


This is a printer friendly version of an article from www.southbendtribune.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

For a printer friendly version that includes the article's **picture** click here:  [Print Story with picture](#)

[Back](#)

Article published May 12, 2009

Students split on Obama Notre Dame visit Among politically minded students, event an honor or an affront.

By **ED RONCO** *Tribune Staff Writer*

SOUTH BEND -- Edward Yap was sleeping off a homework all-nighter right before he found out.

Spencer Howard was walking around Notre Dame Law School with some friends when he heard.

For Yap, who led the Notre Dame College Republicans through the 2008 campaign, news of President Barack Obama's upcoming appearance at the Catholic university's commencement was upsetting.

"When I finally woke up, I saw my inbox and my text messages. Everything was overflowing with messages of disappointment," said Yap, a junior studying political science. "A lot of these text messages, they said, 'What's happened to the university?'"

For Howard, a senior political science major who was president of the Notre Dame College Democrats during the 2008 campaign, the news was wonderful and stunning. "I kind of wandered around campus receiving texts and phone calls and responding to about 25, 30 different people, because they all know where I stand," Howard said. "I got lost on campus -- walked to the wrong parking lot for my car. Just forgot where I was, it seemed."

Obama won the campus mock election in October, with 52.6 percent of the vote to McCain's 41.1. About 23 percent of students turned out to vote.

But Obama's support of abortion rights has led to a loss of support among Catholics in general, according to a Pew Center study, and has meant hand-wringing on this campus of 11,700 students.

Some say it's an honor to hear from the president of the United States at graduation. Others say his invitation is an affront that goes against one of Catholicism's most fundamental teachings: respect for human life.

About this series

Sunday: Is ND Catholic enough?

Monday: Abortion as a political issue

Today: Campus political leaders, faculty respond

Wednesday: Who has authority over ND?

Thursday: How ND chooses commencement speakers

Friday: ND's history of debate, academic freedom

"I really do believe Notre Dame has damaged its credibility in standing up for Catholic causes," Yap said. "We can no longer speak about these issues with honor and integrity, because we're kind of involved in the problem now." A student coalition, called Notre Dame Response, has been peacefully protesting Obama's appearance.

"This is not a partisan issue," Yap said. "I would love to have Democrats speak at Notre Dame. However, I would ask that any Democrat that speaks at Notre Dame be a good Catholic, advocate positions that are Catholic."

But Howard notes there was controversy surrounding President George W. Bush's visit to campus in 2001, given Bush's support for capital punishment.

He acknowledges that the intensity of the debate surrounding this particular president and the issue of abortion might be greater, but he still thinks the experience will be good for the university, echoing the sentiments of former Notre Dame President the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh.

"Father Hesburgh spoke with a class of mine in which he said the school will be better for having the president come and the president will be better having come to Notre Dame," he said. "I completely agree with that." One place where Yap and Howard agree is in their reaction to protests going on involving graphic imagery of aborted fetuses, plastered on the sides of trucks and being flown through the air on a banner towed by a small plane.

Although those behind the protests argue that the graphic images convey an ugly truth about abortion, Yap says they distract from the message.

He cited a recent protest, led by activist Randall Terry, in which people pushed baby carriages holding dolls covered in fake blood.

"I find that objectionable and I don't think anyone supports that," Yap said. "I wish he would stop doing that because it really deflects from the message we're trying to send."

Howard agrees -- "I'd like to see less of that and more dialogue," he says -- but doesn't share the views of those who said they feel sorry his class has to deal with the controversy. "It's the real world. You're going to run into controversy throughout your life," he said. "I don't think you can escape it, and just because we're in college I don't think this is a place where we can hide from it." Staff writer Ed Ronco: eronco@sbtinfo.com (574) 235-6353
