

# **RADICAL EXHIBITIONISTS**

**When rape victims become actors in campus  
political theater, someone inevitably gets hurt.**

**BY RUTH SHALIT**

**G**iven the widespread perception that apathy is the prevailing political sentiment among the nation's college students, you might not expect an outdoor protest on a cold, rainy Saturday night to attract much of a campus crowd. Yet last year's Take Back the Night march at Princeton University, a school with about 6,000 students, brought out more than 600 men and women who "braved freezing winds and heavy rains to participate," according to *The Daily Princetonian*. On other campuses, Take Back the Night marches attract comparable crowds.

Organized by students who say they want to raise awareness about rape and sexual harassment, Take Back the Night in some ways resembles the stereotypical campus protest: Participants chant, wave signs, present a list of angry "demands" to the administration. But the personal testimony from rape victims featured at the march gives the event a voyeuristic appeal that distinguishes it from old-fashioned student activism. A sort of postmodern variation on the *True Confessions* theme, the "survivor story" represents a new genre of campus radicalism.

Here is how a survivor story is told. After reaching a designated location, the marchers stop chanting and come to an abrupt halt. Necks are craned as six or seven women push their way to the front of the crowd. These are the rape victims, or "survivors." One by one, they walk toward center stage, grab the microphone, clear their throats, and begin: "My name is \_\_\_\_, and I'm here to take back the night." Some women hastily recount their nightmares and retreat into the darkness. Others linger in the spotlight, interspersing their narratives with vague denunciations of the university administration, of male cultural hegemony, of Western society in general. The more ardently political the testimony, the more affirming the response of the crowd tends to be.

Last year, the *Princetonian* reported, many stories generated "alternating applause and soft crying from candle-holding listeners." One survivor was able to pitch the audience from applause to soft crying and back again with particular confidence and skill. Sexually victimized by her high-school boyfriend at age 16, this woman, a senior, had been speaking at Take Back the Night—"tell[ing] my deepest, darkest secret to hundreds of strangers," as she described the experience—since

her arrival on campus. Delivering what was to be her final performance, she once again recounted the details of what had happened to her in high school. She then added an update.

"At a fancy Ivy League school like Princeton," she began, "I was sure...that my nightmare of sexual violence could finally be put behind me." She had been wrong, she said. Several years before, a "very drunk" undergraduate had ogled her at a party in a way that made her feel "particularly uncomfortable." Despite numerous attempts to escape him, the student pursued this woman and her friends from club to club.

After she left her friends at a party to walk home alone, he pounced on her, dragged her back to his room, locked the door, and "while he shouted the most degrading obscenities imaginable," raped her. When he was finished, he grabbed her by the shoulders and smashed her head repeatedly against the metal bed frame until she lost consciousness. "The next thing I knew," she related, "I was slung over his shoulder, being carried back to my dorm, where he dropped me at the bottom of my entryway."

In the context of a rally whose explicit aim is to "show the way sexual violence is linked to different kinds of oppression," this woman's story seemed to offer a sort of unified-field theory. In a spectacle of sexual degradation of nearly Sadean dimensions, she was simultaneously raped and sexually harassed—forced to listen to a stream of "the most degrading obscenities imaginable" even as she was cruelly assaulted. Her story featured raging class conflict: The attacker called her "public-school bitch" and, while raping her, growled, "My father buys me cheap girls like you to use up and throw away." It revealed shocking campus indifference toward rape victims: "Although I screamed the entire time, no one even looked out of their window to see if I was in danger."

It confirmed students' suspicions of male administrators' insensitivity: "The Dean of Students Office told me 'not to press the issue' and to 'let bygones be bygones.'" It showed the university's reluctance to punish rapists: "My rapist was given a year's suspension but is back on campus now and will graduate with my class." Finally, it reminded students who their real friends were: Thanks to the enlightened folk at Princeton's understaffed, overworked rape counseling center, the woman

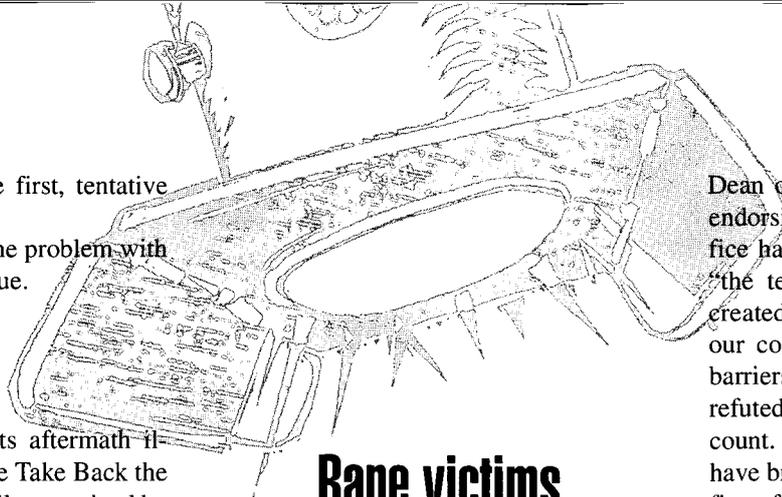
was able to take the first, tentative steps toward healing.

There was only one problem with the story: It wasn't true.

**T**he story and its aftermath illustrate how the Take Back the Night march, originally organized by rape victims as a protest against sex crimes, has been hijacked by left-wing activists seeking to further their own political agenda. Although the rape victims are still the event's main attraction, the issue of women's safety, once the focus of the march, has been pushed to the periphery. To the march's new crop of leaders, the survivor story is important not as a description of an actual crime but as a metaphor for all that is wrong with Western civilization. As the Princeton community eventually discovered, a survivor story need not be true to be valid.

On April 23, three days after the march, the dramatic survivor story resurfaced as an op-ed column in the *Princetonian*. "I want to appeal to a wider audience than the march produces," the woman wrote. Claiming that media coverage of the march could not possibly do it justice, that it was "impossible to accurately convey the poignancy of the victims' stories in a factual news report," she had decided to further "publicize [her] victimization," as she curiously put it, by submitting her story to the campus paper. "If you don't know how to react next time you see me," the woman advised at the end of the article, "give me a hug and tell me I'm very brave. Because I, like the other campus rape victims who speak at Take Back the Night, am very brave and need your support." Students quickly assured her that she had it, writing letters to the paper praising her courage and angrily condemning her unnamed assailant.

Soon, however, things started to go wrong. In an agonized letter to the *Princetonian* published on April 26,



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Dean of Students Eugene Lowe, while endorsing the goals of the march his office had helped sponsor, explained that "the testimony of one participant has created deep misunderstanding within our community and may have created barriers to reporting incidents." He then refuted key details of the woman's account. Although the survivor claimed to have brought a complaint before the Office of the Dean of Students against the man in question, no complaint or mention of the incident had ever been filed. The woman's allegation that her attacker, having been given the light sentence of a year's suspension, had recently returned to campus to torment her anew was absurd on its face. "We could expect a student who had committed such an act to be permanently removed from this community," wrote the astonished Lowe.

Fearing charges of "blaming the victim," the campus press did not pursue the issue further. Behind the scenes, however, trouble roiled. Finding herself suddenly on the defense after Lowe's letter and perhaps hoping to regain credibility, the woman had quietly begun to circulate the name of a particular student in conjunction with her rape story. How widely was this charge spread? "Widely enough that this individual felt falsely accused," Lowe says. "Widely enough so that this individual's reputation in the community had been compromised."

The male student was finally forced to bring a formal complaint against the woman to the Office of the Dean of Students. Because Princeton's internal disciplinary proceedings are kept strictly confidential, students will never know the details of the arrangement reached in that office. On May 22 of last year, however, its outcome became fairly clear. On the *Princetonian*'s last publishing day of the year, a second essay by the woman in question showed up on the paper's op-ed page. Appearing under the headline "Apologizing for False Accusation of Rape," it was a retraction of her original account. "At the Take Back the Night march," she explained, "I was overcome by emotion. As a result, I was not as clear or coherent in my recounting of events as a situation as delicate as this demands."

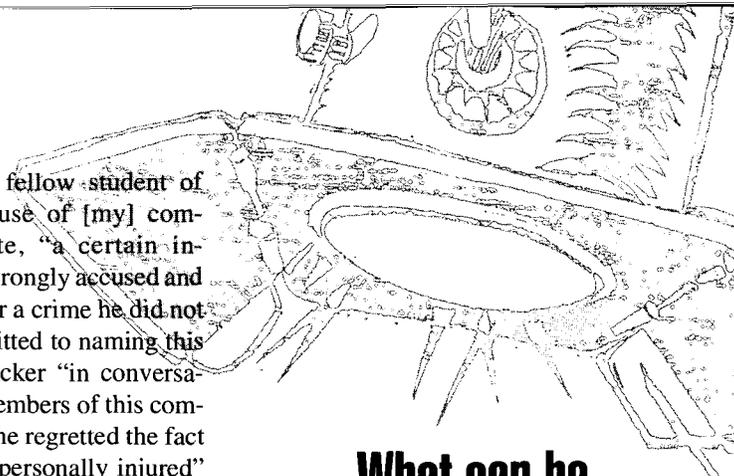
The woman apologized for having

falsely accused a fellow student of raping her. "Because of [my] comments," she wrote, "a certain individual has been wrongly accused and is being pursued for a crime he did not commit." She admitted to naming this student as her attacker "in conversations with many members of this community" and said she regretted the fact that he had been "personally injured" and "verbally attacked" by peers as a result of her statements. "I urge students," she belatedly implored, "to cease blaming this person for my attack." Her motivation in slandering him was obscure. As she confessed, "I have, in fact, never met this person or spoken to him."

**I**n an accompanying news analysis, worried university administrators reflected on what had occurred. "An open microphone can be abused," Lowe observed. "Speech that is made might not always be accountable. There is something in that dynamic that isn't controllable." Carl Wartenburg, the popular and high-profile assistant to the president, agreed that while an open-mike format "might be empowering to some, the risks are so great that it may not be healthy." Other administrators expressed concern about the number of women who in past years had deeply regretted their decision to speak at the march—rape survivors who, in seeking to become "part of the solution," had only brought new problems upon themselves.

Yet the march's student planners immediately closed ranks to defend the open-mike format. Insisting that the survivor story was "essential to affirming women's experiences," most seemed not to understand what all the fuss was about. As a *Princetonian* reporter reverently noted: "March organizers emphasized that instead of questioning survivors, community members should question the environment which perpetuates sexual violence."

Admonishing the student body for



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its naive effort to "ensure that everything we hear [at the march] is truth," one campus Women's Center participant told a *Princetonian* reporter that we "need to listen not to find the truth in [the stories], but for what kind of needs these people have and what we can do to help." Another explained that the context for dishonesty was furnished not by the march but by the "rape culture" in which it occurred.

Administrators objected to the implication that survivor stories need not be truthful. Noting that "while it's never easy to get at truth, the truth is what we have to get," Dean Lowe wondered aloud whether the survivor story in its current form might not be doing more harm than good. Other administrators expressed similar concerns, suggesting that problems might be minimized if students wishing to relate their experiences did so before or after the rally in small, counselor-led group discussions.

But student planners of the event were loathe to give up their main attraction. "The march in its present form has a lot of power, with the whole community there," said one. "I don't think you can duplicate that in small groups." Administrators then suggested that survivors wishing to tell their stories ought to be screened more carefully. This was vetoed as well. "If there were some kind of screening, people would be less likely to speak," explained another organizer. What can be the harm, after all, of a few made-up stories, provided that activists continue to warn the campus against expecting truth from rape victims?

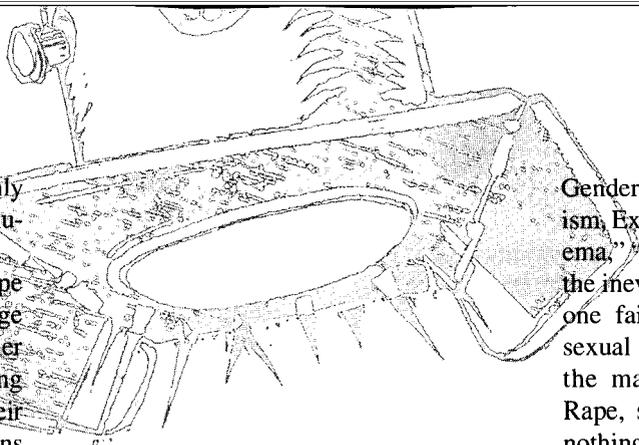
**T**hese consciousness raisers say they are acting in the interests of rape and harassment victims. But the evolution of Take Back the Night as a protest movement suggests otherwise. At Princeton and on campuses across the country, Take Back the Night marches began as the exclusive province of rape victims. While often having a strong political subtext, these

early marches tended not to be highly controversial or to promote a formulaic agenda.

Yet after it became clear that rape victims' stories were drawing large crowds of interested students, other activist groups—suddenly looking within their hearts and finding their own grievances to be mere variations on a general theme of sexual violence—began to clamor for inclusion. Gradually, rape victims lost control of the march, which is now run by their radical “advocates” at the campus Women’s Center. Proclaiming themselves enablers of marginalized and oppressed people everywhere, the new march organizers were soon announcing their intention not to “silence any voices.”

This linkage of rape victims to protest politics has changed the nature of the consciousness-raising project. Participants in the Take Back the Night march used to demand better campus lighting, additional rape counselors, cheaper self-defense classes. Now they denounce the “rape culture of American society.” And having made the ideologized abstraction from rape to rape culture, Take Back the Night marchers can claim to act on behalf of rape survivors when they call for, among other things, a comprehensive “racial harassment policy” (read: speech code) with accompanying “programs”; gay and bisexual “role models” installed in each of the residential colleges; immediate action to correct “underrepresentation” in the administration and faculty; the installation of a minority “ombudsperson” in the Office of the President; and mandated use of “inclusive language” in all university documents.

As a march organizer from the Women’s Center told the *Princetonian*, “We are asking for changes which will get rid of the conditions that contribute to sexual violence.” Last year’s march was held in conjunction with “Sexual Harassment and Assault Awareness Week”—seven days of lectures and film screenings with titles such as “Race,



Gender, and Representation,” “Colonialism, Exoticism, and Sexuality in the Cinema,” “Issues for Young Feminists,” and the inevitable “Rape Culture.” Lest anyone fail to comprehend the horror of sexual violence, a student who spoke at the march put things in perspective. Rape, she reminded the audience, was nothing less than “the crudest and most direct form of racism.... You can’t separate it from the culture of violence, domination, and oppression.”

“The direction we seem to be moving in,” one of the march’s principal organizers told the *Princetonian*, “is using the lens of personal experience to talk about different ways that different kinds of oppression are linked to sexual violence.” In this way, the activists’ unconvincing vision of America as a racist, sexist, classist, imperialist, homophobic dystopia can be revisited and revived through its supposed consonance with the experience of rape victims, for whom any decent person would feel instinctive sympathy and concern. Buoyed by large, tearful crowds and extensive coverage in the campus papers, the protesters expect the university to take their demands seriously. One organizer from the Women’s Center, explaining the march’s ever-broadening political agenda, reasoned to the *Princetonian*, “Making demands has not hurt us in the past. The administration has granted us a lot of the things we’ve asked for.”

To accomplish this, however, Take Back the Night can no longer celebrate the empowerment of rape survivors as an end in itself. Its primary goal must be to reveal them as human “lenses of personal experience” through which an entire world view can be refracted. For several years now, the march has tried to balance the need to keep survivor stories “central” against the need to address different varieties of oppression and achieve practical political goals. Organizers of Take Back the Night at Princeton “have tried to resolve this conflict,” reported the *Princetonian*, “by having survivor stories serve as a springboard for a broader discussion.”

Honest accounts of rape are advanced not to revolutionize society but to supply the facts and achieve justice. What kind

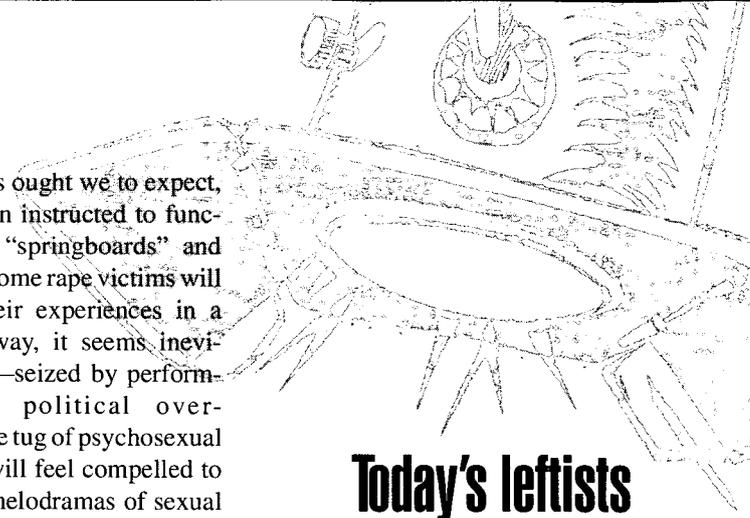
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of survivor stories ought we to expect, then, from women instructed to function as political “springboards” and “lenses”? While some rape victims will always relate their experiences in a straightforward way, it seems inevitable that others—seized by performance anxiety, political overzealousness, or the tug of psychosexual exhibitionism—will feel compelled to serve up gothic melodramas of sexual calamity. Last year’s false accuser made her statements not out of spite, not out of moral panic, but out of sheer aesthetic and ideological enthusiasm. Caught up in the drama of the moment, she allowed her narrative to careen wildly out of control.

**R**ape survivors have been victims of horrible crimes. When recalling the details of their assault, they must venture into excruciatingly private emotional territory. Why, then, have campus activists—self-proclaimed arbiters of sensitivity—seized upon their “personal experiences” as ideal material for midnight political theater? Why the need to keep survivor stories “central”? Because today’s leftists have awakened to what Madison Avenue has known for years: Sex sells. As media pundits wring their hands over the problem of “campus apathy,” students all over the country are defying the trend by showing up in the hundreds, even thousands, at Take Back the Night marches.

Meanwhile, campus rape victims seem to be tiring of the hype. Annoyed at the march’s ideological bombast, they suspect that their experiences are being appropriated by people who in truth care very little about them. “Take Back the Night is being turned into a vehicle for something that has nothing to do with rape or sexual harassment,” one rape victim says. “The whole point of the march is to give women a space, and that can’t happen if you set a political agenda.”

One of the three rape victims who participated in the event’s planning two



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years ago recalls: “Every time I opened my mouth to criticize them, they jumped on me. They said, ‘You’re privileging yourself. You’re trying to emotionally blackmail us.’” This year, no rape survivors were involved in planning Take Back the Night. So what do the organizers talk about? “Oh, you know,” says the former planner. “Whether or not to invite men. They’ll spend hours and hours arguing over whether men should be allowed to sit in on the planning meetings. It is a bunch of upper-middle-class white women who are just totally clueless.”

In the wake of last spring’s false accusation, Princeton administrators may also be losing confidence in the march organizers’ ability to deal effectively with rape victims. Survivors’ “boundaries have been confused and need to be reasserted,” Lowe says. “I doubt that works very well in an atmosphere of high drama.” Asked what he thinks of the march planners’ claims that the stories need not be true to be valuable, he replies, “I have no sympathy for that argument. People get better when they deal with truth. And I want these people to get better.” Will pressure be put on organizers to change the march’s structure? Lowe responds cautiously: “I am hopeful that it may be different. It may not be. In a place that values free expression, you can’t stop people from standing up and talking.”

Under the guise of empowerment, then, rape victims on college campuses continue to be disempowered. Political agitators desiring the attention of “the whole community” have manipulated them into becoming crowd-pleasing exhibitionists of their own sexual histories. The new consciousness raising promotes voyeurism under a guise of revolutionary virtue. In borrowing rape victims’ moral authority, campus activists seek to burnish their own dull ideas with the sheen of victimization and, in doing so, to intimidate critics into silence. The result is political metatheater—a spectacle of sexual exploitation in protest of that very outrage. ■

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# GAME WARDENS FOR DINOSAURS

BY MICHAEL McMENAMIN

**I**t violates First Amendment rights to force people to pay union dues that are used to support political candidates or causes with which they disagree. The U.S. Supreme Court said that in 1988. The decision was written by its most liberal member, William Brennan.

So why did it take George Bush until April 13, 1992, in the middle of a tough re-election campaign, to 1) issue an executive order requiring all government contractors to remind employees of their rights; 2) instruct the Department of Labor to impose new record-keeping regulations for unions, making it easier to verify what percentage of union dues go to political candidates and causes; and 3) urge the National Labor Relations Board to adopt expedited procedures to deal with the backlog of 300 cases of individuals who have had their constitutional rights violated?

Round up the usual suspects. President Bush is a busy guy. With a lot of things to do. And, until the need for re-election beckoned, domestic issues just didn't grab his attention like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the breakup of the Soviet Union, not to mention Operation Desert Storm.

But what have the NLRB and its general counsel, Jerry Hunter, been doing for the last four years to protect these employee rights? They certainly can't use foreign policy as an excuse. And, unlike the Department of Labor, the NLRB doesn't take orders from the president. It is an independent agency whose primary function is to protect the individual rights of employees.

As its general counsel, Hunter plays a major role in shaping NLRB policy because of the enormous discretion he possesses in deciding which cases to prosecute. And the fact is that the NLRB and Bush appointee Hunter have not been doing much to protect the First Amendment rights of individual employees. So what is their excuse?

It's easier to understand if you think of labor unions as dinosaurs. All the signs are there—the lumbering gait, the bloated countenance, the musty smell of creatures living beyond their time, destined



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for extinction. And think of the NLRB and Hunter as game wardens who believe their prime purpose is to protect and preserve the dinosaurs as the endangered species they are.

The wardens are fighting a losing battle. Before national labor laws were passed in the 1930s, only 11 percent of the private work force belonged to labor unions. After the creation of the NLRB, union membership soared to 23 percent of the private work force in 1937 and 35 percent in the early 1950s at the height of the Korean War. After that, it was all downhill: 27 percent in 1970; 22 percent in 1980; and today, less than 12 percent. Before the turn of the century it will be under 10 percent.

The decline is not only statistical. The

recent capitulation of the United Auto Workers in its five-month strike against Caterpillar is vivid proof. The UAW folded at the threat of permanent replacements for the strikers because, if it hadn't, scores of Caterpillar workers were going back to work to save their jobs in defiance of their union. They weren't about to learn the hard way that a union's only weapon, a strike, can be hazardous to your job when your employer uses the other side of the blade—giving your job to someone who wants it more.

Herein lies the explanation for what the NLRB has been doing for the last four years—fighting a rear-guard action to slow the decades-long decline in union membership. (A decline, by the way, not yet matched by a similar decline in the number of NLRB employees.) Understandably, making it easier for employees to assert their First Amendment rights and more difficult for unions to spend employee dues on their favored political candidates and causes is not high on the agenda of the NLRB or its general counsel.

**W**hat is? Maintaining a traditional adversarial relationship between companies and workers is very important. A case in point is the attempt by General Counsel Hunter to declare illegal the growing trend in American industry toward greater employee involvement in decision making.

Hunter claims in a complaint against Electromation Inc. that volunteer employer-employee action committees devoted to single topics such as a communication network, a no-smoking policy, an attendance-bonus program, and absenteeism are illegal under federal labor law. Such employer-employee committees are, this reasoning goes, akin to company-dominated labor unions and would undermine the traditional adversarial nature of management-labor relations required by our national labor law. Hunter has already won at the trial level,