

A National Crisis and the Role of the Academy

By Kevin Boyle

The noise is returning to my university. The first few days after the September 11 terrorist bombings, the campus was enveloped in an eerie silence.

The business of the university continued throughout those terrible days. But the buzz that normally fills the hallways and walkways was gone. Students and staff moved from place to place without speaking, as if conversation were disrespectful to the dead, as if there was nothing to say.

Like most Americans, we were stunned by the attacks. We were also personally touched by the violence. I teach at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Most of our students are from the Boston area, the departure point for two of the four hijacked flights. The campus is just three hours from New York City, and many of us have friends and family there.

The university lost a staff member, who was aboard United Flight 175, the second plane to hit the

World Trade Center. We also lost six alumni. Five were trapped on doomed flights. The sixth worked in the offices of Cantor Fitzgerald. The youngest victim, 22, had graduated just four months earlier. It was a time for silence.

As the weeks passed, however, we began to recover our voices. We talked about everyday things: the wonders of a New England autumn, the annual travails of the Red Sox, the demands of our courses. And we began to talk about the attack. The university organized lectures and panel discussions. My department sponsored a symposium on the crisis for area high school teachers.

When the United States launched its bombing campaign against Afghanistan, student groups staged both peace protests and rallies in support of the military. In sum, we began to do what institutions of higher learning are supposed to do. We began to teach and learn from each other.

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But teaching and learning in the midst of a national crisis is different than teaching and learning in normal times. If the past is any guide, students and the public will have less tolerance for the controversial, even discomfoting, opinions that faculty members and students may offer.

Outright censorship seems highly unlikely. In the current atmosphere of fear and anger, however, self-censorship is a real possibility. At the same time, it is all too easy for faculty and students raised in the long shadow of the 1960s to engage in dissent simply for dissent's sake. Campus protesters should not underestimate the impact their actions may have. The public has a right to be offended by words and actions meant to offend. So, even as we regain our voices, we find ourselves speaking and teaching in a world more precarious than the one destroyed on September 11.

Most faculty members take it for granted that they are able to say whatever they please in their classrooms and in public forums. Twice in the past century, however, national emergencies triggered waves of repression on campuses.

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, many universities imposed a gag rule on their faculties.

“What had been tolerated before becomes intolerable now,” the president of Columbia University told the Class of 1917 at commencement. “What had been wrongheaded was now sedition. What had been folly was now treason... There is and will be no place in Columbia University ... for any person who ... acts, speaks, or writes treason.”¹

Across the country, faculty members were fired for their anti-war views. The most notorious case occurred at the University of Toledo, which dismissed the economist and radical pacifist Scott Nearing just 11 days after the United States declared war on Germany.

The second wave of repression rolled across campuses in the late 1940s and 1950s, at the height of the Cold War. Although there is no firm number of victims, it is safe to say that hundreds of faculty members were fired for their alleged communist ties. Once again, educational organizations—including the National Education Association—insisted that the threat facing the nation made such actions acceptable, even necessary.

Communist Party “membership, and the accompanying surrender of intellectual integrity,” the NEA insisted in 1949, “renders an individual unfit to discharge the duties of teacher in this country.”²

As devastating as these purges

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were, they were only the most visible part of a much wider form of repression in higher education.

"Today," the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism said in 1953, "the vast majority of teachers ... have learned that promotion and security depend upon conformity to the prevailing ... concept of devotion to the public welfare."³

Faculty members thus trimmed their courses of "subversive" readings, excised lecture materials that might put them in the wrong light, and even avoided subjects that might lead to controversy.

As historian Ellen Schrecker has argued, the fear was so pervasive that it stifled critical inquiry on campuses for years. As late as the early 1960s, thoughtful critics considered colleges and universities so cautious they could not serve as centers of political and social change.

A progressive trade union official spending a year at Rutgers University in 1963 expressed the disappointment many politically engaged students felt. "There are no 'revolutions' being fomented in the academy," he wrote an associate, "Indeed, the very lack of involvement helps one to see why [unions] are so damned important in our society."⁴

There is no reason to fear that the current crisis will lead to the same sort of restrictions that col-

leges and universities imposed during World War I and the Red Scare. But there are disquieting examples of faculty members being pressured to keep dissenting opinions to themselves.

The experience of George Wright, a political scientist at California State University at Chico, is instructive. Speaking at the campus' Free Speech Zone, Wright condemned the September 11 attack as a "crime against humanity."

He argued, however, that the Bush administration would use military force in Afghanistan not simply to punish the terrorists but also to "colonize" the Middle East so as to protect the flow of oil. In the process, Wright said, "innocent people would be killed."

Students insisted that such remarks were not welcome: Some members of the audience shouted that the speakers should restrict their comments to discussing the victims of the terrorists. When conservative talk-radio shows picked up the story, Wright was flooded with threatening letters and e-mails.⁵

A similar controversy struck St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Like many colleges, St. Olaf organized faculty-led discussions of the tragedy. Some students were offended by professors' criticism of the

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Bush administration's response to the attack. Two resident assistants took their complaints to the dean, asking that he urge faculty members to offer fewer "negative comments regarding the leadership abilities of the American government."

The dean was sympathetic. "Students spent the morning watching planes hitting buildings and blowing up," he told the press. "They weren't prepared for this political analysis critical of the U.S. government. When your house is on fire, you don't want individuals standing there saying how stupid the firefighter is."

Since the controversy, St. Olaf's faculty has debated whether there are criticisms of government policy that simply should not be aired on campus.⁶

The pressure for self-censorship may increase as colleges and universities face the economic consequences of the terrorist attacks. The American economy was already sliding into recession before September 11. The fall-off in employment, consumer confidence, and investment since then has strained state budgets across the nation.

Public colleges and universities are feeling the effects. Georgia's system of higher education, for example, may face cuts of \$100 million over the next two years, while the New York community colleges and

the entire University of California system are considering slashing their budgets by 15 percent.

Private colleges, meanwhile, have seen their endowments shrink as the stock market contracted.⁷ Under such conditions, it is not difficult to imagine faculty and administrations desperately trying to avoid controversies that could anger state legislators or donors.

An incident at the University of Texas at Austin dramatizes the possibilities. Shortly after the September assaults, journalism professor Robert Jensen published an op-ed essay in *The Houston Chronicle* criticizing American policy makers who "have engineered attacks on civilians every bit as tragic" as the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C.

Many readers were outraged, and in short order alumni were threatening to withhold donations unless Jensen was fired. In response, university president Larry Faulkner fired off his own letter to *The Houston Chronicle*, saying he was "disgusted" by the op-ed piece and considered the professor a "fountain of undiluted foolishness." "There is some comfort," he added, "in the fact that practically no one here takes his outbursts seriously."

Faculty members understood the president's broadside as a clear

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indication that dissent could be costly. “The faculty felt there was a very clear message that if you stick your neck out, we will disown you,” a professor said.⁸

Teachers are not the only members of campus communities who may feel the need to silence themselves. Educators report intense student interest in discussing the roots and consequences of the crisis.⁹ But there is a serious question: Do students feel free to make comments that may be seen as insufficiently patriotic?

The pressure is even greater for Muslim students. A colleague who teaches at a university with a large Muslim population noticed in the weeks after the attack that women dressed in *chadors* avoided making eye contact with non-Muslim students and staff, so intense was the intimidation they felt.

But silence serves no one’s interests. Though the pressure for conformity is considerable these days, teachers must resist the tendency to censor themselves. We have a responsibility to analyze the crisis, to explore its causes, to explore a wide range of policy alternatives, and to consider the likely outcome of our war on terrorism.

Our students deserve to hear a wide range of opinions, even if some of those opinions upset them. We also need to foster a classroom atmosphere that gives students the

freedom to express themselves.

This means that we have to listen—really listen—to our students, including those with whom we disagree. Arguments will result, but arguments are the lifeblood of the learning process. We should not shy away from them. Nor should faculty back down in the face of cautious administrators and angry alumni.

Those of us fortunate enough to have the protection of tenure need to defend the rights of educators and students to speak their minds, even if our colleagues are offering opinions we do not share. And we have to support those institutions, such as faculty unions, that are willing to defend freedom of speech on campus.

But it is not enough to foster discussion and debate about the roots and consequences of the terrorist attack. We also need to spend more time discussing with our students the importance of dissent in the preservation of democracy.

The American political system rests on the extraordinary belief that the people are sovereign. As the nation’s founders understood, the people cannot be sovereign if they are not free. Civil liberties are not a threat to our nation’s well being. They are, rather, its guarantee. It is all too easy to lose sight of

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that proposition in times such as these, when we feel the terrible weight of what has happened and the fear of what may yet come.

Even as educators celebrate the right to dissent, they should feel free to criticize the forms that dissent may take. A generation has passed since student activists led the crusade against the Vietnam War. But that crusade left an indelible mark on campus political discourse.

As historian Michael Kazin explains, a key segment of the 1960s student left “indict[ed] America root and branch for fostering misery” in the non-western world and called for “an anti-imperialist revolution by Third World people inside and outside America’s borders [as the only way to] exorcise the nation’s sins.”

This set of beliefs, Kazin says, pushed its adherents toward a style of protest that assailed “patriotism as a compromise with imperialism.”¹⁰ Protesters during the 1960s thus made patriotic symbols and expressions a particular target of attack, both rhetorically and physically.

The ’60s radicals’ style remains popular with some campus activists—faculty members and students—today; in fact, campuses’ perpetual romance with the 1960s may well have strengthened its

hold on the imagination. As a result, at least some teachers and students have made comments and staged protests that are at best thoughtless and at worst simply cruel.

Two examples suffice. At the University of New Mexico, a history professor told his class, “Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon gets my vote.” He was trying to be funny, he says, but the comment—so rooted in knee-jerk anti-militarism—displayed a shocking lack of concern for the lives lost in the Pentagon attack.

A recent event at Amherst College, near my home university, was equally depressing. On October 18, a group of Amherst students organized a rally on the college’s pristine common to celebrate American patriotism. As the rally came to a close, a group of approximately 10 young people, all of them dressed in black, stepped from the crowd, set two American flags on fire, and trampled on a third while chanting, “This flag doesn’t represent me; this flag doesn’t represent me.”

Most of the protesters refused to speak to the local press after the event. One participant, a student at Hampshire College, explained that the group wanted to show that the United States was responsible for “much of the pain and suffering” in the world and has perpetuated a “spree of genocide that dates back

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to Columbus in 1492.”¹¹

Free speech advocates often are hesitant to criticize such offensive displays, fearing that they may contribute to the suppression of dissent. But if teachers should not be cowed into silence by those demanding unity, they also should not be cowed into silence by adolescent displays of anti-Americanism.

To be sure, educators should forthrightly defend protesters’ right to say whatever they please, and even to desecrate the flag while doing so. They should also feel free to disagree with the protesters’ actions. Julius Lester, professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, showed how it should be done.

Lester has the radical bonafides the most militant protester would envy—in the latter half of the 1960s he was a pivotal staff member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee—and he has maintained many of his political commitments from that era. But he wasted no time in condemning the flag burning on the Amherst College campus.

The current crisis is not a replay of the Vietnam War, he told a local newspaper, and the protesters were wrong to treat it as such. “The flag is coming to represent not the

government of the United States,” he said, “but it is coming to represent the identity of the people on a very individual and personal level ... so many have and will take the burning of the flag as a personal attack.”¹²

Such reasoned and sensitive positions are precisely what Americans need in this difficult time. Our nation will not be made stronger or safer by an imposed unity, nor will it be prodded onto the right path by simple-minded protest. It will be strengthened, however, by the free exchange of ideas.

We need to talk about the United States’ relationship to the Muslim world, about the military and diplomatic choices that our nation faces, about the moral complexity of retaliation, about the psychological burdens of fear, about the great American tradition of civil liberties. Colleges and universities know how to foster those discussions; it is what we do best.

As teachers and staff members, we cannot be afraid to break the silence that the brutal events of September 11 imposed on us. In fact, we are obliged to do so, by our commitment to education, by our commitment to democratic principles, by the memory of our dead. ■

Endnotes

- ¹Carol S. Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), p. 199.
- ²The best account of the Red Scare in higher education is *Ellen W. Schrecker, No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). The NEA statement is quoted on pp. 111-112.
- ³The dean, Carl W. Ackerman, is quoted in David Cauter, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 429.
- ⁴Carl Westman to Irving Bluestone, May 18, 1963, Box 10, UAW Community Action Program Collection, Walter P. Reuther Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
- ⁵"When Viewpoints Clash", *Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 2001, p. 12.
- ⁶*Ibid.*; "After the Attack," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, September 24, 2001, p. 4A; "Terrorist Attacks Put Academic Freedom to the Test," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* October 5, 2001, p. A12.
- ⁷"State Campuses Face Shake-Up," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, November 2, 2001, p. 1F; "CUNY Officials Seek Relief From Spending Cuts," *New York Times*, October 25, 2001, p. D3; "UC Irvine Chief Orders Partial Hiring Freeze," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2001, Part 2, p. 6; "Wealthiest Colleges Lost Billions in Endowment Values in Last Year," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 19, 2001, p. A24.
- ⁸"Terrorist Attacks Put Academic Freedom to the Test."
- ⁹"The Changed Classroom, Post-September 11," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 26, 2001, p. A16.
- ¹⁰Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 209-210.
- ¹¹"Campus Protests Ignite U.S. Flag," *Springfield (MA) Union News*, October 19, 2001, p. 1.
- ¹²"Protesters Under Fire For Flag Burning," *Amherst (MA) Bulletin*, November 2, 2001, p. 6.