

Faculty Affairs Committee
Report to the University Senate
February 24, 2014
Robert Pollack and Letty Moss-Salentijn, co-chairs

At our last meeting, FAC voted unanimously to endorse the following letter sent last month by the co-Chairs to President Bollinger, and to have the letter read into the record of the Senate as part of the FAC's annual report.

Dear President Bollinger,

We have both read your most recent letter with care, noting that it arrived at midnight January 29, in the middle of the weekend. We both felt we needed to reply directly, also quickly and from the heart.

Orwell's *1984* has become a best-seller. Reversing the date from the year he wrote it -1948 – Orwell depicts the dystopic future of never-ending war. But that extension of the Cold War does not speak to the malaise that sits like a fog over Columbia these days.

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* comes a lot closer to where we are today. In this vision of the near future, firemen are state agents ordered to set fires, ordered to burn remaining caches of hidden books wherever they are found. Everyone has walls of real-time video links to the State's media. War is in the past, nothing much at all is in the future. The book ends though, with a precious vision: men and women, young and old, flee into the woods, each having memorized a single book. Together they form a moving, renewable, living library. This is all they can do but it is not nothing: they embody what they value.

We know no one at Columbia who is not upset, chronically and deeply, since the election. We know this is true of the Administration, and your letter certainly embodies this distress. We know it is true of our students, and the cluster of suicides this month can have no other meaning. But what of ourselves, and what of our colleagues; that is, what of the faculty? When Bob was a member of the administration about 30 years ago Isidore Rabi told him the following story. Rabi was in Low's Faculty room to hear the newly arrived President of the University, Dwight Eisenhower, give his inaugural talk to the faculty as a whole. Eisenhower averred that the faculty were the most important employees of the University. Rabi raised his hand, stood up and said "Mr. President, we

are not employees of the University; we are the University.”

So, Mr. President, we are asking you how we, the faculty, may embody what the University values, with a sense of full obligation and with the assurance of full recognition. In *Spectator* last month an anonymous student tells of his or her suffering in these days, and quotes Cornell West to ask that we all do better at expressing “radical tenderness and militant kindness.” We need your help in helping faculty to reach into themselves and find strength to express themselves in these ways. We are not sure how best to get there, but we hope you will get the ball rolling by giving us the chance to give it a try.

* A Columbia Website should have links to all sites that serve the purpose of protecting and sustaining our freedoms, and also sites that acknowledge the fog and offer a discourse on it. We have in mind, for instance, that no University website currently has easy access to all the ways that all members of the Columbia community who carry education loans - students, administrators, employees and faculty – may lay off or smooth repayments by public service.

* Faculty do not have places, times or administrative permission to acknowledge our own fears to each other. Some may mock and others flee, but we are sure many faculty will be grateful for the chance to admit that we do not have the capacity to see through the fog that envelops our country. Then, we should be held to the expectation that we allow ourselves to admit to our fears in the presence of the rest of the university community, including our students and our colleagues in the administration, without fear of any negative consequences.

* Venues for such quiet, difficult conversations are very hard to find on our campus. We suggest you consider opening the most visible public spaces on campus for these discussions, stocking them with tables, chairs and assigning them for this purpose when they are otherwise not in use. The spaces that come to mind are Low Rotunda, Low Faculty room, Lerner Auditorium, the Butler student lounges, and of course the lounges in every dormitory. This last set of appropriate spaces is currently off limits to a professor without a special pass. This is ironic, sad and easily fixed.

Thanks for reading this long and painful letter. We hope you receive it in the spirit we have written it: to begin the long-delayed acknowledgment of the absolute necessity that kindness accompany intelligence in our common home.