Sound & Fury

The heated debate over President Bush’s appearance at Commencement raised questions about the state of civil dialogue and discourse on campus.

Commencement 2008 has been over for more than a month now, but it will not soon be forgotten.

President George W. Bush, the first sitting president to visit Furman, arrived on campus May 31 precisely at 7:30 p.m. and, before an enthusiastic crowd of more than 10,000 people, addressed the Class of 2008 for 18 minutes, using his last Commencement speech as president to emphasize the values of civic responsibility and service to others.

Then, as quickly as they arrived, the president and his motorcade were gone, leaving the spotlight to more than 600 graduates gathered to celebrate their momentous day.
Not surprisingly, however, the White House announcement on April 12 that Bush would be speaking at Furman generated both excitement and anger among the university’s various constituencies.


Respect for the office. Respect for the graduates. Freedom of expression and dissent. The proper way to model professionalism and civic engagement. The debates flew back and forth, fast and furious.

The most pointed and inflammatory exchanges took place on the discussion board of FUnet, the university’s internal Web site. Because FUnet allowed comments to be posted anonymously, a common practice on-line, many took advantage of the opportunity and, using pseudonyms, rebuked the professors who signed a letter titled “(W)e Object,” which began circulating on campus in late April and was posted on the Furman home page (www.furman.edu) May 5.

The letter, which stated it was written “in the spirit of open and critical review that is the hallmark of both a free democracy and an institution of higher learning,” was signed by current and former professors, students, alumni and friends. It listed a host of Bush administration policies to which the signers objected and said that they were “ashamed” of the president’s actions.

The response, at least on FUnet, was swift. Although there was some support for the letter, the preponderance of comments were critical. Many arguments were framed in terms of “liberals” versus “conservatives,” the sharpest darts were aimed at the professors involved and were heightened by rumors about a faculty protest at graduation.

Some professors were taken aback by the vehemence of the comments. A few attempted to engage their detractors in substantive dialogue, but their efforts failed to defuse the criticism.

The “(W)e Object” letter also prompted a counter petition, sponsored by a student group called Conservative Students for a Better Tomorrow. It lambasted the letter and expressed embarrassment in those faculty members who had “sacrificed professionalism for publicity” and appeared to value tolerance and open-mindedness only when it fit their world view. The petition further questioned whether professors had the right to request to be excused from attending graduation. (The Furman administration confirmed that faculty have always had that right.)

Once Commencement arrived, however, all ran smoothly. A small group of protesters, most of them from the Greenville community, lined Furman Mall, held signs and made their opposition to President Bush known — and cheered the graduates as they marched past. Some students and faculty wore white armbands, and 14 professors wearing “We Object” T-shirts stood in silent protest at the rear of the faculty section during Bush’s speech. But the ceremony itself proceeded without disruption — in keeping with the clear consensus of the Class of 2008, whose primary concern was that their graduation not be marred by unnecessary dramas.

And although the furor over the president’s appearance led to heated discussions and bruised feelings on all sides, it did produce constructive dialogue. A series of forums analyzing the Bush presidency, arranged by faculty in the two weeks before graduation, dealt with the war in Iraq and administration policies regarding torture, education and the environment, among other topics. The programs were well attended and generally well received, and prompted forthright discussions. Faculty and students also found themselves talking more both in and out of the classroom, and these exchanges provided further opportunities to listen and grow.

Still, the controversy revealed that there are, in one professor’s words, some “rough edges” in the Furman community. Many of the concerns raised during the weeks before Bush’s appearance remain — about the nature of civil discourse, the right and appropriateness of dissent, the values of acceptance, respect and tolerance for those with differing opinions, and especially how dialogue and discussion can and should be conducted on a college campus.
President David Shi, himself the target of criticism from faculty upset that they were never consulted about the plans to have Bush speak, dealt with several of these issues in his charge to the graduates. He emphasized that Furman seeks to promote the free exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of civility and respect, and pointed out that “Liberally educated people are those who have learned to practice tolerance and self-criticism and embody civility and humility.” (See page 56.)

But given the ferocity of the debate, questions linger. How does Furman bridge the gap among those clamoring to be heard? How does the university community counter the tendency to follow the prevailing societal attitude that “Those who yell the loudest win?” Can Furman, in an increasingly fractious political climate, maintain a campus atmosphere in which reason and objectivity displace animosity and righteous indignation? How can the university ensure that amid moments of contention or disagreement, all voices feel acknowledged and valued?

These questions will no doubt be the source of discussion and examination in the months to come. How Furman deals with them will determine its ability to mature as a national liberal arts university.

Visit www.furman.edu/fumag for more on Commencement, including a slide show from the proceedings and links to the speeches by President Bush and Meredith Neville.