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Notre Dame's Surrender to a Hostile Culture

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David Solomon's essay "A President's Retreat" forcefully highlighted the recent misstep by the Rev. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame, at the crossroads of the university's future as a Catholic institution (Houses of Worship, Taste page, April 14). Prof. Solomon properly focused on the threatened secularization of Notre Dame, leaving to the side for the moment the questions of free speech and censorship – questions that he understandably found "humdrum" after three months of demagoguery. During that time, opponents to any limits on events sponsored by Notre Dame paraded the predictable platitudes – "censorship," "free speech," "academic freedom" – while ignoring Our Lady's institutional right to free speech, a right that includes the right not to promote speech that is false and contrary to her mission as a Catholic university.

Also ignored is the reality that all universities promote some speech, while declining to sponsor other speech that conflicts with their institutional goals and objectives. For public universities, guided more often by political correctness than free inquiry, restraint comes in the form of speech codes, suspensions of student editors who published the infamous Danish cartoons, and limits on a professor's reference to religion in course work. Father Jenkins suggested that, as we are at a Catholic university, our faith would help define Notre Dame's institutional goals, and that "an event which has the implicit or explicit sponsorship of the university . . . and which either is or appears to be in name or content clearly and egregiously contrary to or inconsistent with the fundamental values of a Catholic university, should not be allowed at Notre Dame."

Yet, in the face of opposition from some vocal faculty and students, Father Jenkins repudiated this position. With this position now publicly abandoned by our president, Prof. Solomon rightly fears that Notre Dame lacks the "will to retain its Catholic distinctiveness in the face of a hostile culture . . ." Retreat, however, is surrender to a hostile culture, and that is not what we, as Catholics, are called to; rather, as John Paul the Great often proclaimed, we must be radical, be countercultural, be not afraid.

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Notre Dame's Surrender to a Hostile Culture

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(See related letter; "Letters to the Editor: Notre Dame's President Made Courageous Decision" – WSJ May 13, 2006)

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