

The Sad Power of an Atheist's Temper Tantrum Against a Christian Football Coach

Angry atheists are at it again.

This week, they're taking on Dabo Swinney, head coach of the Clemson Tigers. His alleged unlawful conduct? Expressing his Christian faith and allegedly making a number of voluntary religious activities available to his players—the adult student-athletes at Clemson.

The Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) sent Clemson University a “letter of complaint” detailing Swinney's alleged constitutional violations, including such atrocities as the team's volunteer chaplain writing Bible verses on a whiteboard and the team making available bus transportation to players who wish to attend church.

In a reasonable constitutional world, this complaint would be ignored by the media and discarded by the university. After all, there's no evidence that Clemson or Coach Swinney did anything other than expose players to the coach's religious point of view, a point of view he's constitutionally entitled to hold and express.

Players were not compelled to attend church or Bible study, and the university is not paying the volunteer chaplain. So, how could any of these actions “establish” a religion within the meaning of the Establishment Clause?

We do not, however, live in a reasonable constitutional world. Because of a quirk in the law, atheists have the power to go to federal court simply because a public acknowledgment of religion offends them. Their mere offense can often give them “standing” to file a federal lawsuit.

Thus, an atheist's temper tantrum has real-world power.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation exercises this power to the fullest, using litigation and threats of litigation to challenge everything from the national motto ("In God We Trust") to war memorials to even the display of the Star of David at a Holocaust memorial (yes, really).

This real-world power is multiplied tenfold by media complicity. Just look at the Clemson controversy. Within days of FFRF's press release, news of its latest attack on religious expression raced across the Internet, putting the university under immediate public pressure—when not one single player had complained about the coach's conduct.

In other words, there's no constitutional violation and no victim, but there is still a national controversy.

The combination of potential court action and media pressure unfortunately causes public officials to back down again and again, often before lawsuits are even filed. Fortunately, however, Clemson is backing its coach.

And so are tens of thousands of Americans. We are sending a letter of support to the Clemson coach, and in just 24 hours, more than 50,000 Americans expressed their support for Coach Swinney.

The response has to be twofold. First, confront FFRF and its angry atheist allies in court, fighting their cases not just on the merits but also contesting the very idea that mere personal offense can be sufficient grounds for filing suit. There is reason to believe the Supreme Court of the United States—when it considers the issue—will do away with "offended observer" standing, and if it does, it will restore constitutional sanity to First Amendment doctrine.

Next, FFRF must also be confronted in the media. The avalanche of coverage it enjoys can often deceive public officials into

believing angry atheists have a high degree of public support. In fact, there are many atheists who have no problem hearing religious viewpoints—after all, no reasonable person expects to always hear statements they like—and have no problem with religious liberty.

It's doubtful that the angry atheists at FFRF command majority support even among American Atheists (its membership is only 20,000), much less the millions of American Christians. When public institutions cave to atheist threats, they frequently enrage their constituencies—not out of legal necessity, but merely to end an unpleasant news cycle.

American democracy thrives in an atmosphere of freedom, when all Americans enjoy to the fullest their rights to free speech and free exercise of religion. Democracy thrives when we seek not to censor speech we dislike, but instead to change hearts and minds through debate and dialogue.

Through quirks in the law, and with the help of a complicit media, angry atheists seek to change the terms of the debate, to narrow the marketplace of ideas to exclude religious voices.

They must be opposed. Not silenced, but opposed. Temper tantrums cannot and must not trump the First Amendment.

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