

Professor Bean and the Zebras

By John K. Wilson

One academic freedom controversy this spring involved history professor Jonathan Bean at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Conservative columnist Cathy Young called it “a witch-hunt that would do the late Joe McCarthy proud.” According to Young, “if this case is any indication, conservatives on many campuses are not just a rare breed but an endangered species.”(Cathy Young, “SIU Persecutes Its Lone Conservative,” *Boston Globe*, May 3, 2005)

The controversy began in Bean’s 20th Century America class. After some classes about the civil rights movement, Bean handed out an article about the Zebra Killings, a dozen or more murders around San Francisco in 1973 and 1974, carried out by a gang of black thugs who apparently targeted whites. Bean used an article from David Horowitz’s website, frontpagemag.com. The original article included a link to the European American Issues Forum (EAIF), a white supremacist group “dedicated to the eradication of discrimination and defamation of European Americans” which had a petition on its website calling for congressional investigation of excessive Jewish influence on America. (Horowitz’s website calls it “a civil rights organization.”)

In an April 6, 2005 email to his teaching assistants, Bean indicated the questions they should raise in discussing the article: “Did the civil rights movement lend an aura of innocence (or moral immunity) to all black actions, however heinous? If we study the ugliness of the KKK, should we look at other forms of racism? Someone once wrote that the oldest story known to man is that of the former oppressed becoming the oppressor.” Soon afterwards, Bean wrote an email apology and described the reading as “supplementary.”

Whatever the legitimacy of countering articles with civil rights by teaching about a gang of serial killers from the 1970s who targeted whites, the fundamental fact is that Bean was never punished in any way (and obviously should not be punished) for assigning an essay, even though it had links to a white supremacist group and he bizarrely suggested that African-Americans had become “oppressors” of white people. In fact, there are no reports of anyone filing charges against Bean or formally investigating Bean or ordering him to withdraw an assignment. The worst that happened to Bean was that the dean cancelled discussion sections one week during the turmoil, and allowed two teaching assistants who were offended by Bean to leave the course. While this was a questionable decision, deans have the authority to shift teaching assistants who have a conflict with professors. And it is understandable that African-American teaching assistants would be leery of continuing to work with a professor after being told that black serial killers might have been a creation of the civil rights movement, and then publicly exposing the professor’s allegedly racist assignment.

Jane Adams, an anthropology professor who defended Bean, denounced his faculty critics for a “serious breach of collegiality” because his “reputation has been publicly smeared.” However, this is a misunderstanding of collegiality, which is often used as an excuse to silence dissenting faculty. Collegiality does not mean faculty get together to hug each other. In fact, one important job for faculty colleagues is to criticize one another.

Bean wrote shortly after his apology, “They want a pound of my flesh!...They’ve been waiting to lynch me. I made the mistake using this particular source (sort of).” The administration, far from attacking Bean, came to his defense. Dean Shirley Clay Scott reassured Bean that the issue was over and he faced no danger of disciplinary action. Scott was much more harsh toward Bean’s critics, chastising the eight professors who had publicly criticized Bean. Scott sent an email to the history department, ordering faculty critics of Bean to “be more careful” and “curb rhetorical flourish.” Scott declared, “we should try to act with great civility toward one another.” A professor who publicly criticized Bean, Rachel Stocking, noted: “What we did was to exercise our free speech by basically criticizing his teaching methods. It’s significant that people who spoke against racism on a college campus have been subjected to this kind of attack.”