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timesunion.com

Swastika sets off a furor
Defacement of poster touting Skidmore lecture part of wider uproar

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First published: Tuesday, April 1, 2008

SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Skidmore College is investigating a swastika that was drawn on a giant poster promoting a campus lecture Wednesday by former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, a spokeswoman said.

The vandalism is part of an uproar over the visit that has spilled into faculty e-mail, the student newspaper and pro- and anti-Ashcroft Facebook pages.

The Skidmore Young Republican Assembly organized the lecture with help from Young America's Foundation, a conservative outreach group that raised \$19,000 of Ashcroft's \$25,000 fee.

"It's so frustrating," said Tom Qualtere, the GOP Assembly's 21-year-old co-president, who is from Slingerlands. "You want to act like you're running Stalinist Russia, go ahead. But don't call yourselves liberals while you're doing it."

One professor, Mehmet Odekon, e-mailed colleagues suggesting the college shouldn't "honor and glorify" Ashcroft by contributing money for his lecture. But another professor, Bob Turner, described that as a "minority point of view." Faculty members support Ashcroft's visit even if they might reject his politics, Turner said.

Turner, adviser to the Republican student club, filed a bias complaint about the swastika Monday.

"They're targeting a minority," said Turner, who teaches American politics and supports Barack Obama for president. "It has the impact of suppressing speech -- that students would be hesitant coming out as conservative for fear of being targeted as a Nazi."

Ashcroft stepped down as the country's top law enforcement official in 2005. Prior to that, the Yale-educated Republican represented Missouri in the U.S. Senate and served as the state's governor. He was a divisive attorney general under Bush. Detractors condemned him for what they saw as trampling on civil liberties. Supporters lauded his tough approach to terrorism in a post-9/11 world.

Ashcroft is one of the most prominent speakers in years to visit Skidmore, a 2,400-student liberal arts college in Saratoga Springs. His arrival is a triumph for the Republican student club. The conservatives have experienced a revival in recent years, ever since a professor outraged some students by referring to its members as "Future Fascists of America."

That comment, which the professor said was taken out of context, came at a "post-election blues" event held after President Bush won a second term. Ashcroft will speak in the same venue, the 279-seat Gannett Auditorium. The 7:30 p.m. lecture on "leadership in challenging times," open to the public, will be simulcast in Davis Auditorium.

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Ashcroft's visit is part of the Conservative Challenge Week, an annual event to raise awareness at a school that both Republican and Democratic student leaders characterized as a "liberal bubble."

That label often applies to faculty, too, said Skidmore Democrats President Benjamin Yelin. The vast majority of professors Yelin encountered who have espoused political views are liberal, said the 21-year-old government major from San Francisco.

Nationally, nearly half of 18-to-29-year-olds identify themselves as Democrats, while less than a third identify themselves as Republicans, according to a national voter survey.

Yelin says he loathes Ashcroft. But he voiced frustration with both the swastika and a Facebook group called "Skidmore Students Against John Ashcroft On April 2nd." That Web page depicts a tub of "Crisco" dumped on Ashcroft's head.

"If we're going to try and counter what we think John Ashcroft stands for, that would be the absolute worst way to do it," Yelin said of the Nazi symbol. "Our concerns with Ashcroft are respect for civil liberties ... Writing the swastika is emblematic of not having civil liberties."

The young Republicans didn't take down the defaced Ashcroft poster because producing the 6-foot by 4-foot sign was expensive. Instead, they whited-out the symbol, which a vandal had sketched within the "O" of Ashcroft's last name. Authorities have no leads right now as to who did it, said Skidmore spokeswoman Andrea Wise.

The poster remained in the student center Monday, where the Republican students were selling Ronald Reagan "ranch calendars" and T-shirts with slogans like "Enjoy Capitalism."

Junior Mike Thomas, 20, stopped by to check out the Ashcroft display as he campaigned for president of the Student Government Association.

"I don't know much about him -- but everybody deserves a chance to speak," Thomas said.