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. 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. Appealing to the dangers of radical Islam, Kramer alleged 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 of the dangers of radical Islam. Kramer was acclamation 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.’ ACTA’s founder and Chairperson Emerita, Lynne Cheney, is the wife of Vice-President Dick Cheney, and a former Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is a member of its National Council. A lengthy quote by Cheney appears on the cover of the report, suggesting that the supports its contents and giving the document the appearance of an 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 engaging 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 ‘if Usama 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 ‘the belief that the response breeds hatred 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 associations with ‘terrorists’ and ‘supporters of terrorism’. ACTA’s report, asserting that ‘our universities are failing America first, and the general public is so uninterested – or who are unwilling to defend – our fundamental principles’, lists specific questions that ‘outside enemies and terrorism might use to portray our universities as “blame America first”.’ ACTA’s list of internal enemies includes faculty and students who 1) engage in pro-Palestinian activity, 2) support movement to disassociate themselves from Israel (Democrat, Cleveland) and Maxine Waters (Democrat, Los Angeles). These are acts that either effectively or dissuasive target those who teach Middle East studies on university campuses. The Middle East Forum, a think-tank run by Daniel Pipes and supporting of the Israeli right wing, established a website pretentiously called Cam pus Watch. Campus Watch claims to ‘monitor and gather information on professors who fan the flames of disinformation, incite, diminish and ignore’. Campus Watch also alleges that Middle East faculty members in the United States has become the preserve of Middle Eastern academics. They portray US policy in an unflattering light, and disassociate US society from the Middle East. The Middle East studies association, the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), the main scholarly association, is now 59 per cent of Middle Eastern origin.

These assertions are maliciously false. Ex- pression 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 origins. Moreover, casting associations with scholars because of their national origin violates the most basic democratic and fundamental traditions of the United States and is a form of racism.

The sloppy thinking of Harvard University President Lawrence Summers is another indication of the future for 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’. 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. 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 pro-family group, because it allowed students to read a single text about Islam that leaves out any mention of other religions. The university for obscuring the nature of Islam. This constitutes ‘religious incitement’ (which is ‘forbidden’ by the Supreme Court.

Daniel Pipes jumped on the bandwagon and claimed that the university was failing to comply with ‘the basic religious neutrality which is a central cornerstone of the Constitution’. Daniel Pipes and others have attempted to use this opportunity to promote the agenda of MESA: to delegitimize and narrow the range of acceptable thought and beliefs on US campuses.

Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board, is a member of WINEP’s Board of Directors for the future of free debate on the Bush administration’s drive to war in Iraq.

The activities of ACTA, AVOT, Campus Watch, and their fellow travellers recall the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy, when, in October 1950, he accused the US Army of having communists as its employees. McCarthy’s campaign focused on a range of American political 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 delegitimate critical reflection on US Middle East policy and neutralized understandings of contemporary Islamic social and political movements, and to harness the study of Islam and the Middle East to the most narrowly construed political demand, it is not anti-Semitic.

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Notes


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