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A muted response from UNH

Professors' right to opinion cited

By Tom Long, Globe Correspondent | September 10, 2006

When it was revealed that professor William Woodward believed the US government was behind the 9/11 attacks, it sparked outrage from Granite State political figures and a muted response from officials at the University of New Hampshire.

Woodward, a professor of the history of psychology, is a member of Scholars For 9/11 Truth, a group that believes the "World Trade Center was almost certainly brought down by controlled demolitions and that the available relevant evidence casts grave doubt on the government's official story about the attack on the Pentagon," according to its website.

The group also believes that the government not only permitted 9/11 to occur but may even have orchestrated these events to facilitate its political agenda.

"The 9/11 Commission Report is incomplete, and there are plenty of questions that haven't been answered," Woodward said last week.

When news of Woodward's association with the group was published in a local newspaper last month, it sparked a hail of criticism from New Hampshire politicians.

On Aug. 28, New Hampshire Governor John Lynch denounced Woodward's views. "It is crazy and offensive to suggest that President Bush had anything to do with 9/11," a spokeswoman for the New Hampshire governor said last week. "It raises questions about Woodward's competence."

Stephen J. Reno, chancellor of the University System of New Hampshire, took a more measured approach.

"A professor is in a position of authority and their opinions hold great weight," he said last week. "While I do not agree with Woodward's views, it is also important to create an environment in the classroom in which real discussion is supported."

On Sept. 1, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni jumped into the fray and released an open letter to Andrew E. Leitz, chairman of the board of trustees of the University System of New Hampshire, asking for

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a formal review of Woodward on the grounds that he "may not be abiding by professional standards or may be putting personal, social or political agendas ahead of a fundamental commitment to the objective search for the truth."

Reno said he has not spoken to Woodward or heard him defend his ideas. "I leave it up to the administration of the University of New Hampshire to make the determination if his views are allowed by academic freedom," Reno said.

Woodward is obviously enjoying his moment in the spotlight, even if he didn't seek the attention. "I've really stirred up the pot, haven't I?" he said last week. "I guess it's fair to say I don't mind creating a little excitement."

He said his views about 9/11 are not a big part of his teaching. "I mention my views in one class out of 35 and only in the interest of fair disclosure."

Bruce L. Mallory, provost and executive vice president of the University of New Hampshire, has delivered the school administration's official response. "It is important to note that no complaints have been registered by students or colleagues regarding Dr. Woodward's expression of political views, thus the university has never initiated any formal investigations and has no reason to do so now," he said in a statement.

But the controversy did lead to a review of Woodward's performance. "I am assured that he has exercised appropriate restraint and adhered to professional standards in the classroom," said Mallory. "He has only discussed the matter of Sept. 11 in the context of a course on political psychology, an appropriate venue for exposing students to conflicting ideas about the American political context and how it is understood and interpreted. Unlike other cases around the country, Dr. Woodward has not sought public audiences to discuss his views."

Mallory concluded that Woodward "has operated within the boundaries of academic freedom as articulated by the American Association of University Professors, even as he has expressed some ideas that many find objectionable."

A former Peace Corps volunteer, Woodward has been a member of the UNH faculty for 31 years. He is also a member of the so-called "Dover Six" who were arrested in New Hampshire Republican Congressman Jeb Bradley's Dover office last May for staging a sit-in to protest the war in Iraq.

Woodward said his views about 9/11 have been blown out of proportion. "If a student asks, I tell them. I hope they can refute me. I want people to have the courage to have political discussions at the dinner table and in bars and restaurants."

He said he would like to teach a class on the psychology of 9/11. "I'd like to get students to ask questions, like 'Can we trust the government, or can we trust the media?'" ■

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