

Saferide not helped by court mob

Orwell's 'Farm' should be required reading for hecklers



THE FINE PRINT

BY PAT MALACH

This is a lot bigger than Saferide."

Abe Hepner's statement near the end of Friday's Constitution Court hearing to decide the fate of the women-only program provided a clear indication of what his complaint was actually about.

It has nothing to do with Hepner wanting to have access to the program's vans. The real reason for Hepner's complaint — in the tradition of Ronald Reagan, George Bush and David Duke — was his fight against what he views as reverse discrimination.

And yes Virginia, there is discrimination at Saferide.

The question that needs to be answered is whether that discrimination can be justified. Clearly, in the case of a program designed to protect women from assault, the discrimination against men is reasonable.

A little empathy and common sense should tell us that a woman who fears for her safety walking across campus at night is going to be in even more danger, and feel more threatened by getting into a van with a man she has never met. Allowing men on Saferide vans would defeat the purpose of the program.

Maybe Hepner should stop and ask himself how he would feel if his actions against the program were successful and this led to even one woman being assaulted. Would this price be worth his little crusade against political correctness?

But Hepner is not the only one who needs to do a little soul-searching.

The way the Safride supporters and the ASUO handled this complaint against the program and the Constitution Court hearing that followed would be humorous if it wasn't so frightening.

The ASUO and Saferide chose to play power politics — where the group with the most ability to bully others gets its way, with little regard for what the law says — rather than allow a non-politicized judgment.

Three hours prior to the Constitution Court hearing, student senators attended an emergency meeting to confirm a new justice where they heard ASUO President Jennifer Bills tell them questions about that night's hearing weren't relevant to the nomination.

At the hearing, the angered mob supporting Saferide did attempt to behave itself after Constitution Court Chief Justice Steven Briggs threatened to clear the hall. But the murmuring, sporadic comments from the crowd and condescending laughter continued throughout Hepner's presentation.

I would ask all of the people who showed up for Friday's hearing to boo and hiss at Hepner, make fun of his looks, his mother, his dress and his friends, to step away from the Saferide issue and ask them-

selves if that is the way they think politics should work. Should the group that can show the most hostility, that can flex the biggest political biceps, get its way no matter what the morality of the issue or the law states?

If that's the case, it doesn't bode well for the future of plebians in this country. Outside of this campus, the political power is held by heterosexual, white males. Obviously, the political bullying at the national level takes on more subtle characteristics, but it does exist. Should all decisions go in favor of the people with the ability to quash opposing points of view?

That's not the political system I want guiding my future.

There is a fairy tale called *Animal Farm* that everyone who heckled Hepner Friday night should read. When you get to the part about the sheep who would bleat out "four legs good, two legs bad" anytime one of the animals tried to question the decisions of the authoritarian pigs, ask yourselves if what you did was any different.

Just like the people supporting Saferide Friday night, the sheep in George Orwell's tale thought what they were doing was correct and for the good of all.

No matter what the stated goals are, or the justifications, oppression and intimidation are dangerous political tools. There are no correct reasons for oppressing dissenting views.

And the politics of power have no place in a fair government.

All of this is quite ironic. Saferide, more than any other party involved, should be interested in having the Constitution Court decide this issue without having to consider any outside pressures. Saferide could best protect itself against future challenges by finding out for sure where it legally stands. If a non-politicized reading of the ASUO Constitution doesn't allow for a program like Saferide, then the best step would be to change the constitution, not to bully and intimidate the justices to rule in favor of the mob.

Judging by the number of people who showed up in support of the program, and on the merits of the program itself, Saferide would have little trouble passing an amendment to the constitution specifically giving it the right to keep its women-only policy intact. If the situation was handled in that manner, the program would never again have to worry about challenges to its legal right to exist.

Unfortunately, that is not the way events transpired. And Saferide will remain open to future challenges, such as the possibility of a more conservative-minded court shutting the program down. By reacting with hysteria and power politics, rather than rationally and calmly considering what was best for the program, Saferide may have missed a chance to strengthen the program's legal standing.

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