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11-15-04: Historians/History

## Why We Are Dissatisfied with the OAH's Report on Repression

By David Beito, Robert "KC" Johnson, and Ralph E. Luker

*Mr. Beito is an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama and the founding member of HNN blog, [Liberty and Power](#). Mr. Johnson is a professor of history at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Mr. Luker, an Atlanta historian, was co-editor of the first two volumes of *The Papers of Martin Luther King*. Johnson and Luker are members of the HNN blog, [Cliopatria](#).*

On 25 March 2004, two and a half years after 9/11 and the passage of the Patriot Act and a year after American forces led the allied invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, [the executive committee of the Organization of American Historians authorized appointment of a special committee](#) to investigate "repression" in the American academy.

The [initiative for the appointment of that committee](#) came from a petition by [Historians Against the War \(HAW\)](#), an unofficial coalition of historians who opposed the invasion of Iraq. The leadership of HAW and the OAH overlapped, as past OAH President Eric Foner of Columbia, outgoing OAH President David Montgomery of Yale, and incoming OAH President James Horton of George Washington University had signed the petition. When Horton appointed the investigating committee, it seemed appropriate to name Montgomery as its chair. The additional members of the committee, Sara Evans of Minnesota, Ray Arsenault of the University of South Florida, and Gloria Miranda of El Camino Community College, represented the gender and ethnic diversity that pre-occupies the academy in recent years, but they did not reflect the breadth of political attitudes toward the war and the state among American historians.

As we thought about the mandate of the OAH executive committee to its special investigating committee, [KC Johnson](#) noted that HAW's petition saw "eight types of 'repression,' including":

'restrictions of research and surveillance of library use under the USA PATRIOT Act'; 'reports of teachers, especially in high schools and community colleges, reprimanded or confronted with suspension or non-renewal for allowing students in their classrooms to express opposition to the occupation of Iraq'; 'Systematic denunciation of historians who have criticized government policy by Campus Watch, No Indoctrination, Students for Academic Freedom, and other groups'; 'Dismissals and refusals to employ faculty members allegedly on the basis of their views on foreign policy'; 'Restriction of historians' access to government records, and new limits to enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act.'

HAW's grievance that the Bush administration restricted historians' access to government records, he observed, was unlikely to win a sympathetic hearing in government circles when it was coupled with a second HAW petition, similarly endorsed by the OAH, that denounced the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emptive war. The administration officials could now "claim that the leading professional organization of American historians has linked its call for more liberal release of documents with an attack on Bush's foreign policy," said Johnson. Citing [his own the experience](#) and the files of FIRE, the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Higher Education](#), he denied the

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assumption that "the chief threat to academic freedom and free speech on the campus today" comes from "right-wing ultra-patriots."

In the discussion that followed KC Johnson's comments, [Michael Burger of the history department at Mississippi University for Women](#) said: "A propos FIRE, campus speech codes do seem a more clearly established challenge to free speech on college campuses. Would OAH support a statement condemning speech codes? Perhaps there's an interesting experiment there." And so there was. Taking up Burger's query, [Ralph Luker](#) said that he doubted that that is what HAW's leaders originally had in mind, but he recommended that Montgomery get in touch with FIRE if his committee were seriously interested in exploring contemporary threats to academic freedom.

Prompted by Luker, [David Beito](#) agreed. He was a historian whose position neither HAW nor the OAH's special committee should dismiss lightly. Having signed HAW's petitions against the war, he was among the most outspoken critics of the administration's prosecution of the war and among leading critics of restrictions of speech in academic communities. Moreover, he saw even greater potential in Burger's query about the special committee's agenda.

"As someone who has not hesitated to use his academic freedom to criticize the war (normally considered a "leftist" cause)," he wrote, "I would urge Montgomery to take this request seriously. This could be an excellent way to build bridges between conservatives, libertarians, liberals, and socialists and thus be better able to defend academic freedom for everyone. It would also be a wonderful advertisement for Joe and Jill Six Pack about the across-the-board consistency of the OAH."

The [Report of the OAH Committee on Academic Freedom](#) is out and it is disappointing.

We endorse its concerns about government surveillance under the Patriot Act, its observation that government surveillance has discouraged scholars and students from abroad from entering American academic communities, and its criticism of the slowed pace of declassifying federal documents. On the other hand, it is foolish to believe that government subsidy of academic research -- unlike any other form of government subsidy -- ought to be free of government oversight of such research. The acceptance of government subsidy necessarily implies accountability to the source of subsidy. When all academic programs are threatened with budget cuts and jobs for historians are consequently threatened, how can a proposal to increase funding for the teaching of American history be deemed a threat to academic freedom by the leading professional organization of historians of the United States? On the committee's final point, it is encouraging to see that the OAH is beginning to attend to K-12 education. Yet, what is the point of indicting a New Jersey school district's emphasis on the legacy of Ronald Reagan? Would it similarly indict a school district's emphasis on the legacy of any other president?

More importantly, we are taking advantage of the special committee's closing request for reports of additional topics for its consideration. We are officially asking the committee to address the matter of the chilling effect of speech codes on the freedom of academic inquiry and speech. We are asking the committee in good faith to contact FIRE and to examine its files of grievances. We are asking the committee to recognize that conservative and libertarian voices express legitimate grievances. We are asking the committee to recognize that threats to academic freedom don't emanate exclusively from the government and right-wing extremists. They emerge all too often from among ourselves in the misguided pursuit of ordinarily decent results.

- [Committee needs to build credibility](#) by Thomas W Hagedorn (November 17, 2004 at 7:41 AM)
  - [Re: Committee needs to build credibility](#) by Thomas W Hagedorn (November 17, 2004 at 7:43 AM)
  - [Re: Committee needs to build credibility](#) by David T. Beito (November 17, 2004 at 5:12 PM)

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