

This Week in the News: Arizona Shooting Sparks Free Speech Debate; 'Spotlight' Report is Still Hot

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by Jordan Fischetti

The recent tragic shooting in Arizona has elicited some speech-chilling legislative proposals, as well as condemnation of "hateful political rhetoric." In response to this disregard for the First Amendment, Greg wrote in The Huffington Post about how granting the power to censor often leads those in authority to censor any criticism of themselves, pointing to the case of University of Georgia student Jacob Lovell as a perfect example. (Lovell's experiences are profiled in our newest video, "Scootergate," accompanied by Robert's blog post, which in turn was reprinted by the Student Free Press Association.)

Using the shooting as a platform to sound off on other issues, University of California, Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgeneau sent an e-mail to the Berkeley community about how "hate speech" in general, and the "racist" political climate of Arizona in particular, sparked the shooting. Adam's examination of this e-mail, demonstrating Birgeneau's complete lack of evidence connecting "hateful rhetoric" or the political environment with the shooting, as well as the constitutionally protected status of the aforementioned rhetoric, was picked up by The Huffington Post and the Student Free Press Association.

Howard Blume mentioned Adam's take on the e-mail in two articles (here and here) for the Los Angeles Times, as did Josh Keller in a column for The Chronicle of Higher Education. Also, blogger and law professor Glenn Reynolds highlighted Adam's blog post on Instapundit.com. Additionally, 2010 FIRE intern and Berkeley junior Casey Given wrote a blog post for Students for Liberty about how Birgeneau's e-mail reflects a deeper trend of blaming expressive activity for various violent acts. Casey is thankful that FIRE is there to help prevent such sentiment from turning into campus censorship. Finally, another former FIRE intern, Noah Baron, also mentioned FIRE in discussing Birgeneau's connection of the political climate to the Arizona shooting in a blog post for The Huffington Post.

In related news, Mary Beth Marklein of USA TODAY wrote an article about "threat assessment teams" at universities, highlighting Adam's disapproval over how these teams often abuse their power and censor student speech by misconstruing "innocent outbursts" as safety threats.

FIRE's annual speech code report, *Spotlight on Speech Codes 2011: The State of Free Speech On Our Nation's Campuses*, made the news for the fourth consecutive week. Writers Courtney Warner and Maria Mauriello from the school newspapers of Pennsylvania State University and the University of Chicago, respectively, wrote about their universities' respective yellow- and red-light Spotlight ratings, while Jorge Barrientos wrote about California State University-Bakersfield's yellow-light rating at

Bakersfield.com. Also, Jake Armstrong of Pasadena Weekly commented on several other California institutions' poor ratings.

The problems with the proposed "Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act" continue to draw attention as well. Citing Greg's concern that the bill will encourage even more campus censorship, Bob Ingle of the Asbury Park (N.J.) Press wrote a column about how the new legislation would not effectively combat bullying, but instead waste much-needed education funds and possibly be more harmful than beneficial.

The utility of FIRE's December national mailing to the presidents and general counsel of 296 public universities was remarked upon again this week by Mike Adams of Townhall.com, who praised FIRE's commitment to holding administrators personally liable for free speech abuses on campus if private correspondence results in no action.

Finally, Cato Institute's blog, Cato on Campus, featured a segment about the top ten summer internships in the liberty movement. Naturally, the FIRE Internship Program made the list, described as providing "a one-of-a-kind platform to learn and make a difference." So if you know of any hard-working undergraduates who are dedicated to advancing individual rights on college campuses, or are one yourself, the application deadline for the FIRE Internship Program is March 31!