The Role of Higher Education in a Security State

by Michael Perelman

What is the role of higher education when a nation moves toward a political climate in which the government has a free hand to do whatever it wants in the name of national security? If our society faces a real threat that could destroy our life as we know it, then by all means we should all, including higher education, rise to its defense. However, if national security is merely used as a ruse to grab power, then higher education faces a very different imperative. Even if the threat is real, higher education still has a responsibility to carefully question the extent to which state power is justified.

A National Security State or the Security of the National State?

At times, a national security state has seemed reasonable. In ancient Greece and Rome during times of emergency people would choose a dictator. This term had a quite different meaning at the time. The dictator was an honorable person who would take office for a short period, then leave once the crisis had subsided, carrying with him the gratitude of the people rather than wealth and power. With the completion of the campaign, society would revert to its normal state.

In contrast, the current conflict involving the United States in a campaign

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against “international terrorism” promises to be interminable, supposedly requiring permanent Constitutional changes.

The United States itself may be said to have experienced crises sufficiently dire to justify a national security state during the Civil War and World War II. During World War II, higher education in the United States enthusiastically came to the defense of the country. From my own discipline, economics, the brightest young minds—including many of those who later won Nobel prizes—contributed to the war effort.

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At the time, government expected both rich and poor to chip in to support the war effort. Taxes fell heavily on the rich. Many business leaders came to Washington to work for a dollar—meaning a dollar a year rather than for the almighty dollar. During these emergencies, social policies became more egalitarian.

Not everything worked harmoniously. Profiteering certainly had not been entirely eradicated, even by some of the dollar-a-year men who laid the groundwork for great postwar benefits. Business was often disrespectful of workers’ rights. As the war continued, feelings of economic solidarity frayed at the edges. Even so, the economy never worked as well. Despite a war that consumed almost half of the Gross National Product and the diversion of many of the supposedly most productive workers to the military, productivity still soared under national planning.

However, national security can be a pretext for taking actions unrelated to national security. For example, in contrast to the World War II experience, during the postwar period, the government created a different kind of national security state—a blatantly inauthentic one in which the supposed danger from domestic Bolshevism never represented a serious threat to the government. Unlike World War II when social solidarity was voluntary, McCarthyism of the postwar period attempted to impose a false social solidarity that often depended on fear of the government itself. Unlike the World War II era, McCarthyism was divisive and destructive. It was incapable of creating anything productive in contrast to the accomplishments of the war machine during World War II. The economy still performed well for a couple of decades, but only because of its momentum.
Despite the attack of September 11, 2001, today’s version of the national security state resembles the McCarthy experience rather than World War II. While the attack on the World Trade Center was both tragic and dramatic, it did not represent a movement large enough to challenge the might of the United States. Even worse, the Administration’s reactions are likely to exacerbate terrorism in the future.

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when a catastrophe threatens the very survival of a community, new norms of behavior often suddenly emerge without any action by the government. Entrepreneurial behavior, which is normally accepted, if not admired, suddenly is seen as antisocial profiteering. Instead, society expects people to make sacrifices for the common good. For example, after a powerful earthquake ravaged Alaska in 1964, Safeway refrained from raising its prices, even though ordinary business logic indicated that the company could increase profits by taking advantage of the situation. Today, rather than the whole society pulling together, one has to look far and wide to find evidence of shared sacrifices on the part of the affluent. Instead, we see tax cuts for the rich and economic stagnation for much of the rest of society. In fact, rather than promoting the social good, the current thrust is to stress individual responsibility and the dissolution of social contracts, such as Social Security.

**THE MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Our first duty in education is to create informed discussion and search for truth no matter where it leads. How will higher education respond? Admittedly, tensions naturally lurk behind the very idea of higher education. Is education merely utilitarian? Is the role of colleges and universities just to produce students and information in accordance with the expressed needs of business or government? Or does higher education also have a deeper responsibility to examine, and even question, the prevailing context in which the university operates? If
higher education follows the latter route, then we must nurture the precious flower of academic freedom.

The notion of academic freedom is a relatively new and still tenuous part of higher education. Initially higher education in the United States was mostly an extension of the church. The president of the college also was typically the economics instructor. In that position, he would shape the class to the satisfaction of merchants who acted as the institution's benefactors. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the land grant colleges gave higher education a more utilitarian turn. A couple of decades later, as industry became more dependent upon scientific knowledge, higher education began to cater to large industries. David Noble has insightfully charted the course that MIT took in becoming a handmaiden to industry. Business leaders had no more interest in academic freedom than the leaders of the church-oriented schools.

With the GI Bill, higher education became more democratic. As the universities accommodated the returning soldiers, they accumulated infrastructure that made higher education more accessible to the population in general. Community colleges went even further. Higher education was still torn between the objectives of training a workforce and educating citizens with a broader understanding of the world, but the latter mission got a better hearing at that time than
ever before. The 1960s and early 1970s were probably the high point of academic freedom. Even so, higher education punished some of those who took unpopular positions during this period also.

Of course, some elements of higher education had long made their peace with the national security state. Beginning with World War I, some leaders in higher education found federal contracts irresistible. Especially after the financial stringency created by the Great Depression, the scramble for federal money became irresistible. Rebecca Lowen describes in detail the way Stanford University, a late

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comer, clawed its way into the inner circle of the military academic complex well before the build-up for World War II. These contracts did not come without a price, which Stanford paid in part by bartering away its academic freedom.

We should take seriously the warning in President Eisenhower’s farewell address on January 17, 1961—not just about the danger of the military industrial complex, but his words about the university:

> Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been over shadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers. The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present—and is gravely to be regarded. Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific technological elite.

The authoritarian aspect of education has never been entirely absent, but today, the attitude toward tolerance is taking an ominous turn. The call for a national security state returns higher education to its roots as an extension of the church—except that the modern theology is patriotism and nationalism.

Here we come to an impasse. A full-blown national security state leaves no place for debate, even though the preferred policy of the government might lead to catastrophic results.
THE CHALLENGE

Already, a number of professors and even a few disciplines are coming under attack. Small, well-funded groups, taking advantage of the rising mentality of a national security state, monitor higher education for signs of what they consider to be unacceptable behavior, often by taking a few choice words out of context. We must see these assaults on academic freedom as a danger for all.

Consider the words of Robert A. Taft, son of President Taft and leader of the Republicans in the Senate, who said only a couple of months after Pearl Harbor:

*The response to attacks on academic freedom should not be a reflexive dismissal of charges, but an insistence that they be aired in a fair and reasoned forum.*

As a matter of general principle, I believe there can be no doubt that criticism in time of war is essential to the maintenance of any kind of democratic government. Perhaps nothing today distinguishes democratic government in England so greatly from the totalitarianism of Germany as the freedom of criticism which has existed continuously in the House of Commons and elsewhere in England.... [T]oo many people desire to suppress criticism simply because they think that it will give some comfort to the enemy to know that there is such criticism. If that comfort makes the enemy feel better for a few moments, they are welcome to it as far as I am concerned, because the maintenance of the right of criticism in the long run will do the country maintaining it a great deal more good than it will do the enemy, and will prevent mistakes which might otherwise occur.

The response to the attacks on academic freedom should not be a reflexive dismissal of all charges, but an insistence that they be aired in a fair and reasoned forum in which all viewpoints get a hearing that depends on facts rather than fiery rhetoric. A national security state has a natural tendency to encourage those who would restrict the boundaries of acceptable thought, threatening the vitality of higher education, as well as society as a whole. Part of our challenge will be to defend the boundaries and explain our mission to the public.

Perhaps the best course to follow would be the ideal model of science. Science students must learn to understand their discipline, but at some point in their education, they must also learn to challenge existing knowledge in order to clear the way for progress. In that sense, science must be both rebellious and respectful. The appropriate mixture will vary with circumstances, but a mixture is necessary.
The challenge of higher education is greater than that of science. Most of us are in disciplines where we lack the tools to apply objective tests. Even so, we must always be willing to push the boundaries, whether it be in something as ill-defined as social justice or as precise as engineering.

Public support for academic freedom today is weak as would be expected in an emotional environment with more heat than light. The final two sentences of the report of the University of Wisconsin’s Board of Regents decision in a famous late-19th century academic freedom trial, portions of which are now in the plaque on

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Bascom Hall, offer a guide for our higher education today:

In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of the truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere we believe the great state of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.

TOWARD AN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STATE

In conclusion, higher education can be a force for change or it will robotically reinforce the status quo. To follow the latter course will eventually sap the vitality of society, including higher education.

Let me suggest that what we really need is an international security state, one capable of addressing pressing problems that threaten the entire world: global warming, looming worldwide shortages of water and petroleum, the containment of epidemics in the midst of the deterioration of public health systems, and the proliferation of military spending.

Unlike the present incarnation of the national security state, this international security state would depend upon openness in order to meet the challenges ahead. If we are to take even a halting step in this direction, we require vigilance and courage in protecting higher education from the powerful threats it now faces. With strength and patience we can work toward the creation of a reenergized system of higher education that can meet the real challenges the world now faces.
Obviously, higher education is not in a strong position at this moment to change or even challenge the state of affairs in the nation. It probably never has been, but our responsibility has never been higher. Those truly concerned about the dangers implicit in the increasingly authoritarian situation must learn to reach out. We must reach out in respectful dialogue to those within the academy who do not agree with our interpretation. We must also learn to work in solidarity with other unions and to deepen our contacts with higher education in other countries. We must do a better job in communicating with the public at large without marginalizing ourselves. Perhaps most of all, we in higher education must begin an intensive educational process ourselves.

Progress may not be easy, but it is possible. Discouraging as conditions might seem to be today, consider how unlikely the transition must have seemed for the McCarthyism of the 1950s to give way to the movements of the 1960s.

ENDNOTES


WORKS CITED