The New McCarthyism in Academe

by Ellen Schrecker

“W e are in dangerous times,” University of Colorado President Elizabeth Hoffman warned the faculty at a special meeting on March 3, 2005. There was, she explained, the very real danger that the university might face what she called a “new McCarthyism.” As she grappled with the raging storm over Colorado’s controversial ethnic studies professor Ward Churchill, Hoffman worried that the university, which had only recently apologized for firing an untenured faculty member in the 1950s, might “do today something that our predecessors [sic] will judge ill of us 50 years from now.” Hoffman was hardly alone in her concerns. Lee Bollinger, Columbia’s president, faced a similar struggle over his university’s department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Culture (MEALAC); and he too noted that this is “a time of enormous stress for colleges and universities across the country.”

While it would be hard to deny that America’s colleges and universities are under siege at the moment, it is hard to tell whether they are facing a replay of the academic freedom violations of the McCarthy era. After all, during that unfortunate period, at least 100 faculty members lost their jobs, while countless others censored themselves and eschewed political dissent. Today’s body count is much smaller. Probably no more than half a dozen academics, if that, have been let go

Ellen Schrecker is professor of history at Yeshiva University. Recognized as one of the nation’s leading experts on McCarthyism, she has published many books and articles on the subject, including Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (1998), The Age of McCarthyism: A Short History with Documents (1994, rev. ed. 2002), and No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities (1986). Most recently, she edited a collection of essays, Cold War Triumphalism: Exposing the Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism.
for political reasons since the current war on terror began four years ago. And yet...

Hoffman and Bollinger are not crying, “Wolf.” Although it is unlikely that we will see an exact replay of the anticommunist furor that roiled the nation’s campuses during the early Cold War, external forces are currently challenging the traditional freedom and autonomy of American higher education. Inspired by a cohort of dedicated activists, many politicians, talk-show hosts, and ordinary citi-

**While heads have yet to roll, intellectual freedom faces challenges that seem all too familiar to students of the McCarthy era.**

zens are questioning both the mission of today’s universities and the political affinities of their faculties. While heads have yet to roll, intellectual freedom faces challenges that seem all too familiar to students of the McCarthy era. There is a very real danger that external groups and individuals will, as they did in the 1950s, impose political tests for employment on the nation’s faculties. Moreover, unlike those earlier attacks on the academy, the ones today not only threaten people’s jobs, they also endanger the professional autonomy and intellectual integrity of the entire academic community.

What makes the current situation so ominous is that it comes at a time when the nation’s colleges and universities confront structural financial constraints that have already degraded their traditional educational and research functions. McCarthyism’s depredations occurred during the golden age of academe, when higher education was expanding and the professoriate enjoyed considerable respect. Now, with the public sector itself under attack, the federal largesse that supported so much of that earlier expansion has dwindled and the nation’s colleges and universities are desperately scrabbling for resources. At the same time—and in part because of the current political campaign against the university—the academy’s values seem out of step with the rest of the country’s, depriving its increasingly beleaguered institutions of the public support necessary for their continued survival as vibrant centers of independent intellectual life.

It does not, however, take an analysis of the universities’ structural vulnerabilities to recognize the way in which the current campaign creates a climate of chill,
even though—as in the McCarthy era—it targets academia’s squeakiest wheels. Take speakers’ bans, for example. During the late 1940s and 1950s, Communists and even non-Communist controversial figures were excluded from just about every college and university in the country, while administrators pontificated about the threat those men and women posed to free speech and educational proprieties. In many cases, if the institution did allow such a speaker to appear on campus, it would insist that someone else share the platform. When the University of Minnesota banned a concert by Paul Robeson, for example, the school’s adminis-

‘It naturally follows that I will be seeking justification for all departments and their academic value and merit to the university community.’

tration explained that the singer could have performed for the students, if only he had been willing to allow someone to rebut his “one-sided and musically overtoned propaganda.”

Ward Churchill is in Paul Robeson’s position today. He had been scheduled to speak about Native American rights at Hamilton College on February 3, 2005, but once an uproar arose over an obscure article in which he had tastelessly labeled some 9/11 victims as “little Eichmanns,” the college transformed his lecture into a panel discussion about “The Limits of Dissent.” Then, as the furor intensified and the death threats poured in, Hamilton’s president cited the problem of maintaining security and cancelled the whole show. Other colleges and universities followed suit. Wheaton College in Massachusetts, Eastern Washington University, the University of Oregon, and even his own institution, the University of Colorado, rescinded invitations to the controversial scholar (though he did end up speaking to a class and outdoor rally at Eastern Washington). Similar cancellations dogged the college appearances by filmmaker Michael Moore in the fall of 2004. Meanwhile, as one might expect, the Colorado authorities came under pressure to dismiss Churchill altogether. Significantly, as the University of Colorado regents pondered Churchill’s future, it was clear that some of them were after more than one scalp. “It naturally follows that I will be seeking justification for all departments and their academic value and merit to the university community,” Regent Tom Lucero explained. “I want to scrutinize whether or not it is necessary to eliminate courses and departments of questionable academic merit.”
Presumably Churchill’s home, the university’s Department of Ethnic Studies, is now under the gun.

So, too, are many departments of Middle Eastern studies. Their current ordeal is all too reminiscent of the travails of the nation’s East Asia scholars during the 1950s. After the Communists took over Beijing in 1949, Joe McCarthy and his allies sought scapegoats for the so-called “loss of China.” Johns Hopkins’ sinologist, Owen Lattimore, was the main academic victim, in large part because of his eminence in the field. Targeted by McCarthy as the nation’s “top Russian espionage agent,” Lattimore (who had never been a Communist, much less a spy) had to endure 11 days of grueling testimony before a special Senate investigating committee and then face a trumped up indictment for perjury. By the time the case against him was thrown out of court, Lattimore’s career was in ruins. Other East Asia scholars took heed and kept their heads down as best they could.

Today, it’s academics from the Middle East and scholars who study this area who are at risk. The Arab–Israeli conflict has seeded their field with land mines. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the first major academic freedom case of the post-9/11 era should involve an outspoken Palestinian nationalist, the University of South Florida (USF) computer scientist Sami al-Arian whose troubles had long pre-dated the current war on terrorism. USF suspended al-Arian for security reasons after an unfortunate appearance on the _O’Reilly Factor_ in September 2001 brought death threats. Then, after he was arrested and detained without bail on charges of supporting an anti-Israel terrorist organization, the university fired him. Whatever the extent of al-Arian’s involvement with the Palestinian jihadists, his travails, though they may ultimately lead to an American Association of University
Professors (AAUP) censure of USF, could have been predicted. More troubling has been the multi-pronged campaign against the field of Middle Eastern studies as a whole, a campaign that has achieved considerable success in convincing politicians, journalists, talk-show hosts, and ordinary citizens that most scholars in the field are radical, biased, and hostile to Israel and the United States. These charges have been circulating for years within the Zionist community. The events of September 11 boosted them into the mainstream, where they are becoming increasingly accepted as an accurate portrayal of an academic discipline that is, to quote a recent New York Times editorial, “out of control.” At the ideological core of this campaign is a small group of polemicists housed in a variety of independent organizations who have done a brilliant job of disseminating their scenario to the rest of the country. There is, for example, Daniel Pipes’s pro-Israeli think tank, the Middle East Forum and its blacklisting appendage, Campus Watch. When it was formed, in September 2002, the latter outfit targeted 8 professors and 14 institutions for their supposedly unacceptable views about Islam, Israel, and U.S. policy in the Middle East. No doubt because that compilation evoked too many comparisons to the McCarthy-era blacklists, the list soon disappeared from the Campus Watch Web site. The organization now describes its function as “monitoring Middle East Studies on campus” and encourages students and faculty members to pass along information about the Middle Eastern scholars at their schools.

The efforts of Pipes and his allies bore fruit early in 2003 when Senator Rick Santorum introduced legislation that would cut off federal funding to universities that allowed their faculty members, students, and student organizations to openly criticize Israel. While Santorum’s initiative quietly faded from view, a more serious congressional attempt to regulate Middle Eastern studies got under way. In a prepared statement before a subcommittee of the House Education and Workforce Committee on June 19, 2003, Stanley Kurtz, of the National Review and Hoover Institution, attacked the nation’s area studies centers and proposed
that Congress create an outside advisory board to supervise their federal funding under Title VI of the Education Act.

According to Kurtz, the late Palestinian literary critic Edward Said had cast such a spell over the field that just about every center of Middle Eastern studies subscribed to “post-colonial theory” and displayed an “extremist bias against American foreign policy.” Worse yet, not only were these centers engaging in the trendy theorizing that marked so much of the nation’s academic discourse, but they were also discouraging their students from entering the nation’s public serv-

This piece of legislation is so disturbing because it subordinates the professional judgment of the scholarly community to that of external political monitors.

cice. “A major reformation of the American academy’s area studies programs” was necessary. The committee agreed, incorporating Kurtz’s recommendations into a measure, H.R. 3077, that the full House then passed in October.15

Though H.R. 3077 never got to the Senate, it is now under consideration again and its unanimous adoption by the House reveals how readily the nation’s political elites have accepted a right-wing Zionist scenario about Middle Eastern studies. What makes this piece of legislation so disturbing is that it subordinates the professional judgments of the scholarly community to those of external political monitors. Worse yet, this threat to the academy extends far beyond the area studies centers that H.R. 3077 targeted. In his pitch to the House subcommittee, Kurtz invoked the mantra of academic freedom to deplore the lack of ideological diversity on the nation’s campuses:

Unless steps are taken to balance university faculties with members who both support and oppose American foreign policy, the very purpose of free speech and academic freedom will have been defeated.

The vigorous and open debate that is supposed to flourish at our colleges and universities cannot exist without faculty members who can speak for divergent points of view.16

Kurtz’s emphasis on the one-sidedness of the American academic profession, though ostensibly focused on area studies centers, is part of a broader campaign to bring more conservative voices into the academy. Because of the sensitivity of the issues that Middle East scholars deal with, they are taking the first hits, but, as the
current demand for more political diversity within the nation’s faculties reveals, this campaign threatens all of academe.

The campaign seeks to implement what David Horowitz, its main proponent, has labeled an “Academic Bill of Rights,” a measure ostensibly designed to ensure that neither faculty members nor students suffer because of their political or religious beliefs and that all curricula and reading lists reflect “a diversity of approaches to unsettled questions.” At the moment, 17 states have either adopted or are considering such a measure, and similar language has been proposed for the fed-

| These measures seek to regulate—and politicize—such core professional responsibilities of faculty as the grading of students and the design of syllabi. |

eral Higher Education Act that Congress is slated to enact before the end of 2005. If the nation’s politicians actually implement Horowitz’s Academic Bill of Rights, real academic freedom will be endangered in ways that have never before been encountered, for the measures seek to regulate—and thus politicize—such core professional responsibilities of faculty members as the grading of students and the design of syllabi, as well as decisions about hiring, tenure, and promotion.

The rhetorical strategy behind this crusade is brilliant. It rests upon two justifications: one, the undeniable evidence that faculty members tend to be more liberal than the rest of the American population, and the other, an appeal to the academy’s progressive values and commitment to open-mindedness. The recent publication of—and publicity about—a survey purporting to show that the nation’s overwhelmingly liberal faculty members may have been discriminating against political conservatives (and women) reinforces Horowitz’s campaign. Despite the small size of the survey’s sample, it is hard to dispute its finding that there are few card-carrying Republicans in the nation’s faculties. But, as New York Times columnist Paul Krugman pointed out, that situation is more likely to have been caused by self-selection than by discrimination.” After all, what self-respecting conservative would voluntarily subject herself to the rigors of the academic job market and the tenure track when she could earn real money in the more compatible corporate sector? And, in any event, what difference does an academic’s party affiliation make?

Perhaps because of their own ideological fervor, Horowitz and his allies auto-
matically assume that professors infuse their teaching with their personal political views. But they can produce little evidence for such indoctrination. The grievances that appear on the “Complaints Center” of Horowitz’s Students for Academic Freedom Web site often reveal more about the complainants’ sense of entitlement than they do about the political biases of their teachers. Moreover, although Horowitz cites the AAUP’s official statements about academic freedom to bolster his case for politically diversifying the nation’s faculties, he ignores the organization’s pronouncements that stress college teachers’ professional obligation to main-

In arguing for the appointment of more conservatives to the academy, Horowitz depicts American college professors as biased liberals or worse.

tain objectivity in the classroom. This is not an obligation that is taken lightly. During the height of the McCarthy era, when many universities and colleges scrambled to divest themselves of suspected Communists, virtually none of the tainted professors was ever accused of distorting his teaching. And, even today, when a special faculty committee at Columbia was charged with investigating the alleged classroom abuse by members of the Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department, it could only substantiate one incident—and even then in a highly qualified manner.

In arguing for the appointment of more conservatives to the academy, Horowitz not only depicts American college professors as biased liberals or worse, he attempts to disarm them by appealing to their proclivity for openness and tolerance. Thus, for example, he dons an academically fashionable relativism to portray the world of scholarship as a stew of anarchy where, because of the postmodernist takeover, there is no agreed-upon truth and any idea is as good as any other. Given this situation, he insists, the academy should offer the broadest possible range of viewpoints and “should maintain organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.” Such a formulation caricatures the academic community while ignoring the professional standards of evidence, impartiality, and relevance that enable trained scholars to reach a consensus about what constitutes good work in their field. And, it invites kooks and political extremists to meddle in the nation’s college classrooms.
In addition to these concerns, the current political assault on the academic community diverts us from assessing the other ways in which the nation’s campuses have been affected by the aftermath of 9/11. As we shall see, some of the official measures taken to enhance the nation’s security have had a deleterious impact on the university and on the research that takes place there. More significantly, the academy’s ever-present financial problems are undermining its autonomy. Traditional academic freedom is much harder to defend in an institution that must struggle for the resources it needs to keep its current operations afloat.

In the name of countering terrorism, the Treasury Department restricted the grant-making powers of the nation’s philanthropic organizations.

In the name of countering terrorism, for example, the Treasury Department imposed restrictions on the grant-making powers of the nation’s philanthropic organizations. A few days after 9/11, President Bush issued an executive order prohibiting financial “transactions with persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism.” In line with this order, the Treasury Department’s little-known Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued a set of “Anti-Terrorist Financing Guidelines: Voluntary Best Practices for U.S.-Based Charities” in November 2002. Many foundations, including Ford and Rockefeller, responded to the initiative by checking lists of suspect groups and individuals and requiring letters of disclaimer from grant recipients—including some of the nation’s leading universities.

The following year, OFAC again intervened in the scholarly world by invoking prohibitions on handling materials from states like Iran and North Korea to prevent scientific journals from editing manuscripts by those nations’ citizens. And, then, there is the visa problem. The academic community is currently contending with the current administration’s resuscitation of the Cold War practice of refusing to admit politically undesirable foreigners—and not just from the Middle East. Last fall, the State Department turned down the visa requests of 65 Cuban scholars who had been scheduled to attend the international conference of the Latin American Studies Association. Such rejections hark back to the 1950s when visas were routinely denied to foreign scholars who were in or associated with the Communist party.

But far more damaging to the academic enterprise than the politically moti-
veted exclusions of individual scholars has been the post-9/11 tightening of the visa process for all foreign applicants. Not only have the new regulations and delays kept many students out of the United States, they have also deterred many others from applying. As a result, the numbers of foreigners matriculating at American universities, which had been rising steadily since the 1960s, has begun to decline. Because of the academic community’s dependence on such students (especially in the sciences), serious problems emerge. In the short term, there will be fewer applicants, reduced tuition revenues, and a shrinking supply of potential teaching assistants. In the long run, since nearly a third of the graduate degrees in science and engineering go to foreign nationals, the visa restrictions threaten the very future of American science.

**Not only have the new regulations and delays kept many students out of the United States, they have also deterred many others from applying.**

The government’s heightened security concerns are affecting academic research in other equally deleterious ways. In the name of protecting against bioterrorism, the federal authorities imposed new secrecy requirements on “sensitive but unclassified” research that make it much more difficult for some biologists to publish their results. The government is also barring people from certain countries from working on particular kinds of research. As the dean of Harvard’s School of Public Health pointed out, these regulations are counterproductive; not only will they drive the best scientists out of such “sensitive” fields of research, but the demand for secrecy will interfere with the intellectual exchanges so necessary for scientific progress.

Sometimes, the paranoia about bioterrorism can go over the edge, as the case of the University of Buffalo art professor Steven Kurtz reveals. A conceptual artist whose works challenge the corporate promotion of genetically engineered crops, Kurtz got into trouble when he notified the local police after finding his wife dead in bed. The officers, searching the house, noticed the biological materials he was using in his current project and called in the FBI. Despite finding nothing dangerous in Kurtz’s work, the Justice Department decided to prosecute him, along with the University of Pittsburgh biologist who had supplied him with his materials. Would Kurtz, whose fate is still to be decided, have encountered such an
extreme reaction from the authorities if his art had been more conventional?

Whatever the outcome of Kurtz’s case, the proceedings against him seriously constrict political freedom. As does the abortive federal attempt to subpoena information about a November 2003, antiwar forum at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. The parallels with McCarthyism here are eerie; the government was seeking membership lists and other information about the meeting’s sponsor, the National Lawyers Guild, an organization that had been under heavy attack from both the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and the FBI throughout the 1950s.30

Moreover, by encouraging students to monitor their professors, they foster a climate of suspicion within the classroom.

As we have already noted, not all the harassment comes from official sources. Nor did it during the McCarthy era; in fact, it was the very diversity of anti-communist witch-hunters that made them so powerful. So, too, today. Private outfits like Daniel Pipes’s Campus Watch, David Horowitz’s Students for Academic Freedom, and the Boston-based Daniel Project, which filmed the allegations against Columbia’s Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department, dominate the discourse. Moreover, by encouraging students to monitor their professors, they foster a climate of suspicion within the classroom. As the ad hoc faculty committee that investigated the charges against MEALAC explained, the intrusion of external political actors into the controversy led “both students and faculty [to feel]… constrained, watched and inhibited in the free and critical exchange of ideas,” with the obvious “detrimental effect upon the quality of their educational experience.”31 For a number of reasons, including some politically inept moves by the Columbia administration, the Ad Hoc Committee’s report is unlikely to silence the university’s critics. Nor will the other pressures on the nation’s colleges and universities let up. Ward Churchill’s scholarship is now under investigation at the University of Colorado, while President Hoffman, who was facing a football scandal as well as the controversy over Churchill, had to quit her job.

The most serious battle she faced, and the one that may ultimately determine the outcome of the Churchill case, as well as of future academic freedom struggles elsewhere, was over her institution’s budget. At a time of shrinking support for the
public sector, when state legislatures are funding ever smaller percentages of academic budgets and federal research grants are also dwindling, the men and women who lead this nation’s institutions of higher learning may come to feel that academic freedom is a luxury they can no longer afford.

It is important to place the current attack on the universities in this context. While I doubt that there is a conscious conspiracy in operation, conservatives have long had the academy in their sights. The current campaigns by the likes of Pipes and Horowitz, though not, as far as I know, leading to any McCarthy era-type dis-

**The men and women who lead this nation’s institutions of higher learning may come to feel academic freedom is a luxury they can no longer afford.**

missals, have eaten away at the public’s support for higher education. That support, it must be noted, has been eroding for years, a victim of the backlash against the campus unrest of the 1960s and the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is a victim, as well, of the growing commodification of American life and the devaluation of anything that can’t be turned into dollars and cents. College professors, with their dedication to such unprofitable abstractions as the pursuit and transmission of knowledge, seem extraneous in a world where students are customers who demand higher grades and vocationally oriented courses, where policy-oriented think tanks supply the expertise that was once only available on campus, and where scientists have become entrepreneurs ever on the prowl for corporate funding.  

That the academy also harbors most of whatever passes for an oppositional culture in this country only compounds its troubles and growing unpopularity in many circles. There is a connection here between the recent political attacks on the nation’s faculties and the growing litany of more general complaints about the academic community’s higher tuitions, supposed lack of accountability, grade inflation, plagiarism scandals, and wasteful operations. Both the political attacks and the litany of complaints weaken the public’s support for higher education.

It is by no means the case that the American people have bought into the right-wing scenario about the nation’s faculties. But they are not hearing much from the other side. If we are to turn back the attack on the university, we need to make a more effective case for the value of what we do. It must also be a broader
campaign that cannot be limited only to a defense of the academic profession's autonomy, but must also convince the American public that the nation's political and economic future depends on a strong and independent system of higher education. 029

ENDNOTES

5 Knight, personal e-mail to the author, April 11, 2005.
7 Healey, “College Cancels Speech Over 9/11 Remarks,” B1, 6; Wiley, “Professor’s visit sparks furor”; Miller, “Paying the Price,” C1, 4.
8 Gravois, “Students and College Clash Over Invitation”; George Mason University Faculty Senate, “Minutes,” March 6; Selingo, “Election Panel Begins Inquiry Into Colleges,” A35.
14 Ibid.
17 Students for Academic Freedom, “Academic Bill of Rights.”
18 Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte, “Politics and Professional Advancement.”
20 Schrecker, “No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities.”
23 For a brilliant discussion of the intellectual shortcomings of the Academic Bill of Rights, see the recent essay by David Hollinger, “What Does it Mean to Be ‘Balanced’ in Academia.” See also the essay in the forthcoming issue of Daedalus by Columbia's former provost Jonathan Cole, “Academic Freedom Under Fire.”
33 In 1971, Lewis F. Powell, the future Supreme Court Justice, recommended that the business community mount a sustained and long-term campaign to eliminate what he perceived as the anti-corporate influence of the left-wing academic community (Powell, 1971).
34 Messer-Davidow, “Manufacturing the Attack,” 54; Washburn, University Inc. 2005.
36 The very recent defeat of the California version of the Academic Bill of Rights indicates that Horowitz et al. are far from all-powerful (Flower, 2005).

WORKS CITED
Flower, R. “Academic Bill of Rights in California,” e-mail to “multiple recipients of list auap-general,” April 21, 2005.


Knight, J. Personal e-mail to the author, April 11, 2005.


