Michael and Me: Education, Politics, Money, Culture, and Michael Moore at UVSC

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Michael and Me

We often engage in debate at Utah Valley State College. There are, for instance, the dueling shirts ABERCROMBIE and ANTICROMBIE and the (evidently) controversial I CAN’T, I’M LDS. But when UVSC student government officers invited Michael Moore to campus they raised the temperature on the valley floor. On September 26th, for instance, a student published a letter in the student newspaper berating his elected representatives for turning “our institution into a zoo. Walking down the hall I saw a girl being filmed on tape, obviously for Michael Moore, with a shirt that said, ‘UNF*CK THE WORLD.’ Do you think that’s something I want to see on campus?”

I myself have always enjoyed zoos and circuses, although it’s true they can be smelly. So it is with considerable pleasure that I join my fellow citizens in the UVSC community in the three-ring circus of passionate debate over whether or not the Oscar-winning journalist is really Satan.

“The first victim of war is truth”? No, it is language.”
Peter Handke

My colleague Alex Caldiero and I walk down the hall to the coffee cart in the Student Center. The two baristas see Alex coming and vie to take his order. “He’s our hero,” one of them explains to me. “When they held the protest against Michael Moore, right there, Alex walked over to the loudest one and asked what he was protesting. The man said his student fees were paying Moore $40,000. ‘So it’s about the money,’ Alex said, ‘it’s about the money, it’s about the money,’ he chanted, ‘it’s about the money, it’s about the money, it’s about the money.’ The student said there were other issues as well. ‘So it’s not about the money, it’s not about the money, it’s not about the money,’ Alex said, ‘it’s not about the money, it’s not about the money.’ About that time a KSL journalist brought his camera over to interview Alex. ‘So what’s your take on the controversy,’ the journalist asked. Alex started talking in tongues or Latin or something. The journalist started to walk away and Alex called him back. ‘I’m not done yet,’ he said. ‘The problem here is language.’”

Testimony

Students angry that the man whose films they haven’t seen is coming to campus have set up an open mic to express their outrage. Errin
Julkunen, one of the students who brought the “Vagina Monologues” to campus steps up on the box. “I'd like to bear my testimony,” she says sweetly, “that I know Michael Moore coming to campus is true. I know that dissent is patriotic. I say this in the name of the United States of America, Amen.” Boos and hisses, after the shock wears off.

“Can’t buy me love.” The Beatles

The angry father of a UVSC student waves a $25,000 cashier’s check at the students and faculty members who have been talking rationally and passionately about the controversy. “I’ll give you this if you’ll cancel the visit.” Boos and hisses.

Investigative gossip columnists Rolly & Wells report that “A member of the Board of Regents . . . attended a recent closed door meeting in which the UVSC Student Council was offered a private donation to pay off Michael Moore if they uninvited him to their campus. . . . Regent Marlin Snow confirmed this week that he was in the meeting . . . not as a representative of the Board of Regents but as a representative of the community. . . . ‘There’s nothing wrong with opposing points of view, but not someone who is there in your face with nothing positive to say.’”

Mooral Relativism!

“UVSC should reflect community values,” argues the big donor (who will not be named here because perhaps he can still be persuaded to use us as a tax write-off), “and Michael Moore’s bashing of President Bush does not reflect community values. Cancel his visit.”

“As a state college and as an institution of higher learning, UVSC is obligated to promote the values of academic freedom and free speech,” the Chair of the Philosophy Department, Brian Birch, responds. “You are asking us to be moral relativists when you ask us to abandon those values.”

“Who came up with the idea that a college should reflect community values?” I ask Lyn Bennett, a UVSC historian. “Shouldn’t a college serve a community by raising good questions and finding new ways to do things?” She remembers the intense controversy at the University of Kansas when speakers from the KKK were invited to present their ideas. “They didn’t reflect community values,” she says, “but when the University upheld their
right to speak it taught me, the way nothing else could, a core academic and democratic value.”

I tell her about the BYU student who emailed me after I had been quoted in the paper about academic freedom. “I don’t want to hear what you have to say about academic freedom,” he wrote. “I pay tuition to have you teach me what I already know.”

Blatant (from Latin blatire, to blab) Evidence

“Michael Moore: High on Cholesterol, Low on Truth.” Billboard on I-15 near Pleasant Grove, last week of September, 2004

“I disagree with bringing to our campus a blatant, one sided, unscrupulous propagandist whose use of free speech has abandoned the ethical limits that make free speech valuable. . . . [Those who support him] appear to be blinded by ideology.” Paul Tanner, Ph.D. Department of English and Literature

“Tanner closes his letter by again calling Moore a liar without once citing a single evidence or a concrete example of his alleged untruthfulness. . . .” Paul Swenson, Instructor, Department of Communication

“To use (and re-use) the word ‘blatant’ in regard to Moore . . . is likewise blatant. To denounce Moore as ‘unethical’ (three times) is blatant. And to use the word ‘propagandist’ is blatantly prejudicial.” Rob Carney, English Department

Welcome to America

“If Michael Moore isn’t welcome on this campus, then neither am I.” Pierre Lamarche, professor of philosophy and Canadian citizen

Walking back from the coffee cart, Alex tells me about how he felt when he immigrated to Brooklyn from Sicily: “When I expressed surprise at something I hadn’t seen before, when I said things weren’t like this in Sicily, they said “Welcome to America.”
“That reminds me,” I respond, “of when our friend Steven Epperson was fired from BYU for a book review he had written. His wife Diana exclaimed: ‘Steven, that’s wonderful! We can be Americans again.’”

Utah Valley, welcome to America. Your state college is serving you well.

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