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## OPINION

## American Politics Aren't 'Post-Racial'

By **DOROTHY RABINOWITZ**

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The not-quite-concluded racial drama playing out at Purdue University in the last months can't be ranked with the embittering rape charge scandal at Duke that so recently mesmerized the nation. And as news it's not in the same league as the total war waged against Harvard president Lawrence Summers for having had the temerity to suggest that factors in addition to prejudice might have something to do with the underrepresentation of women in math and the sciences.

Still, what happened at Purdue is a pungent reminder of all that's possible now in the rarefied ideological atmosphere on our college campuses – and in this presidential election year, not perhaps only on our campuses.



Ryan Inzana

The story began prosaically enough. Keith Sampson, a student employee on the janitorial staff earning his way toward a degree, was in the habit of reading during work breaks. Last October he was immersed in "Notre Dame Vs. the Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan."

Mr. Sampson was in short order visited by his union representative, who informed him he must not bring this book to the break room, and that he could be fired. Taking the book to the campus, Mr. Sampson says he was told, was "like bringing pornography to work." That it was a history of the battle

students waged against the Klan in the 1920s in no way impressed the union rep.

The assistant affirmative action officer who next summoned the student was similarly unimpressed. Indeed she was, Mr. Sampson says, irate at his explanation that he was, after all, reading a scholarly book. "The Klan still rules Indiana," Marguerite Watkins told him – didn't he know that? Mr. Sampson, by now dazed, pointed out that this book was carried in the university library. Yes, she retorted, you can get Klan propaganda in the library.

The university has allowed no interviews with Ms. Watkins or any other university official involved in the case. Still, there can be no disputing the contents of the official letter that set forth the university's case.

Mr. Sampson stood accused of "openly reading the book related to a historically and racially abhorrent subject in the presence of your Black co-workers." The statement, signed by chief affirmative action officer Lillian Charleston, asserted that her office had completed its investigation of the charges brought by Ms. Nakea William, his co-worker – that Mr. Sampson had continued, despite complaints, to read a

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book on this "inflammatory topic." "We conclude," the letter informed him, "that your conduct constitutes racial harassment. . . ." A very serious matter, with serious consequences, it went on to point out.

That was in November. Months later, in February of this year, Mr. Sampson received – from the same source – a letter with an astonishingly transformed version of his offense. And there could be no mystery as to the cause of this change.

After the official judgment against him, Mr. Sampson turned to the Indiana state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, whose office contacted university attorneys. Worse, the case got some sharp local press coverage that threatened to get wider.

Ludicrous harassment cases are not rare at our institutions of higher learning. But there was undeniably something special – something pure, and glorious – in the clarity of this picture. A university had brought a case against a student on grounds of a book he had been reading.

And so the new letter to Mr. Sampson by affirmative action officer Charleston brought word that she wished to clarify her previous letter, and to say it was "permissible for him to read scholarly books or other materials on break time." About the essential and only theme of the first letter – the "racially abhorrent" subject of the book – or the warnings that any "future substantiated conduct of a similar nature could mean serious disciplinary action" – there was not a word. She had meant in that first letter, she said, only to address "conduct" that caused concern among his co-workers.

What that conduct was, the affirmative action officer did not reveal – but she had delivered the message rewriting the history of the case. Absolutely and for certain there had been no problem about any book he had been reading.

This, indeed, was now the official story – as any journalist asking about the case would learn instantly from the university's media relations representatives. It would take a heart of stone not to be moved – if not much – by the extraordinary efforts of these tormented agents trying to explain that the first letter was all wrong: No reading of any book had anything to do with the charges against Mr. Sampson. This means, I asked one, that Mr. Sampson could have been reading about the adventures of Jack and Jill and he still would have been charged? Yes. What, then, was the offense? "Harassing behavior." While reading the book? The question led to careful explanations hopeless in tone – for good reason – and well removed from all semblance of reason. What the behavior was, one learned, could never be revealed.

There was, of course, no other offensive behavior; had there been any it would surely have appeared in the first letter's gusher of accusation. Like those prosecutors who invent new charges when the first ones fail in court, the administrators threw in the mysterious harassment count. Such were the operations of the university's guardians of equity and justice.

In April – having been pressed by the potent national watchdog group FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) as well as the ACLU – University Chancellor Charles R. Bantz finally sent them a letter expressing regret over this affair, and testifying to his profound commitment to freedom of expression. So far as can be ascertained, the university has extended no such expressions of regret to Keith Sampson.

This case and all its kind are worth bearing in mind for anyone pondering the hypersensitivity surrounding the issue of race today. The mindset that produces those harassment courts, those super-heated capacities for perceiving insult, is not limited to college campuses.

Its presence is evident in this election campaign, which has seen more than a touch of readiness to impute

some form of racism to all tough criticisms of Barack Obama. The deranged response that greeted Bill Clinton's remark that certain of Sen. Obama's claims were "a fairy tale," told the story. No need to go into the now famous catalogue of accusations about the Clintons' "sly racist" tactics.

There will be much more ahead, directed to the Republicans and their candidate. Some more, no doubt, about the Willie Horton ad of 1988, whose status as a quintessential piece of racism is – except for a few rare voices of reason – accepted throughout our media as revealed truth. To be sure, the Willie Horton charge has for some time been overshadowed by ominous predictions of all the Swiftboating Republicans are supposed to be readying.

And Mr. Obama himself, the candidate of racial transcendence, has now taken a plunge of sorts to old-style race politics. In a pre-emptive dismissal of future criticism, he warned a Florida audience on June 20 of the racist tactics the Republicans planned. "We know the strategy," he said. Republicans planned to make people afraid of him. They'd say "he's got a funny name. And did I mention he's black?"

All this may be far from the world of the universities. But to those aforementioned campus ideologues, the thinking is familiar.

**Ms. Rabinowitz is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board.**

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