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Search



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[HOME](#) > [UNIVERSITY](#) > [LECTURE PROMPTS DISCUSSION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT](#)



[UNIVERSITY](#)

Lecture prompts discussion of sexual assault

BY [STAFF WRITER](#) • OCTOBER 24, 2014



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PHOTO BY CONNOR MORIARTY

Community comes together to voice opinions, question George Will's controversial comments

By Emily Williams, For The Miami Student

Seven hundred and forty nine — that is how many words make up George Will's controversial article "Colleges become the victims of progressivism." From the millions of words he has written in over 4,500 columns during the course of his journalistic career, those 749 words have sparked serious backlash over its statements about sexual assault on college campuses, backlash that Will disclosed in a C-SPAN interview that he has never received backlash to such an extent from any of his other articles. On Thursday afternoon, Miami students showed they had some words of their own for Will.

"Nothing less than yes!"

"George Will is not Miami!"

"Yes means yes. No means no."

Those were just a few of the statements chanted by protesters who, starting at around 4 p.m., gathered with signs and fliers outside the gates of the Farmer School of Business. The group included representatives from Men Against Sexual Assault (MARS), Women Against Violence and Sexual Assault (WAVES), Feminists Working on Real Democracy (F-Word) and other students and faculty members who oppose the opinions Will expressed in his column. Many of their posters pointed out one striking phrase in particular.

"[When] they make victimhood a coveted status that confers privileges, victims proliferate," he wrote in the article.

In direct response to this statement, some protesters held signs that read, "There is no privilege in being silenced and shamed," or, "Sexual assault leaves you with scars, not privileges."

One participant, a member of WAVES and a survivor of sexual assault, Laura Uribe, was prepared to ask Will to defend his claim.

"I'm very interested as to what those privileges are and why I haven't seen them yet," she said.

Also a survivor of sexual assault, Mary Williams, the president of WAVES and a contributor to Thursday's protest, felt that Will's choice of words unjustly discredits the pain that real victims have to endure.

the intersection honked their horns in affirmation, initiating satisfied cheers from the protesters.

In lieu of signs, some young women held up T-shirts made for this year's Clothesline Project, an annual display of shirts made by survivors of sexual assault in the Miami community. [CALENDAR](#) [OPEN FORUM](#) [EMAIL EDITION](#)

According to Alexis Doolittle, an intern at Miami's Women's Center, more T-shirts were made for this year's project than ever before. She, along with Deanna Williams, another intern for the Women's Center, handed out neon fliers with sexual assault statistics to everyone who passed through the crowd. They had been working to spread the word via email to student organizations about the protest. Even though they knew there were plenty of students at Miami who felt strongly about the issue, they were impressed by the turnout.

"It's empowering; it really is," Williams said.

James Boyd, president of MARS, felt the protest was successful in making a statement to the Miami community.

"The protest was encouraging because it allowed us to say that we do not want our university to be a place that condones rape culture," he said.

Although some of the protesters' signs were critical of the University President ("Dear President Hodge, show us you care! Survivors deserve love and honor, too!"), Hodge seemed to be proud of the effort students and faculty put forth to organize the protest. He confirmed that he was pleased with how engaged students were in this issue.

"Obviously, these people here have thought a lot about this and feel very passionate about it," he said. "I think it's terrific."

Melissa Thomasson, associate professor of Economics, and Lisa Ellram, professor of Supply Chain Management, were among the protestors, holding their own signs crafted out of pages from the Wall Street Journal. Concerned about what kind of message allowing Will to speak would send to Miami's students, they felt their presence at the protest was imperative. They hoped to show that the faculty cares about making Miami a supportive environment for all students.

"I know a lot of faculty agrees this was not a good choice of speakers," Ellram said.

By 5 p.m., the line of students waiting to enter FSB to get a seat for Will's lecture was so long that its end almost reached the line of protesters. Charlie Meyer, chairman of the College Republicans at Miami, arrived early for his entrance wristband. He and the other members of the organization held a meeting prior to the lecture. According to Meyer, they wanted to focus on the journalistic credentials that got Will, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer known for his stimulating political commentary, invited to speak at Miami in the first place.

"We want to make sure he has some positive questions coming his way," he said.

“That people are trying to frame George Will as a person that is easy on people who commit sexual assault crimes is absurd.” [CALENDAR](#) [OPEN FORUM](#) [EMAIL EDITION](#)

Before being admitted into the building, attendees had to allow their bags to be searched. Police officers monitored the lobby area.

By the time Will began his lecture, “The Political Argument Today,” every seat in the auditorium had been filled. Since the topic of his presentation was not related to the issue that was being protested, the following hour had a very different tone from the protest that preceded it. His lecture did, however, focus on the larger theme of his controversial article — the rise of progressivism.

He spoke of our increasing dependence on the central government, something he referred to as a “decadent democracy.” The unjust distribution of taxes, the rising number of children being born out of wedlock, the ever-increasing expenses of modern healthcare — his list of current national concerns was extensive.

“We can get better by choosing to get better,” he insisted. “I think our national character has not been changed yet, and I think the traditional American exceptional character exists.”

After Will concluded his lecture, the floor was opened to questions from the audience. A young woman on the balcony stood by the mic, waiting for her chance to speak to Will. It was Uribe, WAVES member and sexual assault survivor who had shared her question earlier that afternoon.

Once it was her turn, she asked Will to elaborate on what he had meant in his June 6 article about the “privileges” sexual assault victims receive. The audience, knowing that a question like this was bound to come but unsure how Will would respond, started to hum with whispers.

He said he believes suspending traditional due process of law in campus sexual assault cases is unjust.

“Our society has decided rightly that rape ranks close to and not far behind murder,” he said.

Therefore, he said, great care should be taken to ensure that the protections typically given those accused of other crimes apply to defendants in sexual assault cases.

Uribe recognized that, although he had given an overview of why he wrote his article, her question remained unanswered. She asked him again to clarify what he meant by victim “privileges.”

Will briefly referenced the attention that victims can receive before going into a description of his opinions on campus speech codes restricting First Amendment rights.

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1 Nov 2014 - 29 Mar 2015

"I was grateful to have the opportunity to ask my question as a way to challenge his beliefs and stand up for my own," she said.

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The event concluded with a standing ovation from much of the audience. However, not everyone left the auditorium satisfied.

But, everyone left talking.

Richard Campbell, Chair of the Media, Journalism and Film Department and himself a former journalist was one of 1000 students and faculty members who signed a letter to Miami administration opposing Will's stance on sexual assault as directly contradicting Miami policy. However, he said, he would not have signed it if the petition was in favor of not allowing Will to speak.

"I'm a believer in more speech, not less speech," he said. "If he wasn't coming, what would that accomplish?"

Regardless of whether the person stood in line for the lecture or on the street corner in protest, everyone seemed to agree on one thing. George Will started a discussion at Miami — a very important one.

"This is an issue that makes so many people uncomfortable. The more we talk about it, the more progress we will make," Uribe added.

From those seven hundred and forty-nine controversial words came so many more — spoken in conversation or chanted on the corner, written in articles and letters or on petitions and signs.

When he described his stance on speech codes, Will shared what he thinks about having the right to share unpopular opinions.

"The First Amendment does not say, 'Congress shall not abridge freedom of speech unless the speech annoys somebody,'" he said. "And if you're not annoying someone when you speak, you're not speaking properly."

2 RESPONSES

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MEGAN BRADFORD

NOV 04, 2014 - 10:29 PM

The question still remains, should George Will have been allowed to speak at Miami University even though the statements he made in an article concerning sexual assault contradicted the Universities Code of Conduct? In my opinion yes, it is fair that the university allowed him to speak. First of all, he was hereto speak about a completely

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seeking to be taken advantage of. Sexual assault on college campuses is a prevalent problem, especially at Miami University. In recent years there was a flyer posted that graphically described how to rape a women, that is a major problem. So what could Miami do to eliminate rape culture on campus? To elaborate, rape culture is a concept that scrutinizes a culture in which rape is unavoidable and normalized due to societal mindsets about gender and sexuality. It should not matter what a person wears, if a college students wants to go out in a short skirt they should be able to do so without the fear of being sexually assaulted. In addition, if an individual want to go to the bar and have a few drinks with friends they should not have to fear walking home alone. But because of the rape culture that exists in our society many people do have that anxiety. To help prevent these problems Miami University should teach workshops that educate students about rape culture and teach individuals to have respect for other human beings. Also, it should be known that when under the influence of drugs or alcohol a person cannot legally consent to sex. This is especially important to learn on college campuses because drugs and alcohol are widely used. In response to the article, I am glad that the speech was highly talked about and debated because it opens up discussions about the prevalence of rape on college campuses. I hope that the university takes the problem incredibly seriously and makes steps towards the rejection of rape culture.

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TRACKBACKS/PINGBACKS

- 1. [A Civil Public Square at Work](#) « [Bob on Books](#)

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