

Mason v. Mason

by Matthew Hoffman

The 'Dress a Sig' Controversy at George Mason University

The members of George Mason University's Sigma Chi fraternity had little reason to believe their annual "Dress a Sig" fundraising event was politically incorrect. To those present last April 4, the proceedings seemed innocuous if a bit raucous. Participating sororities paraded members of Sigma Chi in women's clothing across a stage, eliciting hoots and applause from the boisterous crowd of Greeks. Among the contestants was a "Sig" whose corresponding sorority had dressed him in blackface and strapped a pillow to his backside. After the men strutted their stuff, the audience voted for the "ugliest girl" in the bunch. The event helped to raise over one thousand dollars for the Cleo Wallace Center, a home for abused children.

It is doubtful that Sigma Chi or the cooperating sororities had racist or sexist intentions. With its 25 percent minority membership, Sigma Chi is one of the most integrated fraternities on campus. One of its members, Archibald Kao, of Oriental descent, is serving as the president of George Mason's student gov-

ernment. Gamma Phi Beta sorority, which dressed the fraternity member in blackface, has minority members in several leadership positions.

The Greeks could not have known they were inviting the wrath of George Mason University. The event had been approved by university officials, and the "Dress a Sig" contest of the previous year had been conducted on university grounds without controversy, as had a "lip-sync" contest in which white participants dressed in blackface.

The participants in "Dress a Sig" were therefore surprised when, two weeks later, enraged letters written by various university officials and addressed "to the campus community" appeared in university buildings, denouncing the event as "hurtful," "offensive," and "insensitive." One letter demanded that Sigma Chi respond by showing "a willingness of the membership to participate in programs involving intercultural and gender issues." This was required, the letter threatened, "to substantiate their claim that Sigma Chi and the Greek system at GMU are important contributors to the positive development of campus life." Dean of Student Services Kenneth Bumgarner informed the participants that the incident would be investigated by the university.

Meanwhile, leaders of various student groups that claimed offense at the event had organized a closed forum, moderated by administration officials, to discuss the issue. At the "suggestion" of Dean Bumgarner, Sigma Chi and Gamma Phi Beta agreed to participate and sent several representatives. The frightened Greeks, aware of the possibility of serious punishment, were not allowed to speak; they sat quietly while their fellow students excoriated them. The offended parties spoke interminably of their suffering and demanded reparations from the Greeks. The facts were discountenanced; only emotions were deemed legitimate topics of discussion. At one point, John Singsank, the president of Sigma Chi, was ordered to stand and face two minority members of his fraternity. "How do you think you've made them feel?" he was

asked angrily.

By the end of the forum, the sorority representatives were in tears, confessing their guilt as they held hands for mutual support. One of the sisters, herself of Arab descent, babbled almost hysterically. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "I'm so guilty!"

The Sigma Chi representatives, Archibald Kao among them, apologized repeatedly and profusely in a frenzy of self-deprecation, calling themselves "stupid" and "ignorant." Russell Hopler, co-president of the Student Coalition Against Racism and one of the organizers of the forum, was so shocked by the way the Greeks were intimidated and humiliated that he recanted his involvement.

The written apologies of the offending groups, blown up and posted by the university for all to see, were equally submissive and apologetic. "There is no excuse for our insensitivity and lack of forethought. We will never be able to apologize enough for our behavior," wrote the president of Gamma Phi Beta sorority. Sigma Chi strove to sound politically corrected. "We now see the insensitivity of our actions and have a new perspective on cultural issues," wrote Singsank.

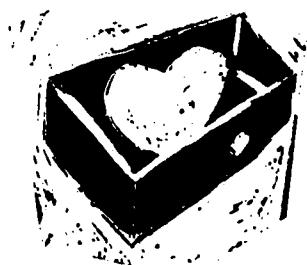
Two days later, Dean Bumgarner's "extensive examination" culminated in a decision. No formal hearing had been conducted, and Bumgarner admitted to the *Washington Post* that no written rules had been violated. Nevertheless, he wrote in yet another posted letter, "steps must be taken to ensure that there is no repetition of this repugnant conduct." Sigma Chi was placed on probation for two years, during which time they are forbidden to conduct any activities, on or off campus. The Gamma Phi Beta sorority was placed on probation for one year. "Our constitutional rights have been completely thrown out here," said Singsank. "The university has taken away our freedom of speech and our right to due process. We were never charged with anything."

Exceptions were made for the initiation of new members, and events "with

an educational purpose directly related to gender discrimination and cultural diversity." Sigma Chi and Gamma Phi Beta were ordered to "plan and implement an educational program addressing cultural differences, diversity, and the concerns of women." In a surprisingly explicit phrase, Bumgarner revealed that "The exceptions to the ban on fraternity events reflect a premise that these events will create a desirable attitude among the participants and will, in effect, be building a future cadre of students to assist in promoting positive attitudes towards these issues."

Finally, Bumgarner warned the punished Greeks not to defend themselves. "The membership is cautioned to avoid any response or action that could be viewed as antagonistic or detrimental to the offended parties," he wrote.

University student organizations hastily issued a plethora of resolutions and statements in support of the administration. *The Broadside*, George Mason's student newspaper, published an editorial praising Bumgarner's decision as "carefully considered and reasonable." The student government senate issued a statement condemning "all events and activities that intentionally or unintentionally offend or hurt any members of this university"—apparently unaware that they were denouncing all controversial speech. Even the Interfraternity Council, a body of fraternity representatives, denounced Sigma Chi's actions and imposed its own, less draconian sanctions on the fraternity.



Although only one of the sororities was punished, all of the sorority members who had participated in the event were told that their actions were sexist—even if they were not aware of it. They were ordered by Bumgarner to develop programs to "address issues related to . . . gender discrimination and stereotyping." The sorority women, wrote *The Broadside*, "have chosen

to acquiesce in the tradition of sexism so ingrained in our society (including the Greek system)." Said the director of the Women's Research and Resource Center, Karen Rosenblum: "The sororities, whether consciously or not, had recreated and participated in sexism."

Sadly, a campus that had been relatively free of racial tension became a veritable tinderbox. "Before this incident I never judged a person by the color of his skin, but now it does go through my mind," said one bitter sorority member, who added that many of her friends feel the same way. Instead of promoting harmony among Mason students, the politics of "multiculturalism" have created division and strife. Yet since the disciplining of Sigma Chi the administration has only gone further with its "multiculturalist" crackdown.

When students applied to perform an act in which they would imitate the black singer Aretha Franklin (without blackface) during a "lip-sync" contest at the university's annual Mason Day celebration, they were denied permission by a university official. "He told me that the act would be considered racist and sexist because six white men were performing it," said John Kirchhoffer, one of the applicants. Another group that applied simply to dress as women while dancing to the ZZ Top song "Legs" was forbidden to do so, and finally had to perform in towels. (Only a day after the canceled Mason Day events, the university's celebrated Center for the Arts presented a ballet, "Trochadero de Monte Carlo," in which men dressed as women and parodied ballet classics. The university charged up to twenty dollars per seat.)

Apparently the university police are now being used to apprehend thought-criminals. In its latest posted letter as of this writing (June), the university complained of "Racist, Homophobic, and Derogatory Flyers" posted in bathrooms, and requested that informers who "have any information about who may have distributed these flyers, please contact the nearest campus police officer."

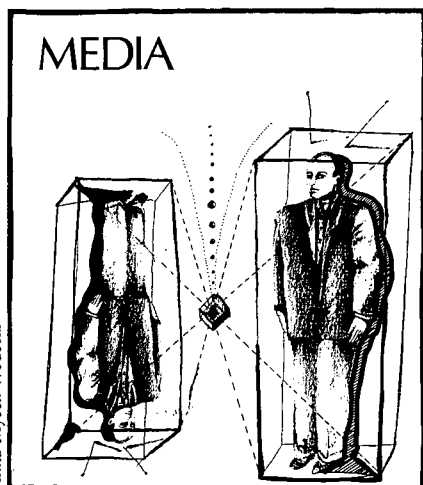
The rise of "multiculturalism" at George Mason University was a surprise to many who viewed the university as a safe haven for conservatives. A rapidly growing Virginia university lo-

cated close to Washington, D.C., Mason has made a name for itself by attracting prominent conservative intellectuals to its faculty. Few outward signs of the coming changes preceded the administration's new policy, though there were some: two years earlier, the university had established a formal "cultural diversity" program, which included sparsely attended seminars teaching, among other things, the evils of "ableism" (prejudice against the disabled) and "heterosexism." The university's guide for interviewing applicants for Residence Advisor positions has generated controversy in recent months with its "Tips on Interviewing Black Candidates." In the realm of expression, however, the university had remained quiescent.

Many students cynically attributed the policy changes to the university's desire to appease Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, who has sought to reform the state campuses according to his own liberal formula. In the 1990-92 budget, George Mason suffered significant losses. Classes had been canceled, tuition rates had increased, and even some parking lot lighting had been disconnected. One student senator who had voted to support the administration admitted to me that his motivation had been to attract more state funding to the university. He claimed other senators had voted for the same reason. Indeed, Wilder congratulated the university for its response to "Dress a Sig" during his commencement address to graduating Mason students. "Mockery, exclusion, or intimidation of any kind are antithetical to intellectual enlightenment," he said.

George Mason University, however, has yet to hear the last of the "Dress a Sig" controversy. As I write, Sigma Chi is preparing to file a lawsuit against the university on First Amendment grounds. In the end it may be George Mason himself, through the Bill of Rights he drafted over two hundred years ago, who protects the liberty of students from the university that bears his name. One may wonder if he would have found humor in this irony.

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The Way It Was?

by Lorrin Anderson

The Ethics of Docudrama

“The nation must be grateful that millions of Americans . . . are being taught night after night lessons that may help them live more amicably with their fellow citizens.”

That's Walter Goodman, writing in the *New York Times*. “Goaded by minority groups,” he says, “commercial television has become a leader in the movement to get Americans to accept other Americans . . . the biggest successes in the continuing push-and-shove have been won by minority groups bent on converting negative images into positive images.”

Walter Goodman, as it happens, is a perceptive and generally fair-minded TV critic, and he's not the kind of guy to delude himself, or us: “The point, pardon the word, is propaganda—mild, benign, not force-fed by the state, but propaganda all the same.” But he's not complaining either: “That is as it must be.”

Must it?

How grateful should we be that we are being force-fed by an entertainment establishment that keeps shoveling out the agitprop? That the aim is ostensibly benign—tolerance, brotherhood—doesn't put the question to rest.

The Goodman quotes are actually from a piece he wrote a couple of years ago. But they apply *a fortiori* today,

when every other sitcom and fictional drama carries a social message, usually stacking the deck in favor of the latest elitist fashions in right thinking.

Where race is involved, nobody in his right mind can object to attempts to put positive images of blacks on television. Even casting gambits that defy current social probabilities—like making most street criminals white and most (non-corrupt) judges black or female or both—are perhaps more or less harmless. But intellectual dishonesty is dangerous at best, and it gets to be a particularly sticky business when the vehicle is that unholy amalgam of purported journalism and sensationalized entertainment, the docudrama.

When a movie purports to be essentially factual, and superimposes a crawl at the end telling us what ultimately happened to the principals in real life—well, given a skillfully doctored script and the powerful, visual impact of television, millions of people probably think that's the way it was, the way it really happened. And when that *wasn't* the way it was, in centrally important ways—when we're getting a distorted picture of American history or social reality, or both—the result is likely to be not benign but pernicious; the well-meaning attempt to promote racial harmony may well end up exacerbating animosities, fueling white resentment, and feeding black paranoia.

Attacks on the docudrama—from both left and right—are hardly new. But it just keeps rolling along. Case in point: a made-for-TV movie that appeared earlier this year, on NBC: *If Looks Could Kill: The Marla Hanson Story*.

The crime the movie is based on was a shocker even for New York: MODEL SLASHED! The razor-wielding thugs who cut Marla Hanson up in the summer of 1986 weren't trying to kill her. They just wanted to destroy her face. They didn't quite succeed; the long red gashes they left were not, thanks to extensive plastic surgery, ultimately disfiguring. But the scars will always be there, and the attack ended a promising career before the cameras.

Cut to February 1991: Marla Hanson, the Movie. A story with the customary departures from reality—dramatic license—and with an increasingly familiar bonus, a sort of

cultural affirmative action that holds up a distorting mirror to the racial complexities of American society.

Marla was—is—a Missouri girl who had come to the Big Apple to carve out a career, and she was starting to get some breaks. The crime was instigated by a white man named Steve Roth, who had sublet an apartment to Marla and two other young women and who, in a twisted way, wanted to be more than a landlord—Marla's lover, in fact; that's the way the movie portrayed it, anyway. (It didn't mention that Roth had a homosexual relationship with at least one of the two black friends he hired to carry out the razor attack.) The ostensible reason for the assault was money: Marla, fed up with Roth, wanted to move out, and she wanted her security deposit back. Roth reluctantly agreed, but instead of giving her the money he set her up for the slashing. (Roth and his two friends were all convicted and went to jail, though they'll soon be eligible for parole.)

The most striking thing about the case, aside from the bizarre nature of the crime, was the way Marla Hanson was twice victimized, first by Roth and the slashers and then by the lawyer for the two black defendants. And the man who mounted the second assault—an unbelievably brutal courtroom attack on Marla as witness—was Alton Maddox, the bitterly antiwhite agent provocateur who has since been barred from practicing law because of his role in the Tawana Brawley hoax. Under the tolerant eye of Judge Jeffrey Atlas (you have to be careful about reining in militant black lawyers if you don't want to be called a racist), Maddox announced that it was his circus now, that he was the ringmaster who was going to “get that lyin' bitch.” He went on to administer a verbal battering, painting Marla as a slut and trying unsuccessfully to get her to say the word “c—” on the stand (to describe herself). It is difficult to believe that a white lawyer, especially in these days of feminist concern, could have gotten away with anything like it.

While the crime involved an attack on a white woman by two blacks, nobody, including the press and Marla herself, assigned any particular significance, at first, to the racial element. (Imagine, if you can, the racial uproar