

FORUM

The New McCarthyism

By JONATHAN R. COLE

A rising tide of anti-intellectualism and intolerance of university research and teaching that offends ideologues and today's ruling prince is putting academic freedom -- one of the core values of the university -- under more sustained and subtle attack than at any time since the dark days of McCarthyism in the 1950s.

As professors are publicly savaged for their ideas, often by outside groups, colleges are coming under pressure to fire them or control what they say in the classroom. Witness the furor last year over a purported "documentary" by the Boston-based David Project, *Columbia Unbecoming*, that charged professors with anti-Israel bias, or the Orwellian efforts by the national group Students for Academic Freedom that -- in the name of ending the alleged politicization of the academy -- attempt to limit legitimate scholarly discourse.

As political ideology trumps scholarly consensus, the government is undermining the peer-review system and the norms of scholarship. Conservative ideologues in Congress, for example, are trying to place political appointees on committees to monitor area-studies programs; the Bush Administration and its followers on Capitol Hill and in statehouses are trying to intimidate professors whose work on topics like global warming or the transmission of HIV calls into question administration priorities. Such arbiters of truth are selectively bullying professors by investigating their work or threatening to withdraw federal grant support for projects whose content they find substantively offensive. In resisting stem-cell research and supporting teaching intelligent design along with evolution, they have cast doubt on scientific expertise and legitimated the latest form of anti-intellectualism in America.

The USA Patriot Act allows the government to secretly monitor what students and faculty members read or transmit over the Internet; and the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 places such extraordinary constraints on laboratory scientists that some of our most distinguished immunologists are abandoning important research -- for example, on vaccines to prevent smallpox, anthrax, and West Nile virus -- that could help deter terrorism. Foreign students and researchers from scores of nations are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain visas to

study or work in the United States, disrupting the flow of the best talent to American universities.

The current attacks on academic freedom are not the only threats to free discussion in the university: Too many subjects, like those related to identity politics and challenges to reigning academic dogma, are also considered off limits. The result is that it has become increasingly difficult within the academy itself to have an open, civil debate about many topics. Scholars and scientists are often exercising their right to remain silent rather than face the potential scorn, ridicule, sanctions, and ostracism that challenging shoddy evidence and poor reasoning on politically sensitive topics can invite.

Why does that matter? Universities remain perhaps the last sanctuary for the relatively unbridled and unfettered search for truth and new important ideas. Without a climate of free inquiry, creativity and discovery will suffer. Today American research universities are the single most important source for major new discoveries that improve the health and social and economic welfare of people around the world. Tie a tourniquet around that free flow of intellectual energy, and we will halt the production of knowledge that is necessary for conquering disease and poverty and for improving the quality of everyday life.

The sad fact, however, is that few academic leaders and prominent members of their faculties are rising to the defense of academic freedom. Where is the Robert Hutchins of today, who protected the idea of the university against ideological foes during the 1940s and 1950s? As Hutchins said, it is "not how many professors would be fired for their beliefs, but how many think they *might* be." It is time to recognize the seriousness of the current attacks, analyze carefully the bases for them, scrutinize evidence on their incidence and consequences, and organize a defense of the university against those intent on undermining its values and quality.

Jonathan R. Cole is a university professor and former provost and dean of faculties at Columbia University.

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 52, Issue 3, Page B7

Copyright © 2005 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)