The boundaries of academic freedom are being hotly debated by everyone from media pundits to members of Congress. But it is important to remember that “free speech is not something that’s survived unchanged throughout American history,” explained Provost Alan Brinkley during a colloquium recently held on the subject. “It’s something that Americans have had to fight for.”

The colloquium presented by Gayatri Spivak, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities, and the Center for Comparative Literature and Society, featured intellectuals from across the nation who have written extensively on this issue.

Brinkley described the tumultuous history of academic freedom in the United States, heralding its breakdowns and lamenting the setbacks. He emphasized that like the First Amendment, to which it is inherently linked, its tenets need to be constantly reaffirmed. It’s a right guaranteed by the Constitution, but also one firmly entrenched in our culture, the result of generations of Americans fighting to uphold free speech in the most contentious of contexts.

Brinkley recalled the controversy during World War I, for instance, when professors across the country were fired, and in some circumstances, proscribed, for their opposition towards the war. “But of course we’ve seen in the last 2 1/2 years a whole range of new challenges to free speech, both inside the university and out, and it makes clear that this battle is never won,” Brinkley said.

Geoffrey Stone, professor and former provost of the University of Chicago, discussed some of the challenges universities face balancing funding needs with safeguarding academic freedom. After a brief history of how outside funding sources have influenced academic freedom, Stone explained that “one of the fundamental responsibilities of the academic leaders of a university is to resist the temptation to sacrifice academic freedom in the never-ending quest for additional resources.” Stone said that private donors, who account for much of a university’s financial stability, often wish to have direct control of their gifts. “Deans, provosts and presidents struggle constantly to define and to hold the line between permissible terms of a generous gift and impermissible intrusion into the realm of academic freedom,” Stone said.

Government, however, is more limited in its ability to impose restrictions along with its funding. Stone noted that a government may condition its funding but not to further a specific viewpoint nor to suppress other viewpoints. Debate arises over how to interpret these guidelines.

Provost Alan Brinkley

Arthur Eisenberg, legal director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, outlined the nature of the Higher Education Act, which conservatives have pressed Congress to pass. HR 3077 seeks to ensure, among other things, that area studies programs provide a diverse set of perspectives.

Eisenberg questioned the nature of the amendment, which calls for an advisory board to “monitor” various academic programs across the country and report to Congress on whether the programs meet “national needs” and offer “diverse views.”

“The question remains whether the government can use its funding authority to influence the content of academic programs even in furtherance of diversity,” Eisenberg cautioned.

Mary Burgan, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, an organization that has been in the eye of the post-9/11 storm surrounding academic freedom, reported on cases that she said exemplified the current interaction of politics and issues of freedom of speech on campus. She gave several examples of cases in which state legislators had used their power of the purse to attempt to require that state universities to conform curriculums to a particular religious or moral perspective. These cases included an attempt by a state to make funding of particular classes dependent on the removal of the Koran as a book selection for incoming freshmen.

Juan Cole, professor of modern Middle East and South Asian History at the University of Michigan, discussed strategies of censorship, that he said, are having a chilling effect not only on his field of study but academia more generally.

Among the key strategies in play today: accusing the targets of censorship themselves of intolerance so that silencing them can be represented as the protection of freedom; describing the targets as treasonous or heretical, so that their speech can be censored on grounds of national security; taking the Orwellian approach of using constant surveillance and monitoring as a form of intimidation, and redefining political speech as a form of commerce, then using the same mechanisms that regulate commerce or govern grants as a means of controlling speech.

Romila Thapar, emeritus professor of ancient Indian history at Nehru University, New Delhi, reviewed the historical roots of attempts to suppress freedom in post-colonial nations, such as India. She ended the colloquium with an impassioned plea. “In a globalized world we should ensure that the dialogue between intellectuals and academics becomes effective. We have to continue with our interrogations of knowledge even if such interrogations lead to dissenting opinions. But dissent and debate in public discourse should not be feared but rather should be acknowledged as normal to democratic systems.”