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## THE SCENE (a.k.a. [vpostrel.com](http://vpostrel.com))

Comments on current ideas and events

**FREE SPEECH:** Good news for free speech on college campuses is all too rare, especially when it comes without knock-down-drag-out fights in the press or courts. That's all the more reason to applaud the president of the University of Alaska, Mark R. Hamilton, who has issued an unequivocal memo to campus chancellors, designed "to state clearly and unambiguously what all of us would take as a given—The University of Alaska acknowledges and espouses the right to freedom of speech":

What I want to make clear and unambiguous is that responses to complaints or demands for action regarding constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of speech CANNOT BE QUALIFIED. Attempts to assuage anger or to demonstrate concern by qualifying our support for free speech serve to cloud what must be a clear message. Noting that, for example, "The University supports the right to free speech, but we intend to check into this matter," or "The University supports the right of free speech, but I have asked Dean X or Provost Y to investigate the circumstances," is unacceptable. There is nothing to "check into," nothing "to investigate."

Opinions expressed by our employees, students, faculty or administrators don't have to be politic or polite. However personally offended we might be, however unfair the association of the University to the opinion might be, I insist that we remain a certain trumpet on this most precious

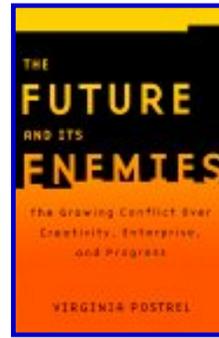
of Constitutional rights.

The memo came in response to the controversy over a poem by Linda McCarriston, a creative writing professor at UA-Anchorage. After some Native Alaskan students protested that the poem was offensive, campus officials circulated emails threatening an investigation aimed at "resolving" the matter, presumably through sanctions against McCarriston. She turned to the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), on whose advisory board I serve (though I had nothing to do with this case), for help. Alan Kors, FIRE's president, wrote to President Hamilton, asking that the university live up to its stated principles of freedom of speech and inquiry, and Hamilton did just that.

To use one of Alan's favorite words, FIRE is a remarkable organization. It is consistently and idealistically dedicated to freedom of conscience, expression, and inquiry: "freedom of speech, legal equality, due process, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience—the essential qualities of individual liberty and dignity," to quote from its mission statement. It is more interested in protecting those freedoms than in scoring points or making its founders famous. When faced with a campus controversy, FIRE's first step is not a press conference but a letter calling on the administration to follow its own principles. On a gratifying number of occasions, this approach works, though rarely does it elicit as eloquent and principled a response as Hamilton's. [Posted 3/27.]

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