



# A Statement of the National Association of Scholars

National Association of Scholars -- 221 Witherspoon St., 2nd Floor -- Princeton,  
NJ 08542-3215 -- (609) 683-7878 -- fax (609) 683-0316 -- <mailto:nas@nas.org>

## September 11 and Academic Freedom

---

February 2002 -- The impact of the terrorist attacks of last September 11 continues to reverberate across the United States, leaving few aspects of American life unexamined and unchanged. As one might expect, a subject to receive renewed scrutiny has been the proper limits of academic freedom in a time of crisis.

Much debate and controversy has centered on the utterances of professors, a group whose job description virtually demands independent thought. In a number of instances, demands have been made that faculty members be punished or dismissed for statements made about the events or context of 9/11. In some cases, sanctions have actually been applied. In one, at the University of South Florida, Professor Sami Al-Arian faces dismissal on the stated grounds that his views and associations have provoked a public reaction that has disrupted university operations.

In response, a wide range of academic organizations and media spokesmen, including the National Association of Scholars, and, most recently, the editorialists of the *New York Times*, have emphatically defended the right of faculty, students, and others on campus to express themselves freely and openly, without fear of reprisal. All appear to agree that the intellectual freedoms fundamental to the academic enterprise must be safeguarded with particular vigilance in periods of stress.

Yet it is ironic that many who have become outspoken defenders of campus dissidence now that radicals are among those threatened, have long been silent about the mistreatment of

other brands of dissent. For more than a decade, our campuses have been blighted with speech codes, harassment policies, "sensitivity training," ideologically discriminatory hiring, and a permissive attitude toward even uglier forms of intimidation. These instruments of coercion have conspired to enforce an artificial uniformity of "progressive" opinion on such issues as race and gender relations, abortion, and the putatively oppressive nature of American political institutions and the civilization of the West. Intolerance of diverse ideas has, astonishingly, become routine, open, and unremarked in many academic quarters. Speakers are shouted down, student newspapers are stolen, and "insensitive" remarks are punished through proceedings marked by secrecy, caprice, and the presumption of guilt. Where, one wonders, have the newfound defenders of academic freedom been all this time?

**Worse yet, what should one make of those professors who now shrilly hurl charges of "McCarthyism" when intellectually discomfited by their critics? Historically, this term has denoted reckless calumnies, name-calling, or guilt-by-association aimed at ruining reputations. How perverse, then, that the charge of McCarthyism is now itself being leveled for that very same purpose. It is particularly distressing to witness a major media organ like the *New York Times* joining the mudslinging through its editorial attack on the report of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *Defending Civilization*, which recorded the tepid, evasive, and frequently anti-American reactions of many university faculty to 9/11. It is difficult to avoid the impression that many professors and journalists regard intellectual freedom less as an end in itself, than as a means of protecting the adversary culture.**

The National Association of Scholars strongly endorses the right of professors and students across the political spectrum to examine the origins and consequences of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and to expound their views freely, without let or hindrance. There are indeed threats to academic freedom coming from many sources, and they must all be resisted. Even after the 9/11 attack, however, the majority of such threats have emanated not from aroused patriots, but from self-proclaimed champions of campus diversity, who have sought to punish the expression of views they regard as insensitive toward Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners in general. The current problem is thus more an exacerbation of the old, rather than the development of any new, form of political correctness.

To be sure, academic freedom does not protect professors who commit crimes, misuse university property, and engage in disruptive or threatening behavior. If, for example, the University of South Florida can demonstrate that Professor Al-Arian aided terrorists or allowed university facilities to be used by them, it is justified in proceeding against him. But to terminate him because his opinions and associations trouble others, imperils every faculty member who holds a controversial view.

The right of free speech is by definition reciprocal and, especially in the academy, it carries an

obligation to tolerate and respond fairly to criticism. Individual professors, the professoriate as a class, and American higher education at large are as much legitimate targets for criticism as anyone or anything else in America. Deflection of criticism by abusive epithets only thwarts the purposes of rational discourse and deters others from engaging in it.

The attacks of 9/11 provide an opportunity for some long-overdue soul-searching at our campuses, since it is on them that censorship, intolerance, and anti-intellectualism have become so deeply ingrained. It is for this reason that honest commentary about our universities' problems - and about the dubious judgments of those on our campuses who, in speaking freely, may also speak falsely or foolishly - is both welcome and timely. Through it, we believe, American higher education, like our other great institutions, will emerge from this period of testing, stronger, wiser, and freer than before.

**The National Association of Scholars is America's foremost higher education reform group. Located in Princeton, it has forty-six state affiliates and more than four thousand professors, graduate students, college and university administrators and trustees as members.**

---

National Association of Scholars [Home Page](#)

[New Information Page](#)

[Press Release concerning this Statement](#)

[Press Releases Page](#)