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WAR ON TERRORISM; Pro or con, war talk's risky on campus

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By TOM MASHBERG

When MIT anthropology professor Hugh Gusterson urged students to "imagine the pain and suffering of people in other countries" in the context of the Sept. 11 terrorist atrocities, he thought his remarks were innocuous enough.

After all, he prefaced them with a call for his students to remain deeply mindful of the suffering of World Trade Center victims too.

But last month, Gusterson's comment was among 117 cited in a report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni as "short on patriotism and long on self-flagellation." Soon, Gusterson's e-mail in-box was brimming with hate-filled anonymous missives.

"If I didn't have tenure I would be nervous about being named by that report," he said. "I fear it has had a chilling effect on junior faculty around the country. Universities are very wary nowadays about giving tenure to people who are in any way controversial." Gusterson's experience underscores a tense phenomenon in academia: faculty and staff being assailed, silenced and in some cases punished for opining about Sept. 11 and its policy aftermath.

In one nationally publicized episode, Kenneth Hearlson, a conservative professor at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, Calif., was suspended for 11 weeks - and reinstated just Thursday - for saying that silence in the face of Islamic terror is akin to complicity with such acts. His words led four Muslim students to complain that he was accusing them of being terrorists - allegations for which Hearlson was exonerated.

In another prominent case, a University of New Mexico professor, Richard Berthold, told a history class, "Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote" - a comment for which he has repeatedly and abjectly apologized.

Yet his college has launched a probe and is pursuing disciplinary action. "There are a lot of things you can't say with impunity, even on a college campus," New Mexico's provost, Brian Foster, said.

Such cases alarm free-speech advocates such as Paul K. McMaster of the Freedom Forum, a First Amendment advocacy group. "At a time when the country could most benefit from the diverse perspectives we depend on academia to provide," he told The Chronicle of Higher Education,

"there will be immense pressure on those in the academic community to repress their views."

Examples abound of academics from the left and right being taken to task for wartime statements, prompting disagreements over whether campus liberals or conservatives are more apt to face reprimands for speaking their minds at a time of heightened fear and more energetic patriotism.

"Any contention that 'prowar is the new campus P.C.' is wholly off-base," said Thor L. Halvorsen of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (www.thefire.org). "There are a great number of cases of people being reprimanded for prowar views, versus very few cases of professors being taken to task for antiwar views."

That contention is strongly rebutted by Robert Jensen, a tenured journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Jensen wrote an op-ed piece deploring as "reprehensible" the Sept. 11 attacks, but added that his anger was directed not just at the suicide terrorists but at "those who have held power in the United States and engineered attacks on civilians every bit as tragic."

Since then, Jensen has been ostracized by colleagues and personally criticized a "fountain of undiluted foolishness on issues of public policy" by his university president, Larry R. Faulkner. He says he cannot even convince colleagues to go on stage with him to debate the pros of cons of U.S. policy at a time of war footing.

"The reality of life on campus since Sept. 11 is that sentiment is overwhelmingly prowar," he said. "Those who are publicly antiwar, or offering critical points of view, are a tiny number of people."

Lists of episodes of wartime academic intolerance around the nation are incomplete, but cases drawing attention include these:

**** At a City University of New York forum in October, math lecturer Walter Daum called the Sept. 11 killers "mass murderers," but added: "The ultimate responsibility for the attacks lies with the rulers of this country, the capitalist ruling class of this country."**

In response, CUNY trustee Jeffrey Wiesenfeld said: "These people should be ashamed of themselves. While recognizing their right to be stupid, their opinions render ill repute to the university. They're fortunate it's not up to me. I would consider that behavior seditious at this time." CUNY trustees later voted to condemn Daum and others as seditious.

**** At Johns Hopkins University, professor Charles H. Fairbanks voiced support at a forum for an aggressive campaign against nations that harbor terrorists. He said he would "bet anyone here a Koran" his analysis was correct.**

Although Fairbanks apologized for the wisecrack, a dean at Hopkins, Stephen Szabo, eliminated his post as director of the school's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. After media criticism of the demotion, Szabo reversed his ruling.

**** At UCLA, a library assistant, Jonnie Hargis, was suspended without pay for five days after criticizing American support for Israel in an e-mail sent out via the school computer system. Though the e-mail was sent in response to a coworker's mass e-mailing that praised U.S. policy, only Hargis, a 22-year staffer, was punished.**

**** At Duke University, the administration shut down a Web site after professor Gary Hull posted an article titled "Terrorism and Its Appeasement" that called for a strong military response to the Sept. 11 attacks. After FIRE intervened, Duke reinstated Hull's Web page, but required him to add a disclaimer stating the views did not reflect those of the university.**

These and other examples, experts say, indicate academic intolerance is alive at both ends of the political spectrum. But for those critiquing U.S. policy, the ACTA report - which goes so far as to chastise Gusterson and 116 other academics as a "weak link" intent on "blaming America first" - as well as a recent speech by Laurence H. Summers, the president of Harvard University, suggest the tilt in academia, for now, is toward embracing U.S. policy.

In his speech, Summers said: "It is all too common for us to underestimate the importance of clearly expressing our respect and support for the military and individuals who choose to serve in the armed forces of the United States.

"Speech should be free, and policy differences should be debated," he said. "But respect for all, including those who wear military uniforms, must be a basic value in our community." And a recent poll by the JFK School of Government at Harvard found 79 percent of college students support U.S. action in Afghanistan.

Summers's comments troubled Jean E. Jackson, an anthropology professor at MIT who was cited as well by ACTA - for stating that from a semantic standpoint, the phrase "war on terrorism" should be used with caution.

"I don't think that kind of statement by the president of Harvard University fosters openness in the university setting," Jackson said.

Speaking of the ACTA report, Ruth Flower, director of public policy for the American Association of University Professors, said: "If the climate of worry about the terrorist attacks means there can be no controversy on campus, it is a very unhealthy thing. There are some things here that hark back to McCarthyism."

But for Gusterson of MIT, the debate over the debate seems odd. He says U.S. campuses might

take a cue from MIT itself, which "has been having the debate that much of the country has not."

"We've had a a peace rally and a talk by John Deutch," a former CIA chief, he said. "One of my colleagues has even called for a resumption of government-sponsored assassinations. The only message that came from MIT itself was that it is not OK to scapegoat Arabs and Muslims."