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Neo-Conservatives Threaten Academic Freedom

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United States

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The 11 September attacks on the United States created an opportunity for the denizens of neo-conservative and Israel-oriented think-tanks to exploit the legitimate fears of the American people and launch a campaign aimed at imposing a new orthodoxy on what may be thought and said about the Middle East, especially on university campuses. So far, this campaign has had only a limited impact. But students and scholars with dissident opinions, especially those of Middle Eastern origins, are feeling some pressure to lower their profiles and conform.

Shortly after 11 September Martin Kramer, former director of the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University, published a lengthy screed condemning the entire field of Middle East studies in North America: *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America*. Kramer alleges that the 'mandarins' of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) have imposed an intellectual and political orthodoxy inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Among the disabilities of American Middle East studies, according to Kramer, was the failure to predict the 11 September attacks and to warn the American public about the dangers of radical Islam. Kramer was acclaimed in the predictable political circles. But few scholars have taken his arguments seriously.

In response to questions raised on university campuses about the need to launch a war against Afghanistan following the 11 September attacks, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) issued a report entitled 'Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done about It'.¹ ACTA's founder and Chairperson Emerita, Lynne Cheney, is the wife of Vice-President Dick Cheney; and the former Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is a member of its National Council. A lengthy quote by Ms Cheney appears on the cover of the report, suggesting that she supports its contents and giving the document the appearance of a quasi-official statement of government policy.

ACTA's report asserts that 'our universities are failing America' because of inadequate teaching of Western culture and American history. The original appendix to the report lists 117 university faculty members, staff, and students who ACTA alleges are negligent in 'defending civilization' (the names were excised after ACTA was criticized for

compiling a black list). ACTA's catalogue of unacceptable speech includes my comment that, '[i]f Osama Bin Laden is confirmed to be behind the attacks, the United States should bring him before an international tribunal on charges of crimes against humanity'. Among the other items cited are '[i]gnorance breeds hate' and 'there needs to be an understanding of why this kind of suicidal violence could be undertaken against our country'.

Policing dissent

The attack on American universities in the name of 'defending civilization' was a ruse for ACTA's real agenda: suppressing any form of dissent from the Bush administration's policy in response to the 11 September attacks. Thus, ACTA regarded as inherently suspect the call to understand better why some people in other lands hate the United States enough to kill themselves to harm Americans.

In March 2002, former Secretary of Education and 'Drug Czar' William Bennett launched Americans for Victory over Terrorism (AVOT). AVOT aims to 'take to task those who blame America first and who do not understand – or who are unwilling to defend – our fundamental principles'. On 10 March Bennett published an open letter as an advertisement in the *New York Times* describing the external and internal threats to the United States. According to AVOT, the external threat comprises 'radical Islamists and others'. The internal threat consists of 'those who are attempting to use this opportunity to promulgate their agenda of "blame America first"'. AVOT's list of internal enemies includes former President Jimmy Carter because he criticized George Bush's 'axis of evil' concept as 'overly simplistic' and 'counter-productive', as well as congressional representatives Dennis Kucinich (Democrat, Cleveland) and Maxine Waters (Democrat, Los Angeles).

Another effort to police dissent specifically targets those who teach Middle East studies on university campuses. The Middle East Forum, a think-tank run by Daniel Pipes and supportive of the Israeli right wing, established a website pretentiously called Campus Watch. Campus Watch claims to 'monitor and gather information on professors who fan the flames of disinformation, incitement, and ignorance'. Campus Watch alleges that Middle East scholars 'seem generally to dislike their own country and think even less of American allies abroad. They portray US policy in an unfriendly light and disparage allies.' Campus Watch asserts that 'Middle East studies in the United States has become the preserve of Middle Eastern Arabs, who have brought their views with them. Membership in the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the main scholarly association, is now 50 per cent of Middle Eastern origin.'

These assertions are maliciously false. Expressing dissent from prevailing foreign policy is no indication of whether one does or does not like the United States. The majority of the members of MESA are not of Middle Eastern origin. Moreover, casting as-

persions on scholars because of their national origin violates the most basic democratic traditions of the United States and is a form of racism.

The sloppy thinking of Harvard University President Lawrence Summers is another bad omen for the future of free debate on Middle East-related issues at US universities. At the start of the current academic year he addressed a student prayer meeting and argued that harsh criticisms of Israel were 'anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent'.² Among other things, Summers was referring to a petition signed by 600 Harvard and MIT faculty, staff, and students to divest university funds from companies that do business in Israel as a protest against Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Similar efforts have been launched at some forty campuses. Whatever one thinks of this political demand, it is not anti-Semitic.

By contrast, the administration and faculty of the University of North Carolina resisted efforts to dictate their curriculum. The university was sued in court by the Family Policy Network, a Christian right group, because it assigned Michael Sells's translation and interpretation of the early verses of the Qur'an, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, as summer reading for all incoming first-year students. Family Policy Network's president, Joe Goover, argued that '[b]y forcing students to read a single text about Islam that leaves out any mention of other passages of the Koran in which Muslim terrorists find justification for killing non-Muslims, the university establishes a particular mind-set for its students about the nature of Islam. This constitutes religious indoctrination [which is] forbidden by the Supreme Court.'³

Daniel Pipes jumped on the bandwagon and assailed the university for obscuring the violent character of Islam. Thus, the University of North Carolina became one of the first institutions featured on Campus Watch. However, the university won the legal case, and the reading and discussion programme went forward.

Delegitimizing critical reflection

It is not coincidental that these efforts to police the boundaries of acceptable opinion about Islam, the Middle East, and US policy in the Middle East emerged following the 11 September attacks and as the Bush administration was launching a drive to war against Iraq. There is a clear political agenda behind these efforts. AVOT is funded primarily by Lawrence Kadish, chairman of the Republican Jewish Coalition, which has long tried to bring Jews into the Republican Party. Martin Kramer is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) – the most influential of the Israel-oriented think-tanks in Washington – which published his book. In addition to directing the Middle East Forum, Daniel Pipes is a WINEP adjunct scholar. Campus Watch appears to be inspired by Kramer's book. Although Kramer is not directly involved in Campus Watch, he has issued a statement supporting its aims.

Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board, is a member of WINEP's Board of Advisors, as was Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, before he joined the Bush administration. Perle and Wolfowitz are the intellectual leaders of the 'chicken hawks' who have provided the rationale for the Bush administration's drive to war with Iraq.

The activities of ACTA, AVOT, Campus Watch, and their fellow travellers recall the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy, when Hollywood actors and writers, trade union leaders, politicians, and university faculty members were branded as un-American communist sympathizers. McCarthy and his followers succeeded in narrowing the range of American political debate and cultural expression, and in depriving many innocent people of their careers and livelihoods. The assault on Middle East and Islamic studies has comparable objectives: to delegitimize critical reflection on US Middle East policy and nuanced understandings of contemporary Islamic social and political movements, and to harness the study of Islam and the Middle East to the most narrowly construed interests of the national security apparatus.

Tenured faculty members do not generally risk losing their jobs. However, in December 2001, Sami al-Arian, an associate professor of computer science at the University of South Florida, was threatened with termination after being accused of being a terrorist sympathizer on a notorious right-wing television programme. Professor al-Arian is of Palestinian origin and has been an Islamic activist for the Palestine cause outside of the classroom. His case is still under adjudication. So far, there are no similar cases involving professors of Islamic or Middle East Studies. But graduate students and untenured faculty are likely to feel intimidated, especially if university administrations do not firmly resist the pressures from the neo-conservative right. Such resistance will be difficult because the campaign to delegitimize dissent and narrow the range of acceptable thought comes from circles close to the Bush administration. If university administrators capitulate, the lack of understanding of Islam and the Middle East in the United States will become even more entrenched than is already the case.

Notes

1. <http://www.goacta.org/Reports/defciv.pdf>
2. Lawrence Summers, 'Address at Morning Prayers', Memorial Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 17 September 2002. (<http://president.harvard.edu/speeches/2002/morningprayers.html>).
3. Joe Glover, 'Book Fails to Tell Whole Truth', *USA Today*, 8 August 2002, editorial (<http://www.usatoday.com/news>).

Joel Beinin is professor of Middle East History at Stanford University and past president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America. His latest book is *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). E-mail: Beinin@stanford.edu

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