

# New attacks on academic free speech in US

Shannon Jones

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Academics critical of the US war in Afghanistan continue to be targeted by the media and right-wing forces in a campaign aimed at silencing opposition to government policies.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a right-wing academic group founded by Lynne Cheney, the wife of US Vice President Dick Cheney, issued a report November 13 naming 40 college professors and one university president which it accused of insufficient patriotism. The report states, “college and university faculty have been the weak link,” in the US response to the September 11 terrorist attacks and cites statements by faculty, which it alleges, are “short on patriotism and long on self-flagellation.”

One academic singled out by the council, Hugh Gusterson, an associate professor of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who spoke at a campus peace rally, called the report “reminiscent of McCarthyism.”

Another person cited is Wesleyan University President Douglas Bennet. The council noted an open letter he wrote on September 14 to the campus community in which Bennet warned that “disparities and injustices” in American society can lead to hatred and violence.

A November 5 comment in the *Wall Street Journal* by Gregg Easterbrook, senior editor of the *New Republic*, supports the witch-hunting of academics critical of US foreign policy. The piece, titled “Free speech doesn’t come without a cost,” cites the case of Robert Jensen, a professor at the University of Texas, who has faced attacks by the press and the campus administration for his antiwar views. Easterbrook advances a twisted concept of freedom of speech to try to make the case that calls for the firing of Jensen and other left-wing academics are just and legitimate expressions of free speech.

In a brief supporting the blacklisting of such anti-war academics, Easterbrook writes, “When the Bill of Rights was enacted the First Amendment was construed mainly to shield speakers from imprisonment for antigovernment views. That expression could have other costs—denunciation, ostracism, loss of employment—was assumed.”

In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks US academics who have spoken out against military intervention or have attempted to place the tragic events in a historical context have come under attack by large sections of the press and university hierarchy.

The *Wall Street Journal* singled out for attack the Middle

Eastern Studies Association of North America (MESA). In a November 15 op-ed piece, entitled “Terrorism? What Terrorism?!,” Martin Kramer of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy denounced MESA for a recent statement saying it was “deeply concerned that innocent people in the Middle East would become the targets of misguided retaliation.” Kramer denounced Columbia University professor and well-known author Edward Said and other MESA members for belonging to a “very sick discipline” that “can’t contribute anything to America’s defense.” Professors who had pointed to alleged Arab grievances, he said, were justifying terrorism and refusing “to acknowledge that their paradigms collapsed the Twin Towers.” Kramer concluded his diatribe by calling on the government to stop funding Middle Eastern studies.

In the last two months professors of Middle Eastern origin have been particular targets of harassment and intimidation. The US Justice Department is seeking to reincarcerate a Palestinian-born professor, Mazen Al-Najjar, on national security grounds. Al-Najjar spent more than three years in prison on a visa violation although he was never charged with a crime. Al-Najjar helped run a University of South Florida Islamic studies group in the early 1990s and supported Palestinian charities.

The Justice Department is trying to reverse a court ruling that freed Al-Najjar last December on the grounds that his rights were violated. Al-Najjar and his wife, who have three US-born children, are also fighting a deportation order.

Campus officials, who claim he is a safety risk, have placed University of South Florida professor Sami Al-Arian, an associate of Al-Najjar, on indefinite leave. Both Al-Najjar and Al-Arian condemned the September 11 attacks.

The University of Miami fired an Iranian medical technician who allegedly made the remark, “Some birthday gift from Osama Bin Laden,” on hearing of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Mohammed Rahat, who turned 22 on September 11, said the words were meant to be sarcastic. Paula Musto, vice president of university relations, said Rahat had been fired because his comments were “deeply disturbing to his co-workers and superiors at the medical school. They were inappropriate and unbecoming for someone working in a research laboratory.”

Rahat has retained legal counsel in an attempt to win reinstatement. “I am an opinionated person, but for them to fire

me because of that, it's too unfair," he said.

The administration of the University of North Carolina has come under attack for refusing to censure faculty involved in two antiwar teach-ins on campus. An article, written by an associate editor of right-wing web magazine *frontpage.com*, titled "America's enemies rally at UNC Chapel Hill" was faxed to major media outlets. The chancellor and a number of faculty members have received threatening phone calls and e-mails and the university has been the subject of abuse by right-wing talk show hosts.

Canadian officials have followed the lead of their American counterparts. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is investigating a "hate crime complaint" against Sunera Thobani, a women's studies professor at the University of British Columbia. The complaint alleges that Thobani promoted hatred against the United States for widely reported remarks she made at a women's conference in Ottawa critical of US foreign policy. Thonabi argued that the US government, not international terrorists, was the most dangerous global force.

Michael Labossiere of the RCMP hate crimes unit said the complaint against Thobani was being taken seriously. "Normally, people think it's a white supremacist or Caucasians, promoting hate against visible minorities...We want to get the message out that it is wrong, all around."

Since her speech Thobani says she has received threats and hate mail from both the US and Canada.

Meanwhile, the University of New Mexico is pursuing disciplinary action against professor Richard Berthold, who made a joke in class about the September 11 attack on the Pentagon indicating anti-militarist sentiments. The university has come under pressure from a number of Republican state legislators to fire the professor who has 29 years seniority. A drunken man, apparently incited by the right-wing campaign, entered Berthold's house and attempted to assault him.

The attacks on academic free speech have aroused growing anger and indignation among students and faculty across the US. Drawing particular fire have been the actions of City University of New York officials who condemned faculty members who participated in a teach-in against the war in Afghanistan on October 2.

However, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued only a weak statement in response to the attacks on academics. Titled "Academic freedom in the wake of September 11, 2001," the AAUP does not cite any of the numerous instances of harassment and attempts at censorship on campuses across the US, and merely refers to "disturbing lapses."

The AAUP declined to sign a more strongly worded statement currently circulating among academics in the US and Britain. According to a report in the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain, hundreds of professors have signed the petition, which campaigners are planning to publish in the *New York Times*.

It states in part, "Trustees of the City University of New York

are planning formal denunciations of faculty members who criticized US foreign policy at a teach in. There have been similar efforts to silence criticism at the University of Texas at Austin, MIT, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and elsewhere."

The statement concludes, "We call on all members of the academic community to speak out strongly in defense of academic freedom and civil liberties, not just as an abstract principle but as a practical necessity. At a moment such as this we must make sure that all informed voices—especially those that are critical and dissenting—are heard."

The University Senate at Columbia University in New York passed nearly unanimously a student sponsored resolution defending freedom of speech on campus. The resolution states, "During recent weeks some student members of the Columbia community have felt pressure to curtail their opinions of the national response to the September 11 attacks." It continued, "Yet the continuous practice of free and open discourse produces a cacophonous, vibrant, creative community. This resolution reaffirms open discourse a prime value in our community and encourages diverse participation in it."

Another resolution passed by the arts and science council of the University of Illinois at Chicago reaffirmed the right of free speech, "even in wartime conditions."

However, the liberal press has maintained near silence on the attacks on academics. The few articles that have appeared have adopted a generally complacent tone. A number of articles and editorials have appeared equating the attacks on anti-war academics with alleged instances of suppression of patriotic or anti-Arab views on campus.

For example, a piece in the November 15 edition of *USA Today* entitled, "Foreign policy, free speech are under fire on US campuses", cites the assertion of Anne Neal, vice president of the American Council on Trustees and Alumni, that liberal faculty are imposing a "blame America first" bias on campuses.



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