORUM | Selena Beckman-Harned

Free speech won a rare victory last Friday when the editor-in-chief of Colorado State University's student paper, The Rocky Mountain Collegian, was chastised but allowed to keep his job. The editor, J. David McSwane, okayed an editorial stating "Taser this, fuck Bush," which ran in a very large font in a space the size this article takes up. The story made worldwide news as those four little words outraged and infuriated. Shocking, I know — who knew that people actually read college newspapers?

The First Amendment can use all the victories it can get; things aren't going so well. At the end of September, the Senate condemned MoveOn.org for their "General Petraeus or General Betray Us" ad, and Congress seems on the verge of awarding the NSA extended wiretapping powers. At least our thoughts are still safe.

Of course, in McSwane's case, it wasn't just a matter of political views, but profanity. I support using profanity sparsely, myself — if you drop the F-bomb because the weather dropped 20 degrees, what words will you have left to use when you lose both legs thanks to gangrene? But as far as I'm concerned, there's no need to censor a newspaper intended almost entirely for college students. My undergraduate newspaper, The Daily Tar Heel, went one step further, banning one of my (brilliant) cartoons because it had two letters in it, "FU." Come on. Anyone who knows what the "f" stands for doesn't need to be protected. Furthermore, if you start orbidding the letter "f," you'll look pretty reaking oolish.

Should McSwane have written nuanced, well-thought-out political commentary rather than just slamming the president? Maybe. But if he had chosen nuanced and well-thought-out over shocking, the only ones who would have read it would



be those who agreed with him, and his editorial would have disappeared into the recycling bin forever. It certainly wouldn't have made CNN, and certainly not the UK's Guardian.

It's funny how most people are all in favor of free speech until someone mocks their beliefs. Remember when the actor who voiced the chef on South Park quit because of the episode making fun of Scientology? He didn't mind when the show mocked, hmmm, let's see, everything else. Last week, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee stood up for Rush Limbaugh's First Amendment rights when the talk show host called veterans opposed to the war "phony soldiers," even though Huckabee had condemned MoveOn.org's controversial ad only weeks before. I guess these jerkwads haven't heard Voltaire's oft-quoted comment on free speech: "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Along with the quote from Voltaire, almost every high school civics teacher cites the case of the Nazis in Skokie, Ill. A troop of Nazi party members, decked out in swastika-studded uniforms, decided to march through Skokie's Jewish neighborhoods. The Illinois Supreme Court decided that the fact that the Nazis were being assholes didn't preclude their rights of free expression, but the controversy raises an interesting problem — far more interesting than the question of whether profanity is destroying our children. Where's the line between "free speech" and "hate crime"?

The fact that the Nazis wanted to march through Jewish neighborhoods proved that they were more interested in pissing people off than making any kind of statement, but does that mean they shouldn't have been allowed to do so? If we start trying to ban free speech any place a listener would be offended, we'll be back at square one. But at the same time, my heart aches to think of the Jewish families watching the Nazis march past from behind their curtains or gay teenagers being forced to hear from their health teacher that they're going to hell. Unfortunately, jerks aren't going to stop being jerks because a law tells them to, and the best course of action may be to give people on both sides of each issue plenty of time to have their say, nuanced and well thought-out or not. Then, at the very least, no one will be able to plead ignorance.

So here's my message to those of you who think free speech has gone too far. Great! Condemn away — be glad that we have enough First Amendment rights in this country for you to do so. Take my advice and stop quoting the things that shock you so damn much. All you're doing is exacerbating the Janet Jackson boob effect — every time you show the offending quote, ad, image, or clip you're just giving your enemies free advertising. Thanks to Congress and every news outlet in existence, everybody (not just those bleeding-heart liberals) is aware of that deeply offensive MoveOn.org ad. Thanks to everyone from Fox News to The Tartan, McSwane's editorial has thousands more readers than it would have otherwise. So hey, First Amendment-haters, go right ahead telling the world what shocks you if you want — I, personally, love getting free press. But if I were you, I'd shut my mouth.

*Selena Beckman-Harned (sbeckman@) is fully in favor of free speech, but if you'd like to pay her, she accepts cash, personal checks, Visa, MasterCard, and PlaidCa\$h.*