



CONSERVATIVE STUDENTS FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

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### **“Support our Seniors”**

Dear President Shi, Provost Kazee, and members of the Furman community:

Our university’s Web site now features a “petition of opposition” on a page dedicated to descriptive information about Furman University’s May 31 graduation and President Bush’s historic commencement speech. Certain faculty members have released this letter, signed by some students and titled “(W)e Object,” that details a number of their objections to supposed actions of the Bush administration. Count us among the disappointed and embarrassed—disappointed at an administration that acquiesced to irresponsible faculty demands, and embarrassed by a faculty that sacrificed professionalism for publicity.

Unfortunately, some professors seem intent on turning what should be a celebration of their students’ accomplishments into a forum to air their political differences with President Bush. “We object” sounds open-minded and charmingly contrarian, but not when the “objection” is entirely unrelated to the President’s commencement speech. A careful reading of the faculty letter reveals no “objection” to Bush’s visit, his speech, or the university’s invitation thereof. A letter that, by its own contents, accomplishes nothing and seeks to change nothing should be regarded as precisely that: an empty message.

The letter itself offers repeated inaccuracies rather than thoughtful criticisms. For example, the letter accuses the Bush administration of “denying global warming.” Even though there remains considerable debate as to what extent global climate change is occurring and even more disagreement on human involvement, there is no doubt the letter is incorrect. Far from “denying global warming,” in 2001 Bush called climate change “an issue that must be addressed by the world” and said, “First, we know the surface temperature of the earth is warming.”<sup>1</sup>

Another particularly egregious error is the letter’s claim the Bush administration is responsible for “creating the largest deficits in history” when in fact, the deficit as a percentage of gross domestic product is now half of what it was in the mid-1980s and a tenth of what it was in the mid-1940s.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in the end, our greatest complaint with the faculty-led letter does not rest on factual or ideological grounds. The real issue is whether members of the Furman community have the

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Global Climate Change,” 11 June 2001.  
<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010611-2.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Office of Management and Budget, “Historical Tables: Fiscal Year 2009,” 4 February 2008.  
<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2009/pdf/hist.pdf>>

decency to put respect for the Office of the President and for the graduating class before their political crusade. Regrettably, it seems some do not.

Of course faculty members are well within their rights to write a letter; the issue is not “free speech” because they could have written such a letter at any time. Indeed, it is revealing that only now, with the prospect of media attention, does this letter appear. They have openly admitted they are mimicking the actions of another university, where professors took out a full-page newspaper ad and received national news coverage before the President spoke there several years ago.<sup>3</sup> Their demand that the letter be prominently displayed on the Furman Web site for an entire month also demonstrates their actual goal—calling attention to themselves and thus distracting from the real purpose of commencement.

Even worse, some professors have demanded that they be released from their contractual obligation to attend graduation, and the administration has apparently promised to comply with those demands. These professors’ petty insistence on skipping commencement demonstrates a lack of respect for their own students’ accomplishments. For people who supposedly revere “tolerance” and “open-mindedness,” such an arrogant refusal to even listen to a short congratulatory speech from the President during a day of celebration is an embarrassment to our university.

Perhaps our immediate past student body president, Hillary Clinton field organizer, and Furman graduating senior Christina Henderson said it best: “I, for one, would find it difficult to forgive the faculty for not being there as my class walks down the mall, onto the field, and across the stage, simply because they don’t have the discipline enough to practice what they teach us everyday about being open to new ideas, different ways of thinking and other opinions. You will not be boycotting President Bush, you will be boycotting the Class of 2008.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of the administration’s compliance with the demands of the faculty, we, the undersigned, present three requests that we hope the administration will consider:

**1. We ask Furman University to hold professors to their contractual agreement to attend commencement exercises in recognition of Furman’s graduating class and its accomplishments by refusing to grant any “conscientious objector” releases.** We also request the names of all faculty members who have submitted such a request, as well as an update of any additional faculty members who do so between now and graduation. Students who have worked hard to earn a degree deserve to know who has decided not to honor their achievements, and surely such “conscientious objectors” would want their names to be known.

**2. We further ask that Furman refuse to post the political views of a fraction of the faculty and student body on our Web site.** Professors have the right to express their views, but we are under no obligation to reward their publicity stunt by providing a link to it from Furman’s home page. Their letter contains no objection relevant to the fact that President Bush will be coming to Furman to congratulate the Class of 2008.

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “Preaching to the Choir? Not This Time,” *New York Times*, 23 May 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Henderson, “Bush should be welcomed,” *The Paladin*, 18 April 2008.

**3. If Furman continues to post the contents of their letter, we expect this response will be posted immediately next to the professors' letter on the same page and for the same duration.** We also expect that all other responses from any students, parents, alumni, faculty, staff members, trustees, or anyone connected with the Furman community will be given the same privilege and posted in their entirety. To do otherwise would be placing a higher value on some expressions of "free speech" than on others.

We thank you for your attention and consideration in this matter, and we appreciate your support of Furman's students, their decisions, and their accomplishments.

Sincerely Yours,

The Undersigned

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