

RACIAL TENSION

INCIDENTS & OUTCRY

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An outbreak of racially motivated harassment last fall sparked outcry on campus and prompted university officials to improve security. Incidents included threats and epithet-laden phone calls to black students in Ujamaa Residential College, vandalism in a hallway of the Latino Living Center, and a suspicious fire outside Akwe:kon, the Native American program house. "These incidents and others like them," President Rawlings said, "are totally intolerable." Tensions escalated when the Cornell Review published a cartoon depicting Akwe:kon as a casino. The newspaper called the cartoon a harmless parody, but it came under fire from students and administrators. Rawlings deemed it part of the Review's "recent history of offending minority groups."

The incidents, along with rumors that racist organizations were planning a "white power" protest in the Ithaca area (the protest never occurred), inspired a 500-person town-gown rally on the Ithaca Commons in November. In response to safety concerns, campus officials installed improved lighting, stepped up security patrols, and added more Blue Light emergency phones.

The events coincided with several other contentious debates on campus relating to racial or ethnic issues:

- Protests over a Humanities Council report that considered consolidating Cornell's ethnic studies programs. Some students and faculty regarded the proposal as a threat to the programs' autonomy.
- Concern about a longtime vacancy of the directorship of the Latino Studies Program.
- Objections from the Latino community, on the fifth anniversary of the Day Hall takeover, that the university hadn't done enough to address its needs. In 1993, students occupied the building for four days, demanding the creation of a Latino program house and more resources for Latino studies, among other things.

In November, the Humanities Report sparked a week-long sit-in in Goldwin Smith Hall by students calling for the entire document to be scrapped; in the end, the sections of the report concerning the ethnic studies programs were withdrawn. And in December, Arts college officials announced the appointment of Rutgers professor Pedro Cabán as LSP director beginning in the 1999-2000 academic year. Cabán's hiring didn't end the controversy, however. After his appointment was announced, a group of students and faculty objected to Cabán on the grounds that he isn't qualified. (He had been considered for the job in 1996 but rejected because of his lack of scholarship; he has since published a book.) But Arts college dean Phil Lewis and senior associate dean Bidy Martin stressed Cabán had been unanimously endorsed by the search committee. "Under Dr. Cabán's leadership," they said in a statement, "we hope it will be possible to overcome the conflicts among participants in the program that have contributed to the problems we are experiencing this year and to establish plans for the program's future."