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FEATURE STORY | December 3, 2001

The War on Campus

by David Glenn [ABOUT](#)

"They're using state resources to the practical effect of aiding and abetting the Taliban"--and they should be fired.

Thus proclaimed Scott Rubush, an associate editor of David Horowitz's *FrontPage* magazine, on National Public Radio in early October. The objects of Rubush's wrath are four left-wing faculty members at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina, who criticized US foreign policy at a teach-in shortly after the September 11 attacks. *FrontPage* has launched a campaign--"Tell the good folks at UNC-Chapel Hill what you think of their decision to allow anti-American rallies on their state-supported campus"--apparently aimed at pressuring UNC's administrators and trustees to sharpen their knives.

The *FrontPage* campaign has kicked up some dust--the UNC administration has received several hundred

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angry e-mails and has been excoriated on the floor of the North Carolina legislature. But no actual damage has been done. Chancellor James Moeser has issued strong statements in defense of his faculty's right to free speech. Throughout the country, academic freedom is far more secure today than during, say, World War I, when several schools terminated professors who, in the immortal words of Columbia University president Nicholas Murray Butler, were "not with whole heart and mind and strength committed to fight with us to make the world safe for democracy."

This article is part of the Haywood Burns Community Activist Journalism series, sponsored by the New World Foundation and the Nation Institute.

Yet there are still genuine causes for worry about academic freedom as we move into a new, perhaps long-term, period of war. For one thing, not all administrations have been as resolute as UNC's: Several college teachers and staff workers across the country now face disciplinary action in various post-September 11 imbroglios. Outside the campus, leftist professors have faced high-pitched media demagoguery. And it's not clear that faculty will manage to respond to such challenges with anything like a unified voice. After two decades of passionate battles over the canon, hate speech and nonfoundationalist theories of truth, American academics may no longer share a broad understanding of what, exactly, academic freedom means.

One person who knows exactly what he believes a university should be--but isn't hopeful that many actually existing teachers will fight for his vision--is Richard Berthold, a University of New Mexico history professor who now faces a potential semester of unpaid suspension for making a callous joke on September 11. As his class on ancient Rome filed in that morning, Berthold quipped that "anyone who can blow up the Pentagon gets my vote."

"It was a stupid thing to say," Berthold declares. "I deserve a lot of the shit that's been dumped on me. However, the First Amendment should protect even jackasses." Berthold is no leftist. "A lot of the hate mail I've been getting says, 'You commie!' which is ironic, given that I'm pretty conservative on most domestic issues." He is, however, critical of US foreign policy, which is part of what was floating in his mind when he made his unfortunate joke. (Berthold once actively participated in the conservative National Association of Scholars. "But I never quite fit in there," he says. "I'm a longhair, and I would always wear a Palestinian scarf to their meetings.")

The firestorm around Berthold burned fiercely--on talk radio and in the New Mexico legislature--for several weeks. As in North Carolina, much of this criticism leaned on the trope of "state support": Do we good citizens really want our tax dollars to pay for sedition? In Berthold's mind, this question (from which private universities are relatively immune) reflects a profound misunderstanding of the university's mission. "There's tremendous pressure from the business community that UNM should simply be filling jobs," says Berthold. "Well, if you want that, then you've bought yourself a vocational school. It's not a university. A real university is about

knowledge and inquiry." But if Berthold dislikes the business lobby's role in shaping the university ("It seems like you have to own a car dealership to join the legislature here"), he holds an equally low opinion of certain of his left-wing faculty colleagues and their enthusiasm for speech codes. After all, the university's charges against him include the claim that he engages in "insulting language." "Now the American campus seems to be on the cutting edge of intolerance," says Berthold. "And all in the name of social justice."

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