

New York Times joins witch-hunt of Columbia University professors

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In its lead editorial on April 7 (“Intimidation at Columbia”), the *New York Times* issued an extraordinary attack on academic freedom, calling for Columbia University to crack down on professors who give “politicized courses.”

The newspaper urged the university to take action against professors in its Middle Eastern and East Asian Languages and Culture (MEALC) department who are critical of the policies of Israel—in effect, sanctioning a purge of the department.

The *Times* editorial was written in response to the report issued by a university panel set up earlier this year to investigate allegations of intimidation against two professors, Joseph Massad and George Saliba. The panel played down the charges against Saliba, but criticized Massad, an award-winning and popular professor at the university. His introductory course on Israeli and Palestinian society has attracted many students since he began teaching it in 2000.

The panel was set up as a concession to pressure from right-wing Zionist groups. Its report, released March 31, concluded that allegations against Massad were “credible,” declaring that in one instance he had exceeded the “commonly accepted bounds” of behavior. The panel reached this conclusion despite its inability to reliably substantiate any of the incidents in which the professor supposedly intimidated students, and its own acknowledgment that Massad never penalized students for their views. Indeed, the panel affirmed that Massad was extremely open in allowing students to raise different points of view in his classes.

The panel’s report amounts to a shameless cave-in to a well orchestrated and politically motivated campaign of harassment and character assassination, and an unwarranted smear against Professor Massad.

In its editorial, the *Times* piles on against Massad. But it goes even further. It criticizes Columbia University—not for legitimizing unsubstantiated criticisms of Massad from right-wing students and outside Zionist organizations, or for abridging academic freedom.

Rather, the *Times* criticizes the university for limiting its investigation to the charge of intimidation, and failing to go after the professor for the content of his lectures and his political views, i.e., his opposition to Israeli policies and Zionism.

While acknowledging that the evidence provided to the panel “seem[s] to indicate that the controversy ... has been overblown,” the editorial states: “Most student complaints were not really about intimidation, but about allegations of stridently pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli bias on the part of several professors. The panel had no mandate to examine the quality and fairness of teaching. That leaves the university to follow up on complaints about politicized courses and a lack of scholarly rigor as part of its effort to upgrade the department. One can only hope that Columbia will proceed with more determination and care than it has heretofore.”

In other words, according to the *Times*, the university should be in the business of suppressing controversial and minority views that offend the pro-Israeli bias that is promoted by the American media and all wings of

the political establishment, and embraced by the *Times* itself.

The editors repeat the allegations that Massad intimidated and brow-beat pro-Israel students. According to the newspaper, the panel showed that Massad “was clearly guilty of inappropriate conduct.”

Referring to the main allegation directed at Massad, the *Times* states that the panel found “he had replied angrily and heatedly to a student who had simply asked whether Israel sometimes gave advance warning before bombing a building so people could get out and avoid harm.” It cites a further allegation, by a student who had served in the Israeli military, that Massad asked him how many Palestinians he had killed. This incident—which the *Times* treats as an established fact—allegedly occurred outside of the classroom and off-campus.

The *Times* ignores Massad’s repeated denials that any of these incidents ever occurred. The report by the Columbia panel also does not categorically affirm that the incidents took place. It states only that that the allegations were “credible.” Even this conclusion flies in the face of the evidence presented to the panel.

The first allegation involves the charge that in response to one student’s question about advance warning from Israel, Massad shouted: “I will not stand by and let you sit in my classroom and deny Israeli atrocities.” The panel determined that the charge that Massad responded “heatedly” to the student—Deena Shanker—was “credible,” in spite of the fact that only two other students corroborated her allegations. One of these was an outside “guest,” whom no one else reported seeing in the class, and another gave a somewhat different version of events. In the committee’s report, these students are unnamed, and Massad was not given any opportunity to question them about their charges.

In his response to the panel’s report, Massad writes: “The fact that I deny that the incident ever took place and that my testimony is corroborated by three students, two graduate Teaching Assistants and one registered undergraduate student, while mentioned in the report, is treated as immaterial to the report’s conclusions.” (Massad’s lengthy and cogent reply to the panel’s findings, as well as his original statement before the panel, can be found at his web site: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/mealac/faculty/massad>.)

The other alleged incident is no more firmly grounded in fact. The complaining party, Tomy Schoenfeld, was never a student in any of Massad’s classes, and Massad denies ever having met him. Schoenfeld could not remember when or where the alleged incident occurred. He reported that it happened “in the late fall or early spring terms of the 2001-2002 academic year” at “a building adjacent to campus.” He also could not recall the event’s venue or who sponsored it. His only witness had a similar loss of memory about the details of the alleged confrontation.

Nevertheless, the panel found “credible” the allegation that an “exchange of this nature took place.” As Massad writes, “It would seem that based on this finding, anyone who was a student in any department at Columbia University in the last six years can come forward to this

committee claiming an imaginary exchange with me at some event whose date, place, sponsor, and title need not be disclosed, and the committee will find their claim at least partly ‘credible.’”

While there is no reliable evidence that Massad ever intimidated students, there is a wealth of evidence that he himself has been the target of a well-orchestrated, concerted campaign of intimidation and provocation organized by a number of Zionist organizations. These include Daniel Pipes’ CampusWatch web site, which is devoted to monitoring campuses for professors and students who criticize Israel, and the David Project, a Boston-based Zionist group. The Anti-Defamation League has also taken up the campaign against Massad.

This campaign has all the hallmarks of a provocation. Students on campus were solicited by outside organizations to raise persistent and obnoxious questions in Massad’s classes. The aim of such questioning was no doubt to elicit a harsh response and create a pretext for firing him.

One student began circulating a petition in the spring of 2002 demanding that Massad be fired. In his report before the committee, Massad noted that this student later apologized about the petition and “told me that she had been approached ‘from the outside’ to do it but she had dropped the matter.” Another student told Massad that he and some other students had been invited to what the student called a “conspiratorial” meeting led by a professor at the medical school. The student said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss how Massad could be kicked off campus.

That fall, Massad became one of the first targets (out of an initial eight) featured on the CampusWatch web site. In his report before the panel, Massad notes that the professors listed on the web site had their “own public dossiers as enemies of America and Israel and [the web site] called on our students to monitor us in class. Following the launch of CampusWatch, my email was spammed for months with over 4,000 emails daily.... I was subjected to identity theft when thousands of racist emails would be sent in my name to individuals and listservs.” The obvious aim of this effort was to smear Massad as anti-Semitic.

The campaign waged against Massad received the public support of organs such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Daily News* and the *New York Sun*, as well as the Columbia University newspaper, the *Spectator*. In the fall of 2004, the David Project put together a film called “Columbia Unbecoming” that gathered together many of the allegations directed against Massad and other professors at the university.

According to Massad, following the production of the film, he faced a barrage of hate mail, including one from a professor on campus, Moshe Rubin, which, Massad writes, told him to “go back to Arab land where Jew hating is condoned” and called him “a pathetic typical Arab liar.”

It was under these conditions that the Columbia University panel was set up in early 2005 by President Lee Bollinger, Vice President Nicholas Dirks and Provost Alan Brinkley to investigate the charges that students were being intimidated for their pro-Israeli views. The panel was not tasked to address the existence of the campaign of intimidation directed against Columbia faculty.

Bollinger openly solidarized himself with the charges raised in the film, denouncing the “disturbing and offensive nature of the incidents described in the film.” He said that academic freedom “does not...extend to protecting behavior in the classroom that threatens or intimidates students who express their viewpoints.”

The effect of setting up the panel was to legitimize the campaign against Massad and pave the way for measures aimed at curtailing the academic freedom of the Middle East studies department. In the wake of the report, Columbia University has taken steps to take control of the hiring and promotion of professors from the MEALC.

The *Times* editorial is a stunning and crude attack on academic freedom and basic democratic rights. Just who determines what constitutes “politicized courses” or an absence of “scholarly rigor”? What are the

criteria? It is obvious from what the *Times* writes that it would like to see a regime of political censorship and intimidation aimed at suppressing views that conflict with its own anti-Arab and pro-Zionist bias.

The implication of the newspaper’s position is that Columbia must take measures up to and including the firing of professors who refuse to toe the line of right-wing Zionist groups. For the *Times*, the question of Massad’s alleged intimidation is immaterial. What is impermissible is his politics.

If academic freedom means anything, it is that the university has a responsibility to cultivate to the greatest possible extent a free, open and objective exchange of ideas. No member of the university community should feel threatened or intimidated, and reluctant to express his or her opinions—so long as they do not threaten or injure others—for fear of ostracism or retaliation. This applies, above all, to those who hold minority and controversial views.

The Columbia panel that investigated the allegations against Massad, in either deference to or as a gesture toward such basic conceptions, drew the line at the issue of intimidation, and deliberately excluded from its consideration the content of Massad’s lectures and writings. But this is precisely what has provoked the ire of the *Times*. It cannot be bothered with scruples about academic freedom or democratic rights: it wants a full-scale witch-hunt.

How is its position in this case in any principled way different from those who organized the McCarthyite anticommunist purges on American college campuses in the 1940s and 1950s?

That the *Times* has taken this position should come as no surprise to observers of the “newspaper of record,” which has accommodated itself to every attack on democratic rights spearheaded by the Republican right and fully embraced its policy of militarism and neo-colonialism in Iraq and elsewhere. The intellectually debased and politically foul intervention of the *New York Times* speaks to the utter corruption and collapse of American liberalism.

Students and faculty at Columbia should reject this witch-hunt, defend professors such as Massad who are targeted for their political views, and oppose the machinations of right-wing provocateurs on university campuses. They should demand that the report of the university panel be retracted and academic freedom be upheld.



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