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At Columbia, Heckler's Veto Kills Free Speech

Universities keep telling us they're committed to freedom of speech. But once the politically correct people start howling about the wrong sort of speakers, administrators usually fall in line and find a way to cancel or discourage the talks.



This happened to me Saturday at Columbia University, along with conservative author Dinesh D'Souza and six other speakers. We were invited to talk at the Faculty House by Accuracy in Academia, an offshoot of the conservative media watchdog group Accuracy in Media. We ended up off-campus, speaking to a tiny crowd on a sidewalk, surrounded by cops and protesters.

Our speeches were scheduled to follow a Friday night talk by Ward Connerly. He was the leader of the successful referendums against racial and gender preferences in California and Washington State, so the campus thought police were naturally angry. Letters to the Columbia Daily Spectator warned darkly that the "racists" were coming.

Connerly's speech and the whole two-day event had been scheduled since August, and Accuracy in Academia had paid a high fee for use of the hall. Seven hours before Connerly's speech, Columbia decided the group had to pay an extra \$3,100, immediately, for beefed-up security.

Late charges like this are a conventional way of stopping incorrect speech, but someone produced a credit card and the surprise fee was paid.

A crowd of 250 protesters showed up at Faculty House denouncing Connerly as a bigot and an Uncle Tom. One demonstrator shouted, "Let's force our way in," or words to that effect. Nobody tried, but the protester's shout became the source of a lot of official concerns about safety for the next day's speakers and their audience.

These safety concerns ended up pushing the Saturday speakers off campus.

University officials said they had no idea that Accuracy in Academia had invited college students from around the New York area. What would happen if 700 or 800 people, perhaps many of them disruptive, showed up to fill a 200-person hall? A hand-wringing session was held at the home of Columbia's president, George Rupp.

Did the university decide to move the event to a larger hall or give the speakers a bullhorn and let them speak to a standing crowd in Columbia's enormous quadrangle? No. That would have made sense. Instead, Columbia decided to cut the crowd at Faculty House down to size by banning everyone who didn't have Columbia ID.

Unsurprisingly, Accuracy in Academic's leaders said, "No thanks." It would have meant stiffing all non-Columbia invitees, perhaps two-thirds of the crowd. The leaders concluded they were being manipulated by an unprincipled administration, and so they moved the talks to a sidewalk off campus as a protest.

The demonstrators understood a form of censorship had been imposed. That's why they chanted lines that included "Ha, ha, you're outside," and carried signs that said, "Access denied — we win."

As it happens, my speech was going to be about the lack of free expression on the modern politically correct campus — how colleges use speech codes, conduct codes and sexual-harassment rules to intimidate and silence dissenters. It didn't need many changes to fit Columbia's conduct. I said that the crowd was witnessing a sophisticated version of the heckler's veto.

If I'm wrong about this, and if Columbia and its president turn out to believe in free speech after all, they can show it by making sure that Accuracy in Academia is invited back on campus, minus the rule changes, the extra fee and the heckler's veto.



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