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May 20, 2009

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## **Engaging the Oklahoma Legislature on Its Decision to Investigate Richard Dawkins' Free Speech**

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Back in March, I uncovered that members of the Oklahoma state legislature had [launched an investigation](#) of a March 6 speech at the University of Oklahoma by noted evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. The investigation was preceded by an attempt by another Oklahoma legislator to [pass two bills](#) condemning Dawkins and proclaiming the theory of evolution as "an unproven and unpopular theory." Another representative, Rebecca Hamilton, followed up with a post-speech letter to the university demanding all e-mails and correspondence relating to the speech; a list of all money paid to Dawkins, public or private; and the total cost to the university, including, among other things, security fees, advertising, and even "faculty time spent promoting this event."

On March 23, I wrote the [entire Oklahoma legislature](#) explaining to them that such investigations have been rightfully deemed unconstitutional since the heyday of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. I asked them directly: "Does the Oklahoma House of Representatives intend to pursue this matter any further? Given the intense national and international interest in this case and because it implicates the most crucial of constitutional values, I request a response as soon as possible."

Nearly two months later and several additional e-mails to both the entire Oklahoma legislature and to Rebecca Hamilton in particular, and there is still no official response. The notable exception to the silence has been Representative Wallace Collins, who was critical of Rebecca Hamilton's investigation, and assured me that her request did not represent action by the entire legislature. Wallace clearly (and correctly) thought that any investigation of Dawkins or any attempt to pass legislation condemning him was a terrible idea.

However, I have still received no official response from the legislature, Hamilton or anybody actually involved in instigating the Dawkins kerfuffle. Therefore, my organization, [the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), is trying a different approach. Last Friday, we sent a letter reaching out to the Oklahoma legislature to tell them that rather than investigate speakers they don't like, they could instead devote their energies to [protecting free speech and basic rights on campus](#). We pointed out the continuing problem of speech codes on campus and highlighted some of the worst abuses of free speech we have seen on campus in recent years, many of which I've covered here on the Huffington Post.

One may wonder why I am bothering to try to recruit a legislature that was willing to investigate clearly protected speech because they did not like the message to join FIRE in the battle for free speech on college campuses. I will admit it may be an extremely optimistic approach, but honestly, it would be very difficult for me to fight the bizarre abuses I see on campus if I were not an optimist. Some may also say it's naive, and they may have a point. But in my experience, while such educational letters may not always turn an opponent into an ally, I have seen many a fierce critic of unfettered campus free speech reconsider their stance, or, at least, choose to hold back the next time they are faced with the impulse to silence opinions they don't like. It is hard to argue with the idea that everyone should be allowed to argue their ideas.

And, besides, I figure it's worth a shot. But on the other hand, a legislature that recently found it necessary to [declare themselves "sovereign"](#) might be beyond reaching. Nevertheless, here's hoping that reasoned debate and dialogue prevail.

 

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