

**THE NATIONAL
PROJECT TO
DEFEND
DISSENT &
CRITICAL
THINKING
IN ACADEMIA**

The National Project to Defend Dissent and Critical Thinking in Academia was launched in early 2005. It was initiated to respond to the nationwide lynchmob that was unleashed against tenured Ethnic Studies Professor Ward Churchill of the University of Colorado. At that time we published an Open Letter in the Boulder Daily Camera

with over 400 signatures from faculty around the country, which said in part:

“The Churchill case is not an isolated incident but a concentrated example of a well-orchestrated campaign launched in the name of “academic freedom” and “balance” which in fact aims to purge the universities of more radical thinkers and oppositional thought generally, and to create a climate of intimidation . . . It would be hard to overstate the serious nature of what has already happened, let alone what it would mean should the Regents fire Churchill. If this assault on academe succeeds, the consequences for American society as a whole will be nothing short of disastrous.”

The Project has been working mainly with university faculty around the country to meet this challenge to critical thinking and academic freedom, which is spearheaded by very tenacious, politically powerful forces with close ties to those around the Bush regime. That includes David Horowitz with his Frontpagemag.com operation, his Academic Bill of Rights, and the right wing Students for Academic Freedom (SAF); and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a conservative self-appointed academic “watch-dog” group that was founded by Lynne Cheney, the wife of the vice president. Together these and other forces aim to fundamentally transform the universities from being sites of critical thinking to sites of indoctrination. They are out to create a climate of intimidation on the campuses, targeting faculty and students who dare to challenge the institutional foundations of the United States, or of the motives and interests behind its policies.

The University of Colorado’s dismissal of tenured Professor Ward Churchill for alleged research misconduct and DePaul University’s denial of tenure to Professor Norman Finkelstein provide two clear examples of the seriousness of this growing threat.

After an intense two-year campaign spearheaded by Horowitz and ACTA, the CU Regents, following the recommendation of CU President Hank Brown (co-founder with Lynne Cheney of ACTA), voted to fire Ward Churchill for alleged “research misconduct.” Scholars around the world condemned it as a political witch hunt, one which violated established practices of academic peer review and was based on a report which itself contained falsifications, fabrications, and plagiarism.

Faculty across the country reacted with shock and deep concern at the announcement by President Dennis Holtschneider of DePaul University

that renowned and embattled political science professor Norman Finkelstein was denied tenure. The son of Nazi concentration camp survivors, Finkelstein’s internationally regarded scholarship is critical of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, and of its defenders in this country. This made him the target of a highly publicized campaign by Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz to prevent his gaining tenure.

While their particular disciplines are very different, and the details of their cases are quite distinct, the work of Churchill and Finkelstein each represent scholarship which challenges and calls into question core beliefs and assumptions about this country – its history, and its conduct internationally. Taken together, it is clear that “purge” is not too strong a term to describe what we are witnessing against dissenting and critical thinking scholars in academia today, and in particular those whose work challenges the “official narratives” which powerful forces in this society are determined to maintain and restore.

Along with a growing section of faculty, the staunchest supporters of these two professors have been the students that have taken their classes. (Student protests at DePaul’s graduation can be seen at www.Finkelgate.org)The students talk about the profound impact these professors have had on their education. And they express great concern for what it will mean for the education of other students if they are denied the opportunity to learn from these excellent and challenging teachers. They’ve said that whether radical or conservative, students leave their classrooms saying “Wow, he really made me think!” Students nationwide need to learn about and become involved in the efforts of the students and faculty who are courageously working to reverse these decisions.

These and other less well-known purges of faculty are taking place at universities today alongside legislative efforts to control what is taught in the classrooms, and a growing and richly funded right-wing student operation by SAF and Campus Watch that is targeting and attempting to intimidate certain professors. Together this is creating a chilling, repressive atmosphere at a time when there should be the greatest debate and discussion opened up on the campuses, spilling over into society, of the origins and international implications of the course this country and the world are on. The conclusion to the Call of World Can’t Wait (www.worldcantwait.org) has implications for the role and character of the universities as well: which future we get is up to us.

The April 12th edition of the New York Review of Books carried “An Open Letter Calling on the University of Colorado to Reverse its Recommendation to Dismiss Professor Ward Churchill.” The letter was initiated by 11 prominent scholars and public intellectuals: Derrick Bell; Noam Chomsky; Juan Cole; Drucilla Cornell; Richard Delgado; Richard Falk; Irene Gendzier; Rashid Khalidi; Mahmood Mamdani; Immanuel Wallerstein; and Howard Zinn.

That letter says in part: “. . . it is crucial that we who belong to the academic community join together to protect those who are the targets of repressive tactics, whether or not we agree with the ideas or expressive metaphors relied upon by a particular individual.” And it concludes, “As with oxygen, we become acutely conscious of academic freedom when it is not present in sufficient quantities for normal, healthy breathing. When academic freedom is threatened, the most sustaining response is vigorous defense on principle.”