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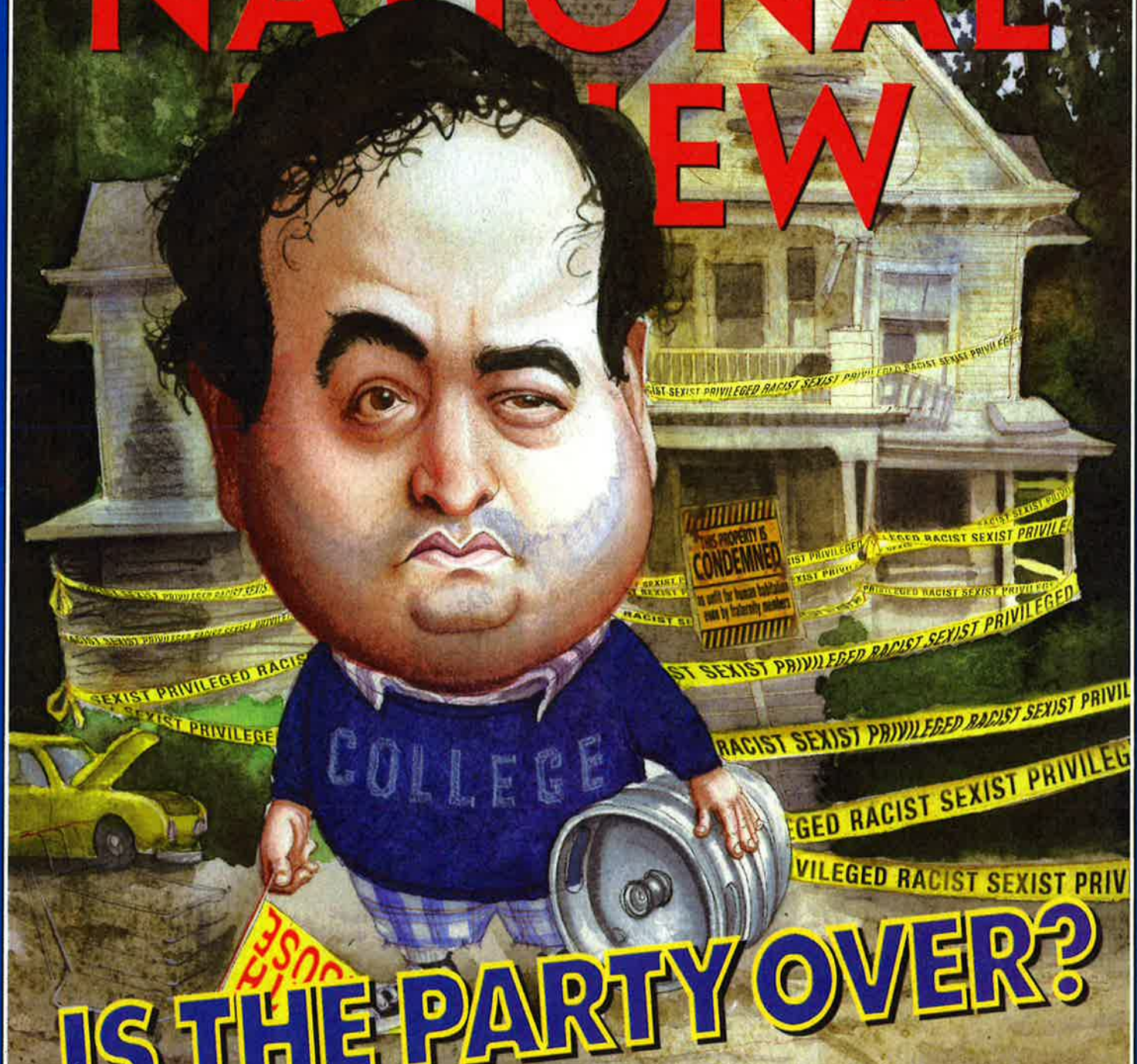

IS THE PARTY OVER?

Ian Tuttle ON THE FUTURE OF FRATERNITIES

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Is the Party Over?

The fight for the future of fraternities

BY IAN TUTTLE

FOLLOWING a night of drunken revelry, Homer reports, Elpenor—one of Odysseus's unhappy and rapidly dwindling band of brothers—climbs atop the roof of the house where they are staying to sleep off the booze. Awakening in the morning, he proceeds to tumble off the roof, fatally breaking his neck in the landing. Thus was born the first frat bro.

Falling from height seems to be a regular part of life among 21st-century college fraternities. Fraternity-house residents and their guests regularly fall off roofs, porches, decks, and fire escapes, out of windows, through skylights, and down stairs. This March, at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, some three-dozen people—business majors, apparently—clustered atop a garage to celebrate "St. Fratty's Day." Predictably, the garage's roof gave way, sending 40 Solo cups to the earth and eight people to the hospital, including one impaled through the thigh. The incident occurred a little before 6:30 A.M.

It would imply that they were attempting rational thought to suggest that Cal Poly's dawn drinkers made poor decisions. Fraternity life is, instead, more often characterized by impulsive acts of derring-do thought ("thought") up in a dense Jose Cuervo haze. How else to explain the decision of a 20-year-old Marshall University student to launch a bottle rocket from his anus—an episode that ended, *pace* Eliot, with both bang *and* whimper.

Indemnifying themselves against liability for the myriad dangers of fraternity life has turned many of the nation's historic college social fraternities—and some of their younger kin—into big-money insurance operations, as Caitlin Flanagan recounts at length in her March 2014 *Atlantic* essay "The Dark Power of Fraternities" (alongside an unmatched chronicle of fraternity escapades, including patio plunges and the Thundering Herd's rectal rocketeer). Espying in the 1980s and early 1990s the prospect of a ruinous personal-injury lawsuit—something that had not escaped the notice of swarming plaintiffs' lawyers—fraternities that were, at the campus level, rivals banded together at the national level, forming insurance conglomerates to mitigate the risk associated with being organizations composed of 18- to 24-year-old heavy-drinking males—a level of liability approximately equivalent to that of handling nuclear waste.

But if fraternities have, through top-notch legal teams and comprehensive risk-management policies, succeeded in avoiding a backbreaking lawsuit related to their various shenanigans, their survival may be endangered for reasons ultimately beyond the reach of lawyers. Over the past six months, fraternities have found themselves antagonists in the two chief areas of American grievance: sex and race.

Last November, in "A Rape on Campus," *Rolling Stone* recounted the harrowing tale of "Jackie," a University of Virginia co-ed purportedly gang-raped in 2012 by seven members of the school's Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. The university responded by immediately suspending all fraternity activity on campus. Over the following weeks, though, the story fell apart. In mid January the Charlottesville Police Department announced that there was "no basis to believe that an incident occurred at that fraternity," and by the end of the month, UVA president Teresa Sullivan had declared the article "discredited."

Nonetheless, the university required all fraternities to sign a revised, far stricter Fraternity Operating Agreement by a mid-January deadline or have their official recognition revoked.

That UVA's fraternities did nothing wrong, yet were effectively punished, highlights the ambivalent relationship many fraternities have with their host schools. When the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s struck America's campuses, administrators and professors keen to be groovy abdicated most responsibility for

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moral instruction in the lives of their students, reimagining the campus as a four-year getaway in which self-discovery, not intellectual formation, was paramount. When, in 1978, John Belushi advanced a toga-clad vision of the college fraternity, it was one that fit squarely into this space effectively free of customary moral restraints. Campus administrators fret about fraternities, but frat houses are only concentrations of the campus culture, over which administrators have largely relinquished control.

An obvious line connects the loosening of relations between the sexes and the fuzzy, booze-induced sexual encounters that are commonplace among American undergraduates today. And it is confusion, more than roving bands of predatory males, that is the source of the "rape culture" meme that has animated campus feminism of late. Alarmists continue to tout the debunked statistic that one woman in five will be assaulted in her college years, to bolster the notion that campuses are beset by a sexual-assault "epidemic" requiring swift, forceful action. In many cases, this has amounted to the establishment of kangaroo courts and/or media trials convicting male students of crimes they never committed. That was the case recently at Columbia University, around which student Emma Sulkowicz paraded her mattress to protest administrators' failure to expel her alleged "rapist." No one mentioned that the accused, Paul Nungesser, had been cleared of charges by the university on three different occasions.

Predictably, the renascence of the notion that men are "potential rapists" has frustrated efforts to address actual campus sexual assault, by creating a backlash, since while everyone is against sexual assault, most people are not against men.

That many feminists fail to make that distinction is a shame, because, despite the demonstrable falsity of the "rape culture" narrative, sexual violence *is* a problem on college campuses—even if the number is (per much of the scholarly literature) approximately two victims, not 20, per 100. Allegations of sexual assault at fraternity houses were made at UCLA in February and at Duke University and Purdue University in January, and research has repeatedly found that fraternity men are overrepresented among perpetrators of sexual assault and sorority women are overrepresented among victims.

Unsurprisingly, fraternities often traffic in vile sexual rhetoric. The Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity at the University of Vermont was closed in 2011 when a survey that asked brothers "If you could rape someone, who would it be?" surfaced online. In 2013, a member of Georgia Tech's Phi Kappa Tau fraternity penned an e-mail entitled "Luring your rapebait." And last October, the Texas Tech chapter of Phi Delta Theta lost its charter after partying in front of a poster that read "No Means Yes, Yes Means Anal."

There are partial remedies that would help make campuses safer, and we will return to them. But addressing the problems of fraternity culture requires understanding why that culture has arisen in the first place. Thus we turn to the second recent fraternity scandal.

EARLIER this month, a ten-second cell-phone video revealed members of the University of Oklahoma's Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) chapter singing a racist chant during a charter-bus ride. The song, which mentioned lynching approvingly, was universally (and rightly) condemned, the apparent ringleaders were expelled (a legally questionable action), and the chapter was disbanded.

In the wake of this incident has come a flood of articles noting the "racist history" of Sigma Alpha Epsilon (it was founded at the University of Alabama in 1856) and present-day instances of racism at fraternities nationwide, from the silly—the 2014 "Cripmas" party sponsored by Clemson's SAE chapter—to the sinister: the noose tied around a campus statue of James Meredith by the University of Mississippi's Sigma Phi Epsilon chapter.

And it is not just in the South. In 2014, Penn State's Chi Omega closed down after members sported sombreros, fake mustaches, and signs that read WILL MOW LAWN FOR WEED + BEER. Also last year, Arizona State University nixed Tau Kappa Epsilon after a Martin Luther King Jr. Day party featured watermelon-shaped cups and guests flashing gang signs.

There is little question that the Greek systems at certain universities remain effectively segregated—but it is less a matter of animus than history. Like many social institutions in the 19th century, the social fraternity—which began in 1825 at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y.—was for much of its early existence exclusively WASP, and aggressively so when students of other colors and creeds began to matriculate. Consequently, excluded students formed their own organizations. The first Catholic fraternity was founded at Brown in 1889; the first Jewish fraternity at Columbia in 1898; and the first black fraternity at Indiana University in 1903, followed by another at Cornell in 1906. The proliferation in recent years of fraternities catering to a particular group of students—Greek-letter organizations now exist for just about any ethnicity and religion—has less to do with persistent racial animus against minorities than with an increased emphasis on cultural identity. Overlooked in the outcry surrounding revelations in 2013 that University of Alabama sororities had discriminated against black pledges was the fact that current members were universally in favor of welcoming black students; it was older alumnae who were barring the way.

Back at the University of Oklahoma (OU), black students and alumni have made a point of defending the school's Greek system and its inclusiveness. "It saddens me to see our Greek community being painted as 'racist' according to the media and even fellow OU students," said Tyrone Speller, the black president of the school's majority-white Phi Delta Theta chapter. William Bruce James II, a black member of OU's SAE chapter from 2001 to 2005, said in a CNN interview that anything like the incident revealed in March would have been unthinkable during his time at OU. He staunchly defended the value of his fraternity experience.

Without trivializing the injury—physical, psychic, or social—inflicted by the instances of racism and sexism perpetrated by fraternities, one can plausibly hold that such events are often not the product of aspiring Klansmen or sexual predators but of persons obedient to something far more complex—as one sees when considering hazing, which is against the law in all but six states. Like racially offensive party themes and noxious sexual jokes, hazing is a ritual violation of social conventions that bonds fraternity members. Saint Augustine testified to this reality 1,600 years ago, when he noted in his *Confessions* that he would never on his own have stolen pears from a neighbor's tree. The powerful desire to bond inspires both fraternities' harebrained hazing rituals and the willingness of pledges to submit to them—as in the case of the Wilmington College pledge who in 2013 underwent a rite of passage reminiscent of the chair scene from *Casino Royale*, sacrificing part of his manhood in the process. Such episodes are incredible and, of course, illegal. But making it through earns one "brothers" for life. Whether that sort (or, let's say, a less virility-endangering sort) of bonding is tolerable in a civilized society is, of course, the question.

We have painted to this point a decidedly unattractive picture of American fraternity culture. But the picture is not complete, and it is hardly fair to most fraternity members, who regularly report an overwhelmingly positive experience of Greek life—and not (just) because of the easy access to alcohol. There is evidence to suggest that members of fraternities and sororities earn marginally better grades than non-Greek peers, that they are more inclined to civic engagement and leadership roles in college and after, and that they are more philanthropic. There are, too, the less quantifiable but equally important advantages: lifelong friendships, more-developed social skills, etc.

Indeed, the Greek system is one of the forms of "voluntary association" that Alexis de Tocqueville noted admiringly in *Democracy in America*: "The political associations that exist in the United States are only a single feature in the midst of the immense assemblage of associations in that country. Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations . . . of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive." "If men are to remain civilized or to become so," he concluded, "the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased."

Yet Americans' inclination to associate has been on the decline, as Robert Putnam famously reported in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). In an age of digital "friendship," Greek-letter organizations facilitate face-to-face interactions and the formation of relationships far more comprehensive than those available via a chess club, service organization, or sports team—because Greek organizations are not about what you are into, but about who you are. And, ideally, who you ought to be.

The attractiveness of that experience explains the overwhelming influence Greek life has had in America. As Maria Konnikova wrote in *The Atlantic* last year: "Fraternity men make up 85 percent of U.S. Supreme Court justices since 1910, 63 percent of all U.S. presidential cabinet members since 1900, and, historically, 76 percent of U.S. Senators, 85 percent of Fortune 500 executives, and 71 percent of the men in 'Who's Who in America.' And that's not counting the 18 ex-frat U.S. presidents since 1877 (that's 69 percent) and the 120 Forbes 500 CEOs (24 percent) from the 2003 list, including 10—or one-third—of the top 30. In the 113th Congress alone, 38 of the hundred Senate members come from fraternity (and, now, sorority) backgrounds, as does a full quarter of the House." As Alan DeSantis wrote in his 2007 book *Inside Greek U: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power, and Prestige*, "understanding the Greek system is a part of understanding America."

The crucial question is, should it be forever so? Or has the Greek system, clearly changed from the days of Theodore Roosevelt and Robert Taft, outlived its purpose?

Even supporters must recognize that fraternities' conduct and mission are often at odds. In certain instances, fraternities may be able to reform themselves. The involvement of alumni might help to change an unhealthy chapter culture (suppose William Bruce James II had stayed involved in OU's SAE house after graduating), and some research has found that mandatory sexual-assault-prevention training and bystander-intervention training make fraternity houses safer. Additionally, fraternities could delay rush. Too many freshmen enter college thinking that Greek organizations are the only entrée into a school's social life, and that anxiety encourages bad decisions.

At least one substantial legal change is sensible, too. Returning the legal drinking age to 18 would likely temper the (in the words of *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat) "frantic and performative" alcohol culture on most campuses, as well as the binge drinking encouraged by imbibing in secret.

But, as noted above, fraternities are only concentrations of a generally out-of-control campus culture. Indeed, it is in large part the ethos of the modern university that has encouraged fraternities' recklessness.

The vacation-not-education vision of college that predominates today has encouraged colleges to deprioritize intellectual formation and to focus, instead, on the assortment of goodies that will make college "transformative" and "unforgettable." This idea of the purpose of college, combined with the "College for all!" mantra, helps explain why fraternities are often hotspots of trouble: They sometimes act as refuges for people who never should have matriculated in the first place. It is not surprising that, when universities are extensions of high school, the campus culture looks a lot like a four-year prom.

Additionally, building better spa facilities for the clientele is costly, which is part of the reason that the typical college president, whether of a snug liberal arts school or Goliath U, has become little more than its fundraiser-in-chief. And because fraternity and sorority alumni are often institutions' largest donors, administrators are loath to vigorously prosecute Greek organizations' offenses, or call for higher standards of conduct. Any institution that would do so would have to break with the corporate model on which its existence seemingly depends.

Finally, colleges have abandoned any pretense of moral responsibility—hence the emphasis on "consent," a flimsy legal substitute for the more robust moral and social structures that have long since collapsed. Douthat has suggested the reintroduction of some version of the old "parietal" system—an increase in single-sex dorms, perhaps, or a requirement to sign in with an adult adviser a visitor to one's room after 10 P.M. But for most colleges to assume this role, he rightly notes, "would cut against the ideological spirit of the modern university, and no doubt would be widely denounced as puritanical, heteronormative, reactionary."

Because of those ideological commitments, abolishing fraternities would not solve colleges' myriad problems. And it would be shameful if fraternities were to bear ultimate responsibility for the campus culture that has been a product of the progressive Left, which has failed to understand that human bonding and the aims of political correctness are not always in harmony. Indeed, to think that fraternities could be wholly reformed without reforming the American college as such would be naïve.

But it is clear, too, that today's fraternities have little in common with their 19th-century kin. While their deep pockets, enormous alumni networks, and increasing popularity among undergraduates will likely sustain fraternities for some time, and while we can, and ought to, defend the importance of voluntary associations that provide community and mediate between individuals and their governments (whether the authority is a White House administration or a college one), it has become incumbent upon fraternities to show that they remain venues for character formation and sources of vital social capital—not just sources of easy beer. **NR**