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'What Can The Virginia Tech Tragedy Do For Me?'

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In the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy, we all knew things on college campuses were going to change. Even the most cynical among us, however, probably didn't think to themselves, "Hey, how can I use this horrible tragedy to my advantage?"

But regardless of whether that despicable thought ever popped into college administrators' heads or not, the simple fact is that some administrators have been using the campus shootings of the past two years as an excuse to justify cracking down on speech they don't like.

The most dramatic recent example of college administrators using the specter of campus shootings to silence speech occurred last month at [Colorado College](#), where students have been found guilty of "violence" for publishing a satirical flyer.

The "violent" flyer was a direct parody of a one-page newsletter posted earlier this year called ["The Monthly Rag."](#) Authored by students identifying themselves as "the Feminist and Gender Studies Interns," the Rag's content was intentionally provocative and

seemingly humorless: a passage about myths of "toothed vaginas" prompting fears of "male castration," instructions on how to "pack" (i.e., how to "appear to have a phallus"), a quotation from The Bitch Manifesto, and an advertisement for an appearance by self-described "prostitute turned sex guru," Annie Sprinkle.

Fair enough -- but certainly ripe for satire, especially on a college campus.

Perhaps predictably, then, the authors of ["The Monthly Bag"](#) -- who listed themselves as "Coalition of Some Dudes" -- published a carbon-copy "Rag" knock-off, a Mad magazine style send-up featuring references to "chainsaw etiquette," "tough guy wisdom," and the range of a Barret rifle.

That the Bag is pure parody is beyond debate. If the title wasn't enough of a tip-off, look at the two flyers [side by side](#). It could not be clearer that the Bag is merely making fun of the Rag.

But whatever common sense may dictate, the two students behind the Bag were found guilty of violating Colorado College's policy on "violence."

You're probably asking yourself how a single flyer, particularly one as tongue-in-cheek as the Bag, could be deemed an act of "violence." Well, Dean of Students Mike Edmonds [wrote](#) that "the juxtaposition of weaponry and sexuality" contained in the Bag constituted an actual threat to campus safety, and that "in the climate in which we find ourselves today, violence -- or implied violence -- of any kind cannot be tolerated on a college campus."

And this is why I find Colorado College's response so outrageous: Edmonds is using the rash of school shootings to justify

punishing students who were completely kidding.

Unfortunately, this isn't the first time this unpardonable rationale has reared its ugly head. At FIRE, we've seen a serious spike in cases where an imaginary threat of "violence" is the pretext used to punish speech that offends some students or administrators.

To cite just two examples: Last year, an environmentalist student in Georgia was deemed a "clear and present danger" by his college's president and expelled from school for publishing a collage protesting the college's plans for building a 30 million dollar parking garage. Yes, that's right: Expelled for a "threatening" collage. Ask yourself: if you wanted to convey a threat, would you seriously use a flyer or a collage? How about dioramas, mobiles, or macaroni paintings?

Here's another one. Earlier this year, Arkansas Tech cancelled a student production of Stephen Sondheim's Broadway musical Assassins—and actually cited "the tragedies at Northern Illinois University and Virginia Tech" as the reason why the show couldn't go on. Somehow I don't think administrators are going to stop the next Cho by shutting down Sondheim.

Campus administrators really need to understand that the real danger lies in conflating simple hurt feelings and anger with legitimate threats of violence. I have a hard time believing anyone sincerely felt threatened by *The Monthly Bag* -- and if someone did, that fear is unreasonable. Administrators have to be able to distinguish between actual threats to campus safety and simple alarmism, lest they trivialize serious claims of potential violence. I mean, doesn't anyone read *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* anymore?

Colorado College president (and former Governor of Ohio) Richard Celeste has claimed, quite falsely, that the *Bag's* authors were "not sanctioned or punished." It's true that the punishment was not as severe as you would expect if the school genuinely thought the "Coalition of Some Dudes" were a threat. But try applying to grad school or finding a decent job after graduation with a letter in your file finding you guilty of campus-terrorizing "violence." Celeste and his college need to stop hiding behind Virginia Tech and start fulfilling Colorado College's extensive promises of free speech.

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