

### CASE #3: CHRISTIAN BASHING?

The founding fathers enacted the Bill of Rights to protect certain rights against infringement by the government. The First Amendment enumerates freedom of speech as one of the first protected rights, and deemed it essential to the marketplace of ideas that fosters a healthy democratic process. However, even politically charged speech may at times go too far, and constitute impermissible hate speech. And that's exactly the sort of speech that supporters of George Washington University's College Republicans allege College Democrats submitted them to.<sup>1</sup>

According to the school newspaper, "A number of crosses used by the Young America's Foundation [YAF] during an anti-abortion event last week were defaced and left in [the office shared by both College Republicans and Democrats]..." Specifically, one was "draped with a condom, another featured a drawing of Jesus along with the words 'pwned' and 'lol,' and others were emblazoned with words like 'Darwin,'" among other writings.<sup>2</sup>

College Democrats took responsibility for the action, and publicly apologized for the actions of one of their members; furthermore, the student responsible, "face[d] disciplinary action under the Code of Student Conduct."<sup>3</sup> University Police took custody of the defaced property, and opened an investigation into the incident, as well. The College Republicans released a public statement condemning the acts, but their president did express appreciation at the way the College Democrats handled the situation.

A student who witnessed the defaced crosses expressed a much stronger reaction to the display, stating, "Apparently to the College Democrats, making fun of Christianity, and specifically a memorial to aborted unborn children is humor. To me, it is flagrant, disrespectful and downright disgusting." In a press release, President Steven Knapp stated, "Such acts are unacceptable and are utterly incompatible with the spirit of mutual respect that is essential to the life of an academic community. I continue to hope and expect that all our students, no matter what opinions they hold, will conduct themselves in the spirit of mutual respect that has long been a hallmark of this University." However, while this bad behavior may be offensive, the exact nature of the act remains up for debate.

Some believe that the acts were childish, boorish, or just poor judgment that justifies the normal penalties for the vandalism. Others argue that the speech goes well beyond childishness – it constitutes desecration of one group's sacred images and religious symbols – and crosses the line to constitute hate speech, which deserves a higher penalty than an average act of vandalism.

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<sup>1</sup> For images of the defaced property and , see Dollard, Pat, "Anti-Christian Hate Crime..." <http://patdollard.com/2009/01/anti-christian-hate-crime-by-college-democrats-at-george-washington-university-political-group-steals-crucifixes-deface-them-with-penises-condoms-crucified-christ-mocked-with-pwned-and-l/>, *patdollard.com* (blog), (Jan. 30, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Grossman, Nathan, "YAF crosses defaced in MC, College Democrat takes responsibility," <http://blogs.gwhatchet.com/newsroom/2009/01/29/yaf-crosses-defaced-in-mc/>, *GWHatchet.com* (blog) (Jan. 29, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Schario, Tracy, "Statement from The George Washington University Regarding the Defacing of Several Small Crosses," [http://www.gwu.edu/~media/pressrelease.cfm?ann\\_id=29986](http://www.gwu.edu/~media/pressrelease.cfm?ann_id=29986), George Washington University (press release) (Jan. 29, 2009).