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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of elements of one culture by members of another. This might include dress, food, music, customs, language and maybe more. I had not heard of this term until recently, when two stories popped up in the news. One involves the Phi Delta Alpha fraternity and the Alpha Phi sorority at Dartmouth. The other involves the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity at UC Irvine.

The two Dartmouth houses planned an April 26 fundraiser to benefit a cardiac health charity. Since both of their names contained the Greek letter "Phi," they named their event "Phi-esta." The party would feature virgin pina colodas, strawberry daiquiris, and Mexican-themed snacks. Seems like a fun event, and for a good cause.

Well, not so fast. Dartmouth student Daniela Hernandez took exception. She complained to several campus authorities, including the Office of Pluralism and Leadership (did they have one of those when you were in school?). She said the event would be exploitative and inappropriate. The fundraiser was to be held shortly before Cinco de Mayo, which she said is just "a drinking holiday in the United States, cultural appropriation, and the inappropriate use of cultural clothing and the exploitation of groups of people and cultures for the sake of business opportunities."

Some other students agreed with Hernandez and, sure enough, the event was cancelled. No pina colodas, no daiquiris, no tacos for you!

Phi Gama Delta fraternity, with 120 chapters nationwide, has had the nickname "Fijis" since the 1800s. (Fiji is a phonetic abbreviation of Phi and Gamma.) In May, the UCI chapter held a charity fundraiser called the Fiji Islander party. Students wore grass skirts and coconut bras. Like in the musical "South Pacific."

Save Gasaiwai, a UCI student of Fijian descent, complained that the fundraiser caused pain to "marginalized" people and reinforced "white male hegemonic structures." The school's Asian Pacific Student Association agreed, and accused the fraternity of "committing an act of cultural appropriation and publicly projecting their ethnographic ignorance." APSA further demanded that the fraternity stop using the nickname Fijis.

University officials compelled fraternity leaders to attend discussions "to show fraternities what cultural appropriation is and how they might be more sensitive."

I have to agree that APSA is right about this: Those who are guilty of cultural appropriation do not, as a rule, make an in-depth study of the culture from which they are borrowing. Instead, they just select what seems appealing and enjoy it.

America, by its very nature, is a potpourri of cultural foods, music, behaviors, dress, and language. Borrowing from each other's cultures has been standard practice in our society. Unless it is done to mock or ridicule, where is the offense?

If we were confined to only that culture to which we can trace our personal lineage, how much poorer we would all be. Should only Irish-Americans be allowed to celebrate St. Patrick's Day? Should only German-Americans polka and wear Tyrolean garb at an Oktoberfest? Only Asian-Americans use chopsticks? Only Mexican-Americans have a pinata at their backyard party? Only Greek-Americans eat gyros and dance at the Greek festival? And so on.

If the nuances of cultures are not fully grasped, isn't that understandable? Can't appealing cultural features be borrowed without offense, when none is intended? By all means laugh at the ignorance and ineptitude of the borrower. But America loses something important when paranoid complaining replaces a sense of humor and good will.

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