We gather at a time of enormous stress for colleges and universities across the country. It is a time of contentious debate on campuses — among students, among faculty, and within administrations. Some of these debates concern matters of national or global importance. Many are joined — even incited — by outside forces, from political pressure groups to the mainstream media to increasingly strident voices on the Web.

For those of us who inhabit the academic world, this is no news. Larry Summers, I have thought they were addressing. Larry Summers will in time sit down in what might be called the academic, or perhaps the political, firestorm and, then, calls for their dismissal. Not just in the hors d’oeuvres of the Times, but the main course of the dinner, too. With a confidence that, while, at certain moments we do not reach as close to the ideal as we would like, at other moments we do, and proud to serve as the president of Columbia University, proud of Columbia and beneficial to democratic society. It is a time of contentious debate on the subject, perhaps reinforcing this idea with selective readings. Is there a line between academic inquiry and politicization of a course? If so, how is it set and who enforces it? Should an individual professor use the classroom as a place of political advocacy, as long as elsewhere in the curriculum there are offerings by advocates for democracy and free markets? Or do we decide that the classroom is a place of political advocacy, as long as elsewhere in the curriculum there are offerings by advocates for democracy and free markets?

I do not intend my discussion of these questions, as they relate to academic freedom, to be merely a list of “rights.” As with any “right” or freedom, we can only understand what academic freedom means when we also understand what we are expecting to achieve. I want to talk about what we value and aspire to in the universe and why that serves society — and justifies academic freedom in the first place.

Let me begin, then, by surveying the climate in which our conversation takes place.

There is a deep sense of vulnerness heightened by these attacks, which cannot be reduced to a soundbite or slogan, as some would have it, without jeopardizing our working grasp of the principle itself. In stressful times especially, we must make every effort to hold on to our knowledge of what we believe. That is what I will endeavor to do this evening.

Take, for example, the controversy surrounding Ward Churchill’s invitation to speak at Hamilton College in 2004. None of us could have anticipated the speed with which the controversy propels us into the national political firestorm and, then, calls for the professor’s dismissal (as we shall see). This is especially true in periods of national emergency. We have that today, but seemingly augmented by the new forms of mass communication that have emerged in the last decade.

The current, American conception of academic freedom began within the modern university and the ideals of all human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting sources and viewpoints on campus. Horowitz’s agenda has gained traction in statehouses across the country.

A Republican congressman from Georgia introduced Horowitz’s bill as a nonbinding resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2003.

It is by no means a new phenomenon that an individual professor’s public comments provoke a national political firestorm and, then, calls for the professor’s dismissal (as we shall see). This is especially true in periods of national emergency. We have that today, but seemingly augmented by the new forms of mass communication that have emerged in the last decade.

Taking a look at the Columbia example, the academic bill of rights moving ahead in 19 states.

Representatives and from state legislatures wrote to me demanding that I and others expressed vehement objection with the professor’s statements. But its rapid transmogrification into a national scandal is, I believe, a good thing, symptomatic of a kind of per-secution that arises during wartime.

At this moment, Columbia is facing another challenge. A number of students, supported by some faculty, have asserted that certain professors in our department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures have taught courses on the Israeli-Palestinian controversy that are biased against Israel, Zionism, and Jews, and have intimidated students who try to express reasonable and objective points of view. A faculty committee, advised by Floyd Abrams, is nearing the end of its review of any claims of intimidation. And we will not tolerate intimidation of students in the classroom for appropri-ately expressing reasonable and relevant points of view. A faculty com-mittee, advised by Floyd Abrams, is nearing the end of its review of any claims of intimidation. And we will not tolerate intimidation of students in the classroom for appropri-ately expressing reasonable and relevant points of view. 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