

What Do the Faculty Think?

The nation was shocked into silence by the unimaginable images of deliberate carnage that we witnessed on the morning of September 11, and for a time we wanted no opinions--only the details of what had happened. And then we wanted the stories of heroism and self-sacrifice. And we also wanted a time of silence to mourn. I stood outside a packed church in downtown Washington at noon on September 14 when the whole city was solemnly silent--except for the drone of a passing helicopter from time to time. New words failing us, we turned to old ones in hymns and prayers and patriotic songs. That time has passed, and now we are back to our usual habits of analysis, criticism, and scorn. The pile-up of details is not enough; as a rational species, we must push beyond them to imagine causes, motives, remedies. And that is good. That is what we do as citizens in America. That is what faculty do as professionals.

The faculty do not, however, have a single brain that renders a unified opinion on matters of public policy. We have, in our Congress, a Republican conservative former professor of economics who wants to drill for oil in the Arctic, and we have a liberal professor of physics who doesn't. Professors crowd our video screens with opposing opinions about the budget, the genetic engineering, and cultures of the Middle East, and we seem to accept their diversity in times of peace. But in times of crisis, our tolerance of such diversity fades, and the words of any one faculty member may be taken to be the words of all. It is predictable that after we had passed through the initial phases of reaction to September 11, we should want more subtle analyses. And so the discourses of academics--passionate as well as cool--have commenced. And so have the voluble reactions of those who believe that thinking out loud in our colleges and universities is so subversive that it ought to be stopped, somehow.

A distrust of intellectuals has always lurked beneath the surface of American popular opinion. Now it has begun to leak out again--either through the frontal assault in the partial reporting by the *New York Post* of a forum at the City University of New York, or the sideswipes at "campus teach-ins" by a respected columnist like Tom Friedman or others such as John Leo. Such editorializing may be legitimate, but to demonize "the faculty" is harmful. Further, there's a difference when the responses to faculty opinions come from those who have the power to retaliate. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer withdrew his ominous warning that public people should "watch what they say," because the government has the power to censor. Just so, the comments of some members of the board of CUNY, and of its chancellor, should also be rethought. These warnings have been accompanied by nods to academic freedom, but they still open the possibility of retaliation.

So, what do the faculty think? They think many things about September 11. Some of them died in the bombings; some lost loved ones. They disagree vociferously on ethics, strategy, causes, and effects. From my own informal survey, faculty opinion ranges from vengeful to conciliatory. That's why we cannot speak on the course of war or peace for "the faculty" that we represent within the American Association of University Professors. But we can speak for faculty on one big thing--the necessity, as patriots and professors, to think and express their views in freedom.

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