

The Elkins Decision

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During the recent controversy concerning former Gay Student Union President Robert Elkins' ability to perform as a resident advisor, we purposely took no editorial stance. We explained the reason why this newspaper reported University President Frank L. Hereford Jr.'s decision to investigate the matter. We did not comment on the situation because the question of how well a homosexual student can function as a resident advisor is much more difficult than so many construe it to be. Unfortunately, as in most controversies, the conflicting opinions were divided into reactionary and liberal camps. Whatever the relative merits of such labels, it there be any, the answer lies somewhere between the two.

•Was Mr. Hereford's decision to maintain Mr. Elkins in his position the right one? Most probably, yes, in light of the overwhelming support voiced by both Mr. Elkins' superiors and the students residing on his hall. But there are more fundamental questions concerning the issue and their answers serve to illuminate the situation as a whole.

•Did Mr. Hereford ever seriously consider removing Mr. Elkins from the Resident Staff at all? This is a question that has received increased speculation recently. The argument is that Mr. Hereford "knew he could never get away with removing Bob Elkins," and his investigation simply safeguarded his defense in the advent of possible complaints. Such statements, however probable, are merely speculative. Mr. Hereford has given no indication, at least publicly, that this was his intent. We must then assume that he did in fact seriously consider the possibility of firing Mr. Elkins. The issue that has received the most debate, though, is the one most fundamental in our view, to the entire controversy:

•Was Mr. Hereford justified in even considering the removal of Mr. Elkins at all? Had there been a formal complaint lodged against Mr. Elkins' performance as a resident advisor, the answer would be a simple "yes." But if, in fact, a complaint was registered, Mr. Hereford chose not to cite it as a defense of his investigation into the matter. We are then forced to work under the assumptions that: 1. no formal complaint was registered, and 2. Mr. Hereford acted of his own volition in instigating the investigation.

No doubt, Mr. Hereford was merely anticipating future difficulties. With Mr. Elkins' position in the Gay Student Union, it was only a matter of time until a parent, alumnus or even some other student brought the matter to his attention. So, by opting to initiate discussion of Mr. Elkins' situation before he received a complaint, Mr. Hereford in a sense, put the cart before the horse. How grave a mistake was this? With respect to Mr. Elkins, at least, we feel it was a serious one. His ability to perform a task he was specifically chosen to carry out was publicly called into question. Mr. Hereford

chose to violate Mr. Elkins' right to his private sexual preferences by creating the investigation, as one student has pointed out in a letter to this newspaper's editors. But by choosing to accept the position of resident advisor, Mr. Elkins in a very real sense, assumed a public trust. And if anything has been learned from the political scandals in recent years, it is that when a man assumes a public trust, to paraphrase Mr. Jefferson, he must expect to have his private life subject to scrutiny.

Mr. Hereford viewed the question as serious enough to warrant this intrusion. There is sufficient evidence to understand this decision. Many students' parents, especially, would be acutely concerned if not violently opposed to a homosexual resident advisor for their children. This is the very real consideration Mr. Hereford must confront. However unfortunate the commonly held views about homosexuality are, it will be quite some time before most people accept homosexuals as individuals, rather than avoiding them solely on the grounds of their sexual preference. The whole Elkins controversy is a strikingly graphic portrait of society's slowness to change the latter attitude. Mr. Hereford is not to be damned for his actions. His concern over the issue and anticipation of possible complaints are understandable.

Another complaint repeatedly raised concerned the manner in which Mr. Hereford approached the issue. Many maintain that by forming a select panel to advise him on the issue, Mr. Hereford has undermined the entire Resident Selection process. Superficially this question is moot in that the committee's decision to retain Mr. Elkins was a vote of confidence if anything at all. In that Mr. Hereford wanted to form an independent body to advise him on the issue, it is not only his right to have whomever he wishes to advise him, but not so foolish a move as some would think. The Resident Staff chose an individual to serve as a resident advisor; Mr. Hereford chose to question that individual's ability to function as a resident advisor; in order to prevent a defensive attitude on the part of the Resident Staff, since one of their appointments was being questioned, Mr. Hereford chose to create an independent body with no vested interest in the outcome to serve on the panel. It would seem that such an unbiased group's decision to maintain Mr. Elkins would carry considerably more weight with Mr. Hereford and the rest of the University community.

In short, Mr. Hereford reacted to a controversial subject in a manner which is to be expected. Yet, since no formal complaint was ever publicly registered against Mr. Elkins, it is unfortunate that the University, and especially Mr. Hereford could not have acted with a greater degree of courage. Mr. Elkins' ability to function as a resident advisor was questioned not because he had been cited for incompetence, but because his personal sexual activity is different than the norm. Some day people will be accepted for what they are.