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Patriotism in academia

By Cathy Young, 6/10/2002

CONFERENCES of the National Association of Scholars, an organization founded over a decade ago to counteract political correctness and the decline of academic standards on college campuses, are invariably a pleasure to attend, featuring thought-provoking topics and impressive speakers who represent a variety of viewpoints. But this year's event, the group's 10th national conference, was special. Its subject was uniquely relevant, and not just to the academy: It was "Higher Education and Democracy in Peace and War."

Since Sept. 11, the longstanding debate about left-wing bias on college campuses has acquired a new urgency. Is the American professorate unpatriotic because, compared to the general public, it has been far less unanimous in supporting a military response to the attacks? Or is it part of the academy's mission to be skeptical of government policies and of majority public opinion? Are the critics of the academy a bunch of neo-McCarthyites who seek to ostracize dissent?

Topics such as these made for some heated discussions at the conference - particularly on the subject of academic freedom and political correctness in wartime.

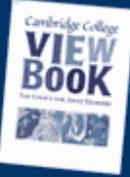
The National Association for Scholars is generally regarded as right-of-center. But the "right" in America is an often uneasy alliance of libertarians and conservatives. This split was evident in the discussion of academic freedom and war, as three speakers broadly sympathetic to the organization's goals - Boston attorney Harvey Silverglate, historian and author Ronald Radosh, and Middle Eastern Forum director Daniel Pipes - found themselves in disagreement on some basic questions.

Silverglate is a co-director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has often clashed with the campus left on such issues as speech deemed offensive to minorities, or sexual assault policies slanted against the accused. Interestingly, he observed that most encroachments on free speech on campus after Sept. 11 have come from the left: There have been numerous attempts to suppress or penalize pro-war, patriotic, or antiterrorist expression deemed insensitive to Arabs, Moslems, or foreign students. But Silverglate also deplored instances of repression directed at critics of US policy.

No one would disagree with Silverglate's outrage over the incident at California State University in which a commencement speaker was heckled off the podium for expressing concern that the war effort could endanger civil liberties. Another example,



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however, proved far more controversial: the case of University of Southern Florida computer science professor Sami Al-Arian.

After Al-Arian appeared on television to discuss allegations that he was involved in terrorist activity, the university claimed that it received massive negative publicity resulting in hate mail, threats, and a drop in alumni donations. A few months later, the school's Board of Trustees recommended that Al-Arian be fired because of activities "outside the scope of his employment" which had adversely affected the university.

Radosh and Pipes vigorously questioned the depiction of Al-Arian as an innocent victim, though they agreed that the university used a "phony excuse" to dismiss him. Radosh asserted that Al-Arian's organization, the Islamic Committee for Palestine, is a terrorist front: "He is a supporter of terrorism just as the Stalinists of the 1950s were supporters of a group that engaged in espionage and subversion."

According to Pipes, "Al-Arian is not being sanctioned for his views but for being a part of a terror network that has killed Americans."

The still-pending case poses troubling questions. Al-Arian has never been charged with a crime, though he has been and is still being investigated by the FBI. Should a public university be expected to apply the same standards of evidence as a criminal court if it decides to dismiss an employee for involvement in criminal activity? Does support for terrorist attacks on America overstep the boundaries of permissible speech in the academy, even if it is protected by the First Amendment?

Radosh noted that both the left and the right have confused dissent and treason: The McCarthyites of the 1950s often labeled dissenters as traitors, while the left often defended Soviet agents as mere dissenters. Today, the ideology of Islamic radicalism confronts us with the same issues as communism did during the Cold War. In Radosh's words, "We are at war with tyranny. What do we do about agents of that tyranny who would use our freedoms to destroy us?"

So far, we don't know the answer. It should be noted that today, Americans feel fairly secure and our war on terrorism appears to be relatively successful. But what if terror became a daily threat? Would free speech absolutism under such circumstances be courageous or suicidal? I can only hope that the question remains theoretical.

Cathy Young is a contributing editor at Reason magazine. Her column appears regularly in the Globe.

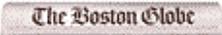
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