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To the Catalyst:

I protest the disciplinary proceeding and verdict against Chris Robinson and another student. The students were found guilty of violating the student code of conduct forbidding threats of violence. I find that decision deeply troubling.

Reacting to the regular appearance of "The Monthly Rag," a poster put out by students associated with Feminist and Gender Studies, the two students concocted the scheme of parodying said publication. In the guise of "The Coalition of Some Dudes," they imitated various preoccupations and imaginings contained in the former publication, many of them sexual in character, but from the stereotypical male macho standpoint. A quid for your quo, so to speak-but no raunchier and with no more intimations of violence than that which was the object of their satire. ("The Monthly Rag" had referred in a jocular vein to male castration, whereas "The Monthly Bag" included various instances of "tough guy wisdom" and "chain-saw etiquette." Neither publication contained anything that can remotely be construed as a threat of violence; but if such be found in the one, it may as easily be found in the other.)

The manifest intention of the two accused students was to make fun of the dubious monthly ruminations of "The Monthly Rag." The aspiring satirists wanted to provoke a laugh and a debate; instead, they were greeted with a persecution.

Both the proceedings and the verdict traduce principles of free expression to which the college is professedly devoted, but which it has unconscionably violated in this instance. The decision is at war with the college's status as refuge for unorthodox opinion and a haven of diverse viewpoints. It violates the plainest constitutional rights of the ordinary citizen, relegating student rights of free expression to a faint shadow of that which is the common birthright of every American.

Supporters of the decision have fastened on the "anonymous character" of the offending poster as being especially deserving of punishment. But they do not apply a consistent standard. The poster made the object of satire also had no names attached to it. The authors of "The Monthly Rag," that is, made use of the very privilege which is incongruously denied to the authors of "The Monthly Bag." It is also pertinent to note that the two accused students immediately identified themselves when called upon to do so. Even granting that anonymous speech is not constitutionally protected (in keeping with the stunted interpretation of student rights of free expression now prevailing), the prompt avowal of their authorship shows that they had no intention of hiding behind the veil of anonymity.

It would seem an inexorable consequence that this decision, if allowed to stand, will harm the college's reputation and expose the institution to ridicule. The standard of free expression here becomes what is offensive to those who are most easily offended. This criterion, in fact, is plainly stated in Mike Edmond's letter to Chris Robinson (available at thefire.org). Dean Edmonds recognized that Chris's intent in posting the publication "was not to threaten but to parody." But intention, Dean Edmonds went on to say, was irrelevant: "the issue here is not whether or not you intended to threaten anyone. The fact is that your publication was received as a threat by members of the Colorado College community."

That is an unreasonable and arbitrary standard. It means that no appeal based on common sense or the plain facts of the situation has any hope of success, because it is on a priori grounds made subordinate to a standard of the utmost subjectivity. Its only boundary, if it has a boundary, is the fertile imagination of super-sensitive souls.

Though the students were found guilty of violating the school's policy regarding violence, they were subjected to a vague punishment—some sort of public forum, to be organized by the accused students, with the goal of addressing "the issues in an open and respectful way among all affected constituencies." This uncertain injunction, which appears to be something of a work in progress, could potentially serve useful purposes, but not if it is seen simply as a venue for the contrition of the accused, to be presided over by one of their accusers. If apologies are due, they are due on both sides. The injury done to the two accused students is real. They were subjected to a hostile inquisition by an unfriendly tribunal, whose powers were unknown. For three weeks they lived under the possibility that they might be expelled. For one of them, the loss of a needed and deserved scholarship impended, and may still impend.

The ultimate cost of this episode lies in its threat to the freedom of classroom discussion. The ripe utterance, the profane exclamation, the misguided metaphor all become subject, under this standard, to prosecutorial zeal and wild inference. The discipline meted out to two students may as easily be meted out to professors. Certainly, students and professors alike would suffer in their spontaneity and creativity under such a dreadful regimen. I call on all students, faculty, and administrators to repudiate this precedent and to reaffirm the principle of free expression as a hallmark of this institution.

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