



To submit a case to FIRE, click [here](#).

To contact FIRE, click [here](#).



Los Angeles Times
latimes.com



UNITED WE STAND...
SHOW YOUR RED WHITE AND BLUE
www.americanflagposters.com

[Home](#) | [Register](#) | [Home Delivery](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Archives](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Help](#)

September 30, 2001

[Talk about it](#) [E-mail story](#) [Print](#)

MARKETPLACE
CLASSIFIED

- Jobs
- Cars
- Homes
- Rentals
- Newspaper Ads

In print. Online.
Your future is here.

calendarlive
Arts & Entertainment
Movies, Music, TV, Dining

California

- The State
- Los Angeles
- Orange County
- The Valley
- Ventura County

Columns

- Steve Harvey
- Peter H. King
- Steve Lopez
- Patt Morrison
- George Skelton

Features

- Good Turns
- Inside Politics
- Behind the Wheel
- In the Classroom
- Surroundings
- On the Law
- Out There

Community Papers

- Burbank Leader
- Foothill Leader
- Glendale News-Press
- Huntington Beach Independent
- Inland Valley Times
- Daily Pilot

The World

The Nation

California

Business

Politics

Sports

Technology

Travel

Editorials, Op-Ed

Sections

RESPONSE TO TERROR

Teacher's Terrorism Remarks Stir Academic Freedom Debate

■ College: Instructor's suspension after claim that he called Muslim students 'murderers' prompts bitter arguments on campus.

By WILLIAM LOBDELL, TIMES STAFF WRITER

A laid-back community college better known for its crew teams, sailors and surfers has become a caldron of political passion in the aftermath of an intense classroom debate about Islam and terrorism.

This academic hot potato at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa has divided a political science class, opened a rift between administrators and faculty, and spilled onto the national stage, where the notion of academic freedom is being reexamined since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Administrators at the 26,000-student community college put instructor Ken Hearlson on paid leave a day after hearing from four Muslim students who alleged that their teacher called them "terrorists," "murderers" and "Nazis" during a heated class discussion. Hearlson said he was talking only about Muslims who condone terrorism, including attacks in Israel, and that he apologized twice during the 200-student "Introduction to Government" class if some believed the remarks got too personal. He also said he regretted bringing up the topic just one week after the tragedy.

College President Margaret Gratton said the veteran teacher was quickly relieved, with pay, of his teaching duties to defuse an incendiary situation and allow time for a thorough investigation.

But the move inflamed feelings already raw from the terrorist attacks.

'Go Back to Where You Came From'

At last Tuesday's class meeting--the first session since the controversial debate--a finger-pointing screaming match erupted outside the lecture hall between a handful of Muslim students and more than 60 classmates. Three campus police officers and two administrators responded.

Some students yelled, "Go back to where you came from," at the Muslim students. Another sent an e-mail to school administrators alleging that a Muslim classmate had said, "Don't hold your breath [that Hearlson's coming back]. He might not live."

The e-mail also was forwarded to Hearlson, who contacted Costa Mesa police and the FBI about possible death threats. Representatives of both agencies have interviewed him, he said.

Times Headlines

[Power Bill Impasse May Jolt Taxpayer](#)

[County Ranks Poorly in Exit Test](#)

[Some Juvenile Hall Inmates Held Beyond Release Dates](#)

[Community Colleges Fear Tough Sell on Bond Issues](#)

[Entrepreneur From Japan Shot to Death](#)

[more >](#)

SUBSCRIBE to the Los Angeles Times.
[click here](#)



Arts & Entertainment

- Books
- Columns
- Education
- Food
- Health
- Highway 1
- Magazine
- Obituaries
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Science
- So. Cal. Living
- Sunday Opinion
- Tech Times
- Times Poll
- Workplace/Jobs

Editions

- Print Edition
- National
- Wireless

Extras

- College Connection
- Sweepstakes
- Discussion Boards
- Crossword
- Horoscope
- Lottery
- Traffic
- Weather
- Multimedia

Special Reports

SITE MAP

Los Angeles Times
Subscription Services
(800) 252-9141 Home
Delivery Subscriptions
Gift Subscriptions
College Discount
Mail Subscriptions
Additional Subscription
Information & FAQs

MARKETPLACE
classifieds and more

- Jobs
- Homes
- Cars
- Rentals
- Newspaper Ads
- Shopping
- Times Guides
- Recycler.com

LA Times Initiatives

- Times in Education
- Reading by 9
- LA Times Books
- Summer Camp Program
- Times-Mirror Foundation
- Community Events

But Muslim students say they, too, feel threatened after the confrontation with Hearlson's supporters.

"It wasn't a debate. It's called an attack," said Mooath Saidi, one of those who complained about Hearlson.

The teacher's supporters have started petitions and e-mail campaigns and posted hundreds of fliers on campus.

"If the administration goes ahead and fires him, there will be great unrest on campus," said Hearlson supporter Hani Bushra, an Arab Christian student and a leader of the petition-signing campaign. "We won't let this issue die."

Bushra and scores of others say the Muslim students misrepresented--or in some cases fabricated--Hearlson's remarks, which they believe were never meant to be personal.

Jameelah Shukri, president of the Muslim Student Assn., said the Muslim students won't rest either.

"I wanted this to come out," she said. "I wanted people to know what Mr. Hearlson was doing. And the debate shows how much hatred other students have toward us."

The only thing that isn't surprising to anyone, including Hearlson, is that when controversy came to campus, it involved him.

The 57-year-old former Marine said he likes to challenge students with provocative questions and scenarios. On the first day of class, he tells them his bias: He is a conservative born-again Christian.

Last winter, a debate between Hearlson and his Muslim students got so heated that campus security was called.

"I like to irritate everyone, including myself. That's how you get pearls," says Hearlson, a formal liberal who was once advisor to the campus gay and lesbian club. The teacher underwent a religious conversion in 1990 and his politics underwent a corresponding shift.

"He's gone from being the vibrant liberal we all knew and loved to being a serious conservative that fewer people knew and loved," said Susan Smith, a history professor and friend.

An ardent backer of Israel, Hearlson started his Sept. 18 class by saying: Why do Muslims condemn the terrorist attacks in New York and at the Pentagon but never denounce terrorist attacks in Israel?

Four Muslim students, sitting in the back of the lecture hall, quickly joined the debate, which by all accounts heated up quickly.

The Muslim students contend that their instructor pointed his finger at them and accused them of murdering thousands of people.

"He pointed at me and called me a terrorist," Saidi said. "I stand by what I have believed from day one. He should be fired."

Orange Coast College isn't the kind of campus where word gets around fast. All of its students are commuters, and many attend class part time and in off hours.

Students supporting Hearlson tried to spread the word around campus by putting up hundreds of fliers for several nights. By morning, they were torn down by unknown parties. Most students are unaware of the raging debate.

But the college's faculty has gotten involved, expressing worries about academic freedom and an instructor's right to make controversial statements. Many said the administration panicked and placed Hearlson on leave without going through the required process. The Academic Senate voted last week to form a task force to review the college's academic freedom policy.

Unusual Moves, Circumstances

College President Gratton agreed that the administration's moves were unusual--but said that was because the circumstances also were extraordinary.

"Under normal conditions, there would have been more extensive consultation" before placing a professor on leave, she said, but because of the terrorist attacks, "this occurred in an exceptional environment."

The administration has brought in independent counsel from the county Board of Education to investigate the matter and recommend what if any disciplinary action should be taken.

Halvorsen said colleges nationwide are silencing their professors from the "left, right and center" after the attacks. "There's a clear epidemic that's challenging academic freedom."

At Orange Coast College, special speakers are being invited to Hearlson's class Tuesday evening, along with more security.

Through it all, Hearlson has watched his political science students' actions--the petitions, lobbying, debates and media handling--with a sense of pride.

"They've learned the game of politics," he said, "and taken it further than I ever imagined."

For information about reprinting this article, go to <http://www.lats.com/rights/register.htm>

Copyright 2001 Los Angeles Times
By visiting this site, you are agreeing to our [Terms of Service](#).

Powered by Genuity