The Attack on Academic Freedom
An Historical Perspective

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American history is characterized by periodic episodes of self-abuse. These episodes entail one group of citizens, often allied to the government, accusing other citizens of being a threat to American security and values.

Such episodes began as early as 1798 with the Alien and Sedition Acts. Involved in an undeclared war with France, the U.S. government, then controlled by the Federalist Party, passed laws that led to the arrest of those considered "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States." It also allowed the imprisonment of those who published "false, scandalous, and malicious writings against the government or its officials." The legislation was used to shut down opposition to the government's policies and thus, in the name of protecting American democracy, systematically undermined it.

Today, parallels have been noted between the Alien and Sedition Acts and the USA Patriot Act rushed through Congress in October of 2001. Both cases were justified by claims that the country faced related foreign and domestic threats.

Self-abusive behavior resurfaced in 1830 during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. And, then again during the Civil War. With the coming of the First World War, Woodrow Wilson encouraged the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917. It was designed to punish those who actively opposed United States entrance into the war. Large numbers of socialists and pacifists were arrested and sentenced to jail for as long as twenty years. Today, conservative factions openly suggest that those who oppose the occupation of Iraq and criticize the

government's "war on terror" are potential traitors to their country.

After World War I the fear of subversion carried over into the first Red Scare era (1917-1920). At this time Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his "special assistant" J. Edgar Hoover waged a campaign against immigrants who allegedly held socialist or communist views. Up to ten thousand people were arrested, many of them held without charge and then summarily deported. In a significant sequel to this episode, Hoover took command of the newly formed Federal Bureau of Investigation and began creating dossiers on citizens he considered "subversive." It was the beginning of an ongoing history of American government "profiling."

Today, both citizens and non-citizens of Middle Eastern origin or appearance are subject to extraordinary scrutiny, both at the borders and in their own communities. Now, as in the early 1920s, those who support the wrong ideas are subject to harassment by the Justice Department and its agents.

The next episode of national self-abuse (the second Red Scare era) occurred in the 1950s and was associated with the activities of the Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy. In 1950 McCarthy publically claimed to have a list of over two hundred communists working in the State Department. In subsequent investigations thousands of individuals were accused of disloyalty, almost always without conclusive evidence or any effective way of defending themselves. Thousands lost their jobs and hundreds went to jail. Today, conservative elements in America, particularly those allied with the Zionist cause, seek to create a new de-facto black list so as to threaten and intimidate those, mostly in higher education, who would stand against American policies in the Middle East.

As these examples indicate, the victims of national self-abuse can vary. It is the exaggerated and emotionally charged component of these outbursts that is a constant. This constant has been studied by scholars and given a name by the historian Richard Hofstadter. He has called this behavior the "paranoid style in American politics."

Today, the enemy-of-the-moment for those addicted to this paranoid style are Americans, mostly academics, who allegedly side with Muslims bent on using terrorism to defeat America and its sacred ally Israel. These academics are seen as having infiltrated higher education in order to undermine American policies and spread disloyalty among the nation's youth. These "fellow travelers—the deluded liberals, the eggheads," as Joseph McCarthy

once called them, are the internal enemies that the paranoid-style defenders of American civilization are intent on rooting out.

The Paranoid Style Attacks Middle East Studies

Here is a short list of attacks on academics seen as standing against American foreign policy in the Middle East . There are, of course, many more cases than those listed below, and the attacks are ongoing.

1. Starting in the 1970s, Edward Said of Columbia University became the most visible critic of U.S. policies toward Israel and the Palestinians. As such, Said was labeled as anti-American[1] and anti-Semitic. The FBI kept watch on his movements and its file on Said runs to some 238 pages. One of the most interesting things about the file (parts of which have become public through the Freedom of Information Act) is the revelation that the FBI regularly spies on academic conferences and meetings having to do with the Middle East.

2. In November 2001, an organization called The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) responded to the September 11 terrorist attacks by issuing a report entitled "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America."[2] It accused forty college professors and one college president of being "short on patriotism" and representing "the weak link" in America's response to the newly declared war on terror.

3. In September of 2002, Daniel Pipes creates the website Campus Watch on which he posts the names and positions of academics in the field of Middle East Studies whom he deems hostile to Israel and "apologists for suicide bombing and militant Islam." He states that Campus Watch is designed to "hover over the shoulders" of such professors "and remind them that their egregious statements" are being monitored and could "even cause them trouble when they try to win tenure or get a new job." The site also asks students to report professors who "reject the views of most Americans and the enduring policies of the U.S. government in the Middle East."[3]

4. Also in September 2002: Right wing activist David Horowitz announces "Campaign for Fairness and Inclusion in Higher Education." Horowitz claims that American higher education has been taken over by left wing faculty who only give their students "half the story" and "politically harass" conservative students in the classroom.[4] He calls for state

level government investigations of political bias in publically funded universities and colleges. In short order, seventeen state legislatures begin such investigations. Subsequently, Horowitz issues the “Academic Bill of Rights.”[5] This document seeks to facilitate the establishment of administrative and legislative oversight and thus undermine the independence of faculty in the classroom.

5. In February, 2003, Professor of computer science Sami Al-Arian of the University of South Florida is arrested and charged under the Patriot Act with seventeen counts of aiding terrorist organizations. Attorney General John Ashcroft publically describes Al-Arian as “the head of the North American branch of Islamic Jihad.”[6] Al-Arian is subsequently fired from his teaching post. In the trial that followed, he is found not guilty on eight counts while the jury deadlocks 10-2 in favor of acquittal on the remaining nine counts. Nonetheless, the government declares that it will retry him. At the urging of his family, Al-Arian arranges a plea bargain agreement. Soon thereafter, a conservative judge violates the spirit of this agreement and sentences Al-Arian to fifty-seven months in prison. Some see this persecution of Al-Arian as the result of the infiltration and corruption of the Justice Department by neo-conservative, Zionist, and Christian Zionist elements within the Bush Administration.

6. In the Fall of 2004, the Boston-based Zionist organization The David Project makes a clandestine film titled “Columbia Unbecoming” accusing the untenured Columbia University professor Joseph Massad and others of “harassing and abusing” students who have pro-Israel views. The president of The David Project said that the film was meant to “alert Columbia administrators to the issue of the anti-Semitism on Campus.”[7] Both the conservative newspaper, The New York Sun and U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner’s (D-Queens) joined the campaign against Massad and called on Columbia to fire him. Instead, Columbia created an ad hoc grievance committee to investigate the allegations. It concluded in April 2005 that the allegations of harassment and abuse were false.

7. In June 2007, DePaul University in Chicago denies tenure to political science professor Norman Finkelstein despite the fact that he had been approved by his department and relevant university committees. Finkelstein is the author of a number of well researched though controversial books on Israel and Zionism. One of his main faculty supporters, international studies professor Mehrene Larudee, is also denied tenure despite backing from her department and relevant university committees. There is good evidence that the DePaul

administration succumbed to outside pressure from Zionist ideologues hostile toward Finkelstein and those who supported him.

8. Finally, from October 22 to 26, 2007, David Horowitz announces Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week, which, in effect, translated the "red-baiting" technique of the 1950s into a nationwide contemporary effort to associate the religion of Islam with terrorism. Aided by such right wing spokespersons as ex-Senator Rick Santorum and Ann Coulter, Horowitz scheduled "teach-ins" at more than 100 campuses across the nation. He claimed that this was necessary because the "left dominated universities" were not giving students vital information about the "deadly threat" from radical Islamists and therefore undermining the country's ability to "defeat our enemy."[8]

General Observations on this Process

These are contemporary examples of the paranoid style in American politics in action. To effectively attack their targets, today's practitioners of the paranoid style have to undermine higher education's rules offering protection for critical thought. And, as we have seen, these institutions and their rules are not impregnable. Too often those in academia who stand in the defense of critical thought are on their own. By this I mean that their institutions are ultimately susceptible to pressures that may often trump the principles of academic freedom, intellectual integrity, and classroom independence. Most often the trump cards are money and/or influence. The pressure that can be brought on university and college administrators by alumni, large donors, as well as legislators and other personages has often been shown sufficient to influence institutional behavior in ways that undermine academic freedom.

Just how alarmed should we all be over this latest round of the paranoid style in American politics? Well, while forcefully fighting for his principles, here is what Thomas Jefferson advised in the face of the Alien and Sedition Acts in1798,

> A little patience, and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore their government to its true principles. It is true that in the mean time we are suffering deeply in spirit, and incurring the horrors of a war. … If the game runs sometimes against us at home we must have patience till luck turns, and then we shall have the opportunity of winning back the principles we have lost, for this is a game

where principles are the stake.[9]

No doubt Jefferson would make the same statement if he were alive today. This being so, it suggests that old adage, “the more things change the more they stay the same.” It bears repeating that the struggle against the paranoid style in American politics is not a one-time event. It is a cyclical problem–something like a chronic disease. Jefferson’s optimism is reassuring, but should we be just as sanguine today?

Probably. There is considerable opposition to the government connected neo-conservatives and Zionists who now seek to limit criticism of their policies within the academy. In this regard many of us, like Jefferson before us, are actively fighting against this assault and for our principles. And, as in the past, the historical scenarios that bring the paranoid’s rhetoric to such a fever pitch come and go. If nothing else, the policies of contemporary neo-conservatives and Zionists are proving more and more disastrous and resulting failures are even now curbing their influence. On the other hand, there are factors which act against the ability of enlightened forces to truly defeat their paranoid style foes, and it is these that help make the struggle a recurring one. It is important that we understand this and the factors that make it so.

There are at least three factors that make for the recurring nature of the episodes we have been examining. All these factors, particularly in times of stress, make the general population susceptible to the exaggerations and distortions put forth by those using the paranoid style. Let’s take a look at each of these and see how they work toward this end. First, there is the fact that most people have short historical memories. On average the United States experiences bouts of paranoid hysteria once every thirty years. This suggests that most adult citizens have forgotten the essentially barbaric nature and consequences of the previous episode and how, in the end, the claims and charges that ruined so many lives turned out to be greatly exaggerated or just plain false. If any great number of citizens remembered with any distinctness the trauma related to such episodes, they would not so readily allow themselves to be repeatedly led off a cliff.

Second, there is the difficulty of thinking critically about events of which we have little knowledge. Under normal conditions, most people live their lives within, and focused on, a localized environment. A consequence of this natural localism is that the further events are from home, the less knowledge most of us have of them. When confronted with a situation

of which they know little or nothing, most citizens rely on the media and the government to provide supposedly accurate knowledge. These sources may or may not know what they are talking about, and may also have ulterior motives for slanting the story in a certain fashion. Nonetheless, most of the time the general population takes this information as gospel and forms its opinions and reactions accordingly. This is particularly the case when it comes to foreign affairs and policy. The effectiveness of the present, ongoing attack on academic freedom, and specifically the freedom of those who exercise critical thinking about American foreign policy, is directly related to the ignorance of the general population about matters of foreign relations.

Today, the general public has no independent knowledge base to understand the Muslim world's feelings about the United States. Without that knowledge base, how is one to critically assess the claims (which in reality are quite nonsensical) that those who attacked on September 11, 2001, did so because they "hate our freedoms" or because they "hate who we are and not what we do," and, also the misbegotten belief that we face civilizational war with "Islamo-fascism." Nor do most Americans have the knowledge necessary to make an independent judgment on the behavior of the Israelis. So even with a history full of misinformation that eventually proved to be wrong, the fact that one cannot think critically about what one knows nothing about, allows us to repeatedly be stampeded into the next supposedly dangerous episode by those who so readily use the paranoid style.

Third, there is the majority's misunderstanding of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights was the result of a strong demand that the U.S. constitution be amended to enumerate the basic rights of citizens, residents, and visitors on American soil. In other words, the Bill of Rights was designed to protect the individual against specific abuses of state power. But who is it that exercises individual rights in ways that might need such protection? It certainly is not the politically mainstream majority. It is, rather, the vocal minority acting outside the mainstream. Such vocal minorities are usually not appreciated by the majority.

This is a particularly important point because those addicted to paranoid style almost always claim to speak for an allegedly endangered majority. Today they allege we are in danger from the terrorist intentions of anti-American Muslims and the soft-headed academics who would defend them. But it is those who contest the paranoid's exaggerated claims, and the abuse of power that inevitably goes along with them, who become a vocal minority most in need of the protection of the Bill of Rights. Because the majority does not understand the

bill's function as a guarantor of minority voices, those using the paranoid style have repeatedly been able to persuade the majority to support the selective suspension of rights. Sometimes the courts prevent this, but often they end up going along with this breach of the constitution.

Conclusion

These three factors illustrate a recurring condition that is very difficult to correct completely, nor will it disappear of its own accord. We seem to be historically stuck with it. Under the circumstances, it is only by vigorously defending and using the right of free speech that space can be sustained for critical voices. We should do this both as teachers and writers, taking advantage of our free speech rights in their professionalized form of academic freedom, and as "public intellectuals," utilizing our right of free speech in its more general form of civil liberty. In this regard our foes will hopefully lend us unintended assistance, for, ultimately, the increasingly barbaric nature and the outright failure of their policies should chasten the media and allow critical assessments to catch the attention of the general public.

Thus we might as well take the words and actions of Thomas Jefferson as a model: have patience, take advantage of the opportunities that "luck" brings, and fight like hell for one's principles. The last characteristic is the most important one.

1. 1. Ronald Radosh, "Edward Said and the War against Terroris," *Front Page Magazine*, 8 March 2002, http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=24027.
2. 2. Jerry L. Martin and Anne D. Neal, "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America and What Can Be Done about It," a project of the Defense of Civilization Fund and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, February 2002.
3. 3. Daniel Pipes, Campus Watch (website), September 2002, http://www.danielpipes.org/article/4961.
4. 4. See *USA Today*, "Ex Liberal Navigates Right," 3 May 2006.
5. 5. Students for Academic Freedom, "Academic Bill of Rights," November 2007, http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/documents/1925/abor.html.

6. 6. “FBI Charges Florida Professor with Terrorist Activities,” CNN online, 20 February 2003,
7. 7. *Columbia Spectator Online*, 27 October 2004.
8. 8. See Lisa Makson, “Islamo-Fascism Week Spotlights Terrorism,” *Newsmax*, 23 October 2007, http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/islamofascism-week/2007/10/23/id/321973.
9. 9. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington DC: Taylor and Maury, 1854), p. 247. These are available as printoffs from the original manuscripts, printed on demand.