

Open Letter Calling on the University of Colorado to Reverse Its Recommendation To Dismiss Professor Ward Churchill

The militarist reflex to rely on the war option for post-9/11 security is daily proving itself disastrously dysfunctional, and as its failures become more manifest, those American leaders responsible reaffirm their extremism, relying on a brew of fear, demonization, and global ambition to pacify a nervous, poorly informed, and confused citizenry at home. And where there are expressions of significant, principled opposition, the impulse of the rulers is often repressive. In such a setting it is hardly surprising that academic freedom is menaced, but not less troubling.

The relentless pursuit of and punitive approach of the University of Colorado at Boulder to Professor Ward Churchill is a revealing instance of the ethos that is currently threatening academic freedom. The voice of the university and intellectual community needs to be heard strongly and unequivocally in defense of dissent and critical thinking. And one concrete expression of such a resolve is to oppose the recommended dismissal of Ward Churchill from his position as a senior tenured faculty member.

In a recent statement calling for the CU administration to reverse the pending recommendation of the former Interim Chancellor to dismiss Professor Churchill, the American Association of University Professors at Boulder wrote, "In February, 2005 the Colorado House of Representatives unanimously adopted a resolution condemning Churchill, and State Governor Bill Owens called publicly for him to resign for statements he made regarding the World Trade Tower disaster. When a University-appointed committee rightly ruled that these resolutions violated Professor Churchill's First

Amendment right to free speech, charges of academic misconduct immediately surfaced -- from the same and similar sources -- despite the fact that similar charges had been raised at least two years earlier, and were never followed up by the University. Against this background, an inquiry was conducted, in circumstances marked by constant inflammatory, ad hominem, and even obscene attacks, on and off the CU campus, against Professor Churchill, anyone who appeared to support him, and even against some members of the ad hoc Investigating Committee, two of whom resigned soon after the investigation began.... [W]e believe that the investigation now is widely perceived to be a pretext for firing Churchill when the real reason for dismissal is his politics."

It is the most honorable calling of institutions of higher learning to provide safe haven for unpopular and distasteful views, including highly critical appraisals of national policy, especially at moments of crisis. Without nurturing critical thought, learning tends toward the sterile and fails to challenge inquiring minds. For this reason alone, 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.

We should similarly be wary of opportunistic attacks on scholarship that are disguised means of sanctioning critics and stifling the free expression of ideas. It may be that aspects of Churchill's large body of published writings were vulnerable to responsible academic criticism, but the proceedings against him were not undertaken because of efforts to uphold high scholarly standards, but to provide a more acceptable basis for giving in to the right-wing pressures resulting from his 9/11 remarks. Churchill's reputation within the university was sufficiently strong that he was appointed by administrative officers to be chair of ethnic studies

just a few years before the controversy surfaced, a position he voluntarily resigned after the flare-up. The Churchill case epitomizes a mood that threatens the vitality and integrity of the atmosphere of universities much beyond this case.

This country exerts an influence that extends far beyond its boundaries, often shaping the destinies of foreign countries. National elections in the United States are often more consequential for citizens of these countries than the outcome of their own elections. In many significant respects, given the global role of the United States, much of the world is significantly disenfranchised, even if their own national political system

successfully functions as a democracy. To compensate to some degree for this dimension of a largely unacknowledged global 'democratic deficit' we in this country at least owe the rest of the world an energetic presence within American society to challenge through critical thought prevailing policies of the government. This operates as a safety valve, although it is far from a substitute for empowering the peoples of the world to participate meaningfully in the formation of policies that impact upon their lives, their hopes, and their individual and collective destinies. But if opposition is stifled in the United States, then foreign societies are denied even this indirect voice in these American political debates that has so often in recent years produced policies destructive of their economic, environmental, and even physical well-being.

Such an argument for political openness is further supported by the passivity of the media, Congress, and opposition politics in post-9/11 America. There has been an absence of serious public debate in this country with respect to the most controversial policies adopted by the government during the Bush presidency. Even highly respected media outlets consistently defer to government sources, especially in

the area of national security and foreign policy. In America there have been some truly exceptional figures, including within the confines of the university, world class scholars whose work was famously influential quite apart from their deliberate decision in the course of their careers to speak out as public intellectuals on controversial questions. But very few members of the academic community can ever achieve this eminence, nor should this be a condition precedent to speaking out on controversial issues. It seems crucial to engender confidence to those in university communities who have the inclination to speak out at teach-ins, demonstrations, media outlets, and in a variety of academic and civic settings, expressing views often likely to offend portions of the wider community, but whose expression are beneficial, even essential, with respect to fostering a fuller understanding of contested issues. The arbiters of acceptable viewpoints are emboldened to act more intrusively within the university whenever the societal climate seems threatened, or even just offended, by dissident ideas. The oppressive strategy adopted often resembles a lion hunt, focusing toxic energies on those in the herd who seem most vulnerable.

The need to be this concerned about academic freedom is itself a warning bell. Ideally, academic freedom should function as the oxygen of the life of the mind—indispensable, yet invisible and so strongly presupposed that its defense is superfluous. 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.

DERRICK BELL, Visiting Professor of Law, New York University School of Law
NOAM CHOMSKY, Massachusetts Institute of

Technology

JUAN COLE, University of Michigan

DRUCILLA CORNELL, Rutgers University

RICHARD DELGADO, University Distinguished Professor of Law, and Derrick Bell Fellow, University of Pittsburgh

RICHARD FALK, Milbank Professor of International Law Emeritus, Princeton University Visiting Distinguished Professor (since 2002), Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

IRENE GENDZIER, Boston University

RASHID KHALIDI, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies;

Director – Middle East Institute; Columbia University

MAHMOOD MAMDANI, Herbert Lehman Professor of Government and Anthropology, Columbia University

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, Senior Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Yale University

HOWARD ZINN, professor emeritus, Boston University