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Editorial: It's all a free-speech zone

From the Journal Sentinel

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We were under the impression that the entire United States is a free-speech zone. Which is why the phrase's use is puzzling in the case of a teaching aide and graduate student at Marquette University who had a quote from a well-known humorist removed from his office door recently.

Advertisement The quote from Dave Barry was, "As Americans we must always remember that we all have a common enemy, an enemy that is dangerous, powerful, and relentless. I refer, of course, to the federal government."

Philosophy department chairman and associate professor James South called the quote "patently offensive" and said that the campus' free-speech zones required him to take it down.

Point No. 1: If this quote is "patently offensive," then a whole lot of folks who call themselves conservatives or Libertarians are patently offensive. Variations of this theme operate as their mantra. There's nothing offensive about it. It's a point of view. Agree or disagree, but don't ban it.

Point No. 2: Lighten up. Most folks recognize hyperbole when they see it, particularly educated people such as those who walk the non-free-speech hallways of Marquette.

Point No. 3: While no right is absolute - yeah, yeah, yelling fire in a crowded theater - free speech should come pretty darn close. An easily offended nanny state might police cartoons and posters pinned up on office doors and walls. Thank goodness we don't live in one. Right?

Of course, Marquette is a private university. OK, but one that presumably subscribes in some measure to the concept of academic freedom. Or is this reserved only for those graced with tenure?

No, the teaching assistant and graduate student who put up the quote - Stuart Ditsler, who says he is a Libertarian - should qualify. A campus spokeswoman said this is a workplace issue, not one of academic freedom. This makes no sense. The workplace in this case is a university.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has taken up Ditsler's cause. A letter to the foundation

from Marquette President Father Robert A. Wild said, because the quote wasn't attributed, "someone reading . . . may not have understood the humor/satire of Dave Barry."

So, here's a compromise. Attribute the quote and return it to the office door. But here's a better one. Allow Ditsler to put it up anyway if he chooses.

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