



Columbia's Own Middle East War

By Jennifer Senior



Illustration by Christopher Sleboda

Of all the political documentaries that have ignited controversy in the past year, *Columbia Unbecoming* is by far the shortest, sparest, and lowest-budget. Still, it quickly attracted an illustrious audience. It was first screened in March to a handful of university alumni. Then it was shown to a trustee, then to a high-level administrator, and then eventually to the university provost, Alan Brinkley. By October, Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, had seen it, as had the Columbia University president, Lee Bollinger; Judith Shapiro, the president of Barnard College, had seen it too, and she mentioned the film in a speech one day at a national women's conference. That was when the press

demanded to see it. It did. A bonfire of ugly headlines about anti-Semitism ensued. The university's public-affairs department spent the final month of the fall semester at the university gates, braced with a fire hose.

Columbia Unbecoming is a 40-minute reel of testimony from fourteen students and recent graduates who describe, among other things, moments of feeling cowed by professors for expressing pro-Israel sentiment in the classroom. The startling thing about the video, made by a group called the David Project, isn't just that these students showed their faces. It's that they dared to name names, and that all of the professors are in the university's Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures, known around campus as MEALAC. One

student, an Israeli and a former soldier, says a professor named Joseph Massad demanded to know how many Palestinians he'd killed; another woman recounts how George Saliba, one of the country's foremost scholars on Islamic sciences, told her she had no claim to the land of Israel, because—unlike him—she had green eyes, and therefore was “not a Semite.” At one moment, the video simply shows a block of text, pulled from an article in the Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly*: “Half a century of systematic maiming and murdering of another people has left its deep marks on the faces of these people,” it says, referring to Israeli Jews. “The way they talk, the way they walk, the way they handle objects, the way they greet each other, the way they look at the world. There is an endemic prevarication to this machinery, a vulgarity of character that is bone-deep and structural to the skeletal vertebrae of its culture.” The passage was written by Hamid Dabashi, the former chairman of MEALAC.

Of course, there is more than one side to every story. In a gracious editorial in the *Columbia Spectator*, Saliba said he didn't remember ever having that conversation about green eyes, but assumes the student—who got a high mark in his class—misquoted “an argument I sometimes make ... that being born in a specific religion, or converting to one, is not the same as inheriting the color of one's eyes from one's parents and thus does not produce evidence of land ownership of a specific real estate.”

Massad, meanwhile, wrote a scathing piece in *Al-Ahram*, calling *Columbia Unbecoming* “the latest salvo in a campaign of intimidation of Jewish and non-Jewish professors who criticise Israel.” The New York Civil Liberties Union decried what it saw as a witch hunt aborning on campus, and many Columbia students and faculty members seemed to agree: A petition went around on Massad's behalf; students organized press conferences and rallies; the faculty quickly convened panels on academic freedom, sensing its scholarship was imperiled. On October 29, *The Jewish Week* reported that Massad was getting hate mail, including a note that said: “Get the hell out of America. You are a disgrace and a pathetic, typical Arab liar.”

Nestled in the middle of the country's largest and most diverse city, Columbia University has for a long time lived in fluctuating, ambivalent relation to the world outside—sometimes insulating its students from it, sometimes absorbing all of its wild rhythms and tensions. Whenever the campus does the latter, as it is doing today, it makes headlines. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has weighed in, praising the university for taking the allegations seriously. Anthony Weiner, a Democratic congressman from Brooklyn who happens to want Bloomberg's job, has called on Columbia to fire Massad, who is up for tenure this year. (Neither Massad nor his two tenured colleagues, Saliba and Dabashi, would return *New York's* calls for this story.)

All of which puts president Bollinger in an extremely delicate, even unwinnable, position, forcing him to walk a line between protecting his students and defending the scholarly prerogatives of his faculty. “We can say universities should never take up, in scholarship or in teaching, really contemporary controversial issues,” he says in a conversation just a few days before the new year. “But I think that would be a huge mistake. Universities have a major role to play in addressing some of the most difficult, seemingly intractable questions of our time, and in ways that differ from how they’re addressed on the outside.

“It’s very, very difficult,” he concedes. “And Columbia, of all the places in the world, is probably the most difficult place to do it. But it’s probably the most important place to do it. And we have to make it possible to do.”

What that means, though, remains to be answered. This could be the beginning of a very long academic war.

“One incident that disturbed me and made me feel personally uncomfortable—practically for the rest of the semester—occurred to me in one of my early Arabic classes.” This is Aharon Horowitz speaking. He’s kippah-clad and round-faced, looking directly into the camera. It’s one of *Columbia Unbecoming’s* more memorable moments. “The professor used the word *man a na*, which means ‘to prevent’ in Arabic,” he continues. “I asked him how to use the verb. And he wrote on the board: ‘Israel prevents ambulances from going into refugee camps.’” Here, Horowitz pauses, then points to his scalp. “I have to say, I really don’t think he would have said that had I not been wearing this on my head.”

Columbia Unbecoming contains a number of such moments—most of which, as it turns out, took place in 2002 and 2003, during and after Israeli incursions into the West Bank and the building of the security wall. Students describe professors who became “red in the face and shouting” when discussing the Mideast conflict; they recount how professors Saliba and Dabashi abruptly canceled classes in order to attend a pro-Palestinian rally. But even assuming these incidents happened as described, do they really constitute intimidation? Or do they merely constitute, say, obnoxiousness? Or gratuitous political speechifying? Is a professor allowed to have politics in his classroom? With the exception of the most unambiguous cases—and the film contains few—intimidation is a subjective notion, a devil without contours. What one student finds intimidating, another may find provocative, even intoxicating.

“I’m sure you’ve had conversations where things grew increasingly heated and you said things you wish, in retrospect, you hadn’t,” says Zachary Lockman, chairman of the Middle Eastern

and Islamic Studies department at New York University. “So okay, that happens. But as a student, you can say, ‘Okay, the guy’s a schmuck.’ And then you can move on.” He emphasizes that he hasn’t seen *Columbia Unbecoming* and that he himself wouldn’t choose to say some of the things the professors are alleged to have said. “That’s not grounds for firing somebody,” he says. “And in part, there may be an effort here to take advantage of the American culture of victimization, right? To frame this in terms of harassment. It gives you some kind of leverage. There’s also a piece of this that suggests students are really stupid. But they’re not. They have a capacity to filter things and to figure out where their professors are coming from.”



Columbia student Ariel Beery supports the film. Photo: Lisa Kereszi

Among the film’s allegations, none claims the professors punished the students with bad grades for their points of view. In fact, Noah Liben, an affable and handsome kid and the only interviewee in *Columbia Unbecoming* to have taken a course with Massad, told me in an interview he got an A-minus. (Though he added that he wrote a final paper based on an idea he didn’t really believe in.) In *Al-Ahram*, Massad points out that he and Liben exchanged e-mails all semester, which hardly suggests that Liben felt cowed by his behavior. Liben told me that this may be true, but he’s thick-skinned. Not all of his

classmates, he says, were the same way.

“Unfortunately, there are likely to be problems in any situation where people come to a place where they meet very different people with very different ideas,” says Rashid Khalidi, director of Columbia’s Middle East Institute. He is bearded, compact, powerfully charismatic; one of his colleagues, attempting to sum up his intellect, told me, “As smart as you think a person can be, he’s smarter.”

Khalidi is Columbia’s spiritual heir to Edward Said, the handsome, prolific, and flamboyantly controversial champion of the Palestinian cause who died of leukemia in September 2003. He has a \$2.5 million endowed chair in Said’s name and is frequently called upon, as Said was, to explain the ways of the Arab and Muslim world to the West. (When Yasser Arafat died, Khalidi spoke to no less than 34 media outlets in a 24-hour period.) From 1991 to 1993, he served as an adviser to the Palestinian delegation in the Madrid and Washington peace negotiations; on

a more problematic note, a rumor persists that he once also served as a spokesman for the PLO, thanks to a 1982 news story that identified him this way. Right now, it's late December, and Khalidi is sitting in his corner office, a rumpus room of comfortable chairs and scholarly clutter, talking at roughly twice the rate of average human speech.

“Most kids who come to Columbia come from environments where almost everything they've ever thought was shared by everybody around them,” he says. “And this is not true, incidentally, of Arab-Americans, who know that the ideas spouted by the major newspapers, television stations, and politicians are completely at odds with everything they know to be true. Whereas kids from, I don't know, Teaneck. Or Scarsdale. Or Levittown. Or Long Island City. Many of them have never been exposed to a dissonant idea, a different idea, as far as the Middle East is concerned. And so you have a situation where it's going to be problematic.”

He swings around to his computer, starts surfing the university Website. “We're not in an environment where Jewish students, as they were in the history of the Ivy League, are discriminated against,” he says. Indeed, the university Hillel estimates that roughly a quarter of Columbia's undergraduates, or about 2,000 students, are Jewish. “Have you looked at the Hillel Website here?” Khalidi asks. “It blew my mind!” He finds it, starts to scroll. “Look at this. They have ten, twelve paid employees.” (Well, at least seven, and five rabbinic interns.)

“The field has been under attack for years, and this is a huge club in that attack.”

He looks back at me with intense blue eyes. “I'm not saying that professors should necessarily *ever* do certain things. I'm just saying that in a polarized environment, and in a situation where overall there's no reason for a person who's Jewish at Columbia to feel persecuted, well, whatever might have happened in the classroom in the hothouse atmosphere of 2002–2003 has to be put in that context.”

Indeed, in a post-September 11, post-security-wall, and post-Iraq-invasion world, it is bitterly challenging to have a calm conversation on the Middle East. These are times when our religions, nationalities, and even political opinions are as essential to our identities as our gender or the color of our skin. Given the intellectual and emotional connection that some professors of Mideast studies have to their subject matter, and given the intellectual and emotional connection some of their students have to that same subject matter, it's startling, in a way, that these clashes don't happen more often. In a way, it's a miracle they don't happen all the time.

The David Project is a grassroots, six-person organization based in Boston. Like Campus Watch, a Website devoted to monitoring departments of Middle East studies around the country for pro-Arab bias, the organization was born in the aftermath of September 11, when the moment seemed right to influence public discourse about Israel. And like Campus Watch, the David Project directs its efforts almost exclusively at universities, where, for the past 35 or so years, sympathy for the Palestinian cause has been easier to express than anywhere else in American public life—and where Israel is often considered politically incorrect to support. Last year, the organization assisted Rachel Fish, a graduate student, in her drive to force Harvard's divinity school to return a \$2.5 million gift from the leader of the United Arab Emirates. (Fish succeeded, and she is now the David Project's New York representative.)

“We thought there was dishonest discussion and discourse about the Mideast on college campuses,” says Ralph Avi Goldwasser, the David Project's executive director and executive producer of the film. “And we found that students who support Israel were not getting support from the Jewish community.” In the past two years, he and his colleagues have visited Harvard, Northeastern, and MIT, trying to assess the needs of Jewish students. But at no place did they find a problem more pronounced, he says, than at Columbia. “About 30 students showed up,” he says, describing his visit last year. “We were amazed. We thought, *With all these organizations in New York, with a Yankees–Red Sox game on TV, why would 30 students listen to two unknown Jews from Boston?*” As the students were describing their troubles, one of them, Daniella Kahane, proposed they make a video testimonial to show alumni. “The only time Columbia reacts,” explains Goldwasser, “is when donors or contributors say something. That's the only reason they're reacting now.”

The film is still a work-in-progress. The David Project keeps adding and cutting material; in the latest version, Rabbi Charles Sheer, who has served Hillel at Columbia University for 34 years, appears, recalling the bitter written responses he got from Dabashi and Saliba after he wrote an editorial in the *Spectator*. “One of them [the letters] said it was like I am starting the Spanish Inquisition and that no rabbi has a right to question the principles of academic freedom,” he says.

Indeed, that letter, also published in the *Spectator*, came from Dabashi, who has never underreacted when faced with the slings and arrows of the opposition. Back in September, after receiving an angry e-mail about his *Al-Ahram* story from an Israeli grad student, Dabashi wrote to the provost, requesting extra campus-police protection because the student had served in the military. (“I see nothing threatening about the message,” the provost wrote back.)



Eric Posner supports the professors. Photo: Lisa Kereszi

Recently, a professor of Hebrew literature and an old lion of the MEALAC department, Dan Miron, has also stepped forward and said that the video's allegations could very well be true. "I am the wailing wall of the Jewish students here," he says. "They come and tell me that when they dared, in class, to take issue with the professors' views of Israel, they'd be humiliated, laughed at, dealt with in a brutal way. We're talking about dozens of students."

But the film has also earned plenty of critics. A student named Eric Posner is perhaps the

most vocal—when the film was first screened on campus, he showed up wearing a sign that read I SERVED IN THE ISRAELI ARMY & I LOVE JOSEPH MASSAD—and he's outraged that neither he nor any other MEALAC majors were invited to appear in it. He says Ariel Beery, a student prominently featured in the film and the student-body president, approached him about participating but lost interest when Posner informed him he'd never experienced any anti-Semitism in the department. "Yeah," Posner says he told him, "they keep three Cossacks in a storage closet and take them out on a weekly basis to rape and beat the Jews."

Beery, who at 19 elected to make *aliyah*—the Hebrew term for choosing to adopt Israel as one's home—remembers nothing of the sort, saying their exchange was brief and harmless. He also doesn't understand why Posner has made this film his *bête noire*. "We've said this every time we've screened the film: If this weren't so complex a situation, it would have been caught a long time ago," Beery says. "It would have been a categorical issue. But it isn't."

The participants in *Columbia Unbecoming* argue that their film is about academic intimidation, nothing more. But is it really? In the context of the Mideast conflict, it is hard to separate the question of intimidation from the question of academic bias: bias in the way Mideast studies is taught, bias in the way certain professors think, bias in campus sentiment about Israel.

"*Columbia Unbecoming* is not a very professionally made film," concedes Miron. He's sitting in his office, another shadow box of books and papers. "It's not even a very useful piece of propaganda," he adds. "They were slim on facts and gave much too much space to emotional

reactions. But since the issue is there, it erupted.” The phone rings, and he takes it, speaking in a mellow Hebrew. He hangs up, then looks at me. “But I see [classroom conduct] as the minor problem,” he continues. “The major problem—and the one which, quite frankly, I don’t know how to deal with—is the intellectual content of what is being said in the classroom. Israel is being delegitimized. Students are learning that Zionism, as an ideology, is racism.” This is, in fact, precisely what Massad has written, in both scholarly and journalistic outlets. It’s this premise that has created a flurry of Israel-divestment petitions across the country, including at Columbia. Over 100 members of the faculty have signed it.

Before the Second World War, departments of Middle East studies devoted themselves to the study of language, history, literature, and philology. There was nothing especially contemporary about their approach. But during the Cold War, the United States urgently needed scholars who understood the culture, politics, and dynamics of the region in the effort to keep communism and radical nationalism at bay. “Area studies” emerged as an academic genre—people became specialists in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East—and Middle East institutes began cropping up at prestigious universities, funded in part by government money. Then came the rise of the New Left and Israel’s 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Professors became radicalized. And at Columbia University, Lionel Trilling, a liberal academic in the English department who also happened to be a Jew, hired Edward Said.

Said made his reputation in the sixties by doing work on Joseph Conrad. It wasn’t until 1978 that he wrote *Orientalism*, an academic blockbuster whose basic claim was that the West had created a certain image of the Orient—meaning the fragmented remains of the Ottoman Empire—that in fact had little to do with what the region was actually like. The book had a profound effect on Middle East studies everywhere. Too much so, some would argue.

“*Orientalism* didn’t just propound a theory,” says Martin Kramer, author of *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* and a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “It became a manifesto for affirmative action. If you were a dean or a provost or a department chairman, you had to ask yourself, *How can I be sure I’m not appointing an Orientalist?* At Columbia, Middle East studies became a rogue department, a friend-brings-a-friend department, and the guys who came in on Said’s coattails didn’t have his finesse. They were just garden-variety extremists.”

In Kramer’s view, the problem with Columbia’s Middle East studies department—and such departments generally—is the same problem that afflicts so much of the academy: insufficient intellectual diversity. “We usually assume that the university should provide a smorgasbord,”

says Kramer. “But here, the tendency is to reinforce their ranks with like-minded people. Which may make the faculty meetings and sherry parties more pleasant. But the students lose.”

“The university should have looked at MEALAC five or ten years ago,” says Richard Bulliet, a historian and colleague of Khalidi’s. “It’s become locked into a postmodernist, postcolonialist point of view, one that wasn’t necessarily well adapted to giving students instruction about the Middle East.” He adds that politicizing a curriculum, or what some call “advocacy teaching,” isn’t always a bad thing. “We’ve had advocacy in the classroom for a long time,” he says. “But in the areas where it’s most visible, like black studies and women’s studies, the point of view tends to coincide with the outlook of the Columbia community—no one feels you have to give the slaveholder’s or male-chauvinist pig’s point of view.” He pauses for emphasis. “But here,” he concludes, “we have an area where no consensus exists. And that’s the problem.”

But let’s suppose, for a moment, that many Middle East studies departments do lack the full seven-octave range of intellectual opinion. Let’s even assume that they skew in an Arabist direction. What NYU’s Lockman wants to know is this: Why is that such a scandal? “I think you can see this the other way,” he says. “That universities or these departments are very much in the minority in the larger American setting. What you get from the media or government officials on the Middle East, the whole way the debate is framed, is very different.”

And perhaps because Arabist voices are seldom heard in American life, Middle East studies departments have for a long time found themselves under scrutiny, which has only intensified in recent years. In the fall of 2003, the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for an independent advisory board to vet all area-studies programs for intellectual diversity before giving them government money. (It later died in the Senate.) When Columbia revealed that the United Arab Emirates had contributed 8 percent of the funding for Khalidi’s endowed chair, or \$200,000, it created a big stir. (“Maybe the 8 percent solution is a dangerous proportion—a controlling interest for a regional superpower like the United Arab Emirates,” Khalidi says. Pause. “I hope my sarcasm came across just now.”)

A new generation of Israeli historians—Tom Segev, Avi Shlaim, and Benny Morris prominently among them—have also emerged in recent years, challenging the received wisdom about the foundations of their country. “There’s a very mysterious process that happens in the academy whereby, little by little, the center of controversy changes,” says Bruce Robbins, a Columbia comp-lit professor and co-author of an open letter from American Jews to the Bush administration that ran in the *New York Times*. “And therefore, the center around which

‘balance’ can be demanded changes. You can debate why the Palestinians were driven out of Israel in 1948. But most people would agree that they were driven out, whether they’re pro-Israel or not. So if you want to argue, you argue why. But you can’t say, as my mother would say, ‘There are no Palestinians.’ ”

I ask Robbins what he thinks of Dabashi’s essay in *Al-Ahram*, which referred to “the vulgarity of [the Israeli] character.” “But there’s a rational kernel under it, right?” asks Robbins. “It’s something that gets discussed all the time in Israel, what they call ‘checkpoint syndrome.’ You give 18-year-olds automatic weapons and godlike power, and there are measurable psychological effects. Occupying is not good for the occupier.”

From a quick glimpse at the university course catalogue, it’s clear that Columbia hardly deprives its students of opportunities to learn about the Mideast from a pro-Israeli, or at least ideologically neutral, point of view. In fact, says Bulliet, at one point during the eighties, a rabbi from Englewood taught a course on the conflict from an unquestionably Zionist point of view. Today, however, the course that’s focused most narrowly on the conflict—and is offered with the most regularity—is taught from an unquestionably Palestinian perspective, by Joseph Massad. He’s extremely frank about it. On day one, students say, he tells his class they shouldn’t expect “balance.” There’s even a disclaimer in his syllabus.

The most troubling incident described in *Columbia Unbecoming*—to me, anyway—involved Massad. It was the moment when Tomy Schoenfeld, a former Israeli soldier, says the professor demanded to know how many Palestinians he’d killed. “I asked, ‘What? How come it’s relevant to this discussion?’ ” he says in the video. “And he said, ‘No, it’s relevant to the discussion, and I demand an answer. How many Palestinians have you killed?’ And I said, ‘I’m not going to answer, but I’m going to ask you a question: How many members of your family celebrated on September 11, if we’re starting with stereotypes?’ ”

Later, in *Al-Ahram*, Massad said he’d never met Schoenfeld and had no record of Schoenfeld’s taking his class. Which is true, says Schoenfeld, in the strictly Clintonian sense. He never did take Massad’s class; he attended a lecture Massad gave at a Columbia sorority. And Schoenfeld says he didn’t formally “introduce” himself; he quickly identified himself by name and as an Israeli during the Q&A that followed. But he insists there was really no more context than that: no heated discussion beforehand, no glares. He simply raised his hand, and this was the abrupt response he got.

I ask Schoenfeld if Massad's question happened to hit a nerve—whether, in fact, he did feel at all conflicted about his service in the Israel Defense Forces. His response contained worlds: how Massad may have bullied a potential ally; how any person in Massad's circumstances, in an unguarded mood, might have done so. Massad is from Jordan, more than 60 percent of whose population is Palestinian. "I have no doubts about my service," Schoenfeld answers. "Because at least when I was in the military, we had specific rules about how you can fire and who you can fire upon. The military in Israel is mostly very ethical."

He stops here. "But it's hard to be ethical when you're conquering," he says. "No matter how you slice it. The reality is that Israel controls 3 million people. And we've ruined their lives. The Palestinians have to go through checkpoints. Every family there has one kid who died. I mean, I'm No. 1 for security. But an Israeli soldier should not stand and have the dilemma about whether an ambulance should cross or not cross, because maybe they hide ..." He trails off. "I'm not saying we should just give them everything they want. I think the occupation's a necessity. But definitely we should understand it's an occupation."

Determining academic intimidation is a lot like determining sexual harassment. It all boils down to two competing narratives, a hologram whose very image all depends on where you stand. The problem in this instance, unfortunately, is that people like Khalidi, who are passionately invested in the future of Mideast studies, are forced to defend their colleagues before knowing whether the allegations against them are true. *Columbia Unbecoming* has stained his discipline, sent his colleagues into despair.

"What are we supposed to do?" he asks, choking back obvious frustration, his vocal cords so taut they sound as if they're being strangled by snakes. "Wait until this idiot wind has blown through? There are people who are trying to *shut down* Middle East studies. This field has been under attack for years, and this is a huge club in that attack. I'm supposed to fold my hands and let people batter us about the head because of what may or may not have happened in the spring of 2002?"

"These are allegations between faculty members and specific students that were not handled, in my view, properly at the time by the university," continues Khalidi. "Or since."

He leans into his desk. "You know," he concludes, "it could be the case that there are students who have serious grievances *and* it's the case that threats to our academic freedom have developed over the last two years. This is a situation where you have to assume it's possible to walk and chew gum at the same time."

On a grim, wintry day, I sit with Lee Bollinger in his office in Low Memorial Library. He's handsome and peacockish in a sportscaster sort of way—longish gray hair, semi-iridescent blue stripes on his suit—but clearly exhausted from this contretemps. “In my view, we have failed in making ourselves as available to talk about these issues as we could have,” he concedes. “I'm not satisfied with the processes we have for students to be able to say what they were saying in the film.”

Bollinger is a First Amendment scholar, a useful credential for a man who's been forced to fathom the limits of academic freedom. Yet over the course of his presidency, he has also doubtless discovered that academic freedom, or the privilege of teaching and pursuing the ideas of one's choosing, is often a very hard notion to defend to the public. Not everyone agrees it should go unchecked—just ask anyone involved in stem-cell research—and complicating matters even further is how dependent universities have become on outsiders for money: parents who pay tens of thousands annually, alums, corporations, the government. Many of these contributors believe they have the same kinds of rights as shareholders in a company, which, theoretically at least, they do not. (At this moment, in fact, Columbia is planning a huge capital drive, and some of its donors are active in national and international Jewish causes—a fact that can't be entirely lost on Bollinger.)

In response to *Columbia Unbecoming*, Bollinger asked Columbia's provost to convene a panel to investigate the incidents in the film and the more general issue of academic freedom. Sadly, the move only managed to infuriate everyone: Faculty saw it as a creepy, McCarthy-like incursion into their territory, and the students couldn't help but notice that the five-person committee included two professors who'd signed the campus divestment petition, and a third who'd advised Massad on his thesis.

But intimidation, as Miron points out, may be the easiest of the administration's problems to unknot. Questions of intellectual bias are much harder to sort through. While president of the University of Michigan, Bollinger committed himself to racial diversity, spending years defending its policy of affirmative action; today, he says he's equally committed to intellectual diversity. Which may not augur well for professor Massad's longevity at Columbia, no matter how favorably disposed the provost's committee may be to him. “I believe a disclaimer before starting your course is insufficient,” says Bollinger. “It doesn't inoculate you from criticism for being one-sided or intolerant in the classroom.” He hastens to add, “That's not to prejudge any claims here. But if you're asking, in the abstract, ‘Can a faculty member satisfy the ideal of good teaching by simply saying at the beginning, *I'm going to teach one side of a controversy*

and I don't want to hear any other side and if you don't like this, please don't take my course,' my view is, that's irresponsible teaching."

But teaching, at least, happens within the academy's walls. What happens beyond, what his scholars do and say—over this Bollinger has little control, even if lobbying groups and members of Congress and the media are baying for retribution. These are polarized times, times of orange alerts and preemptive war. He looks over the offending paragraph in Dabashi's essay in *Al-Ahram*. "I want to completely disassociate myself from those ideas," he says. "They're outrageous things to say, in my view." He leans back in his chair and pushes the essay away. "But what a faculty member says in the course of public debate, we will not take into account within the university. That's a dangerous slope. All I can do is express *my* views.

"I have to be careful, as president, because my disagreeing can be taken as a form of chilling speech," he admits. "But I have free speech, too."

■ LEAVE A COMMENT

LATEST NEWS FROM NEW YORK MAGAZINE



APR. 13, 2024

The *New York* Crossword: 'Good to Know'



APR. 8, 2024

Comments: Week of April 8, 2024
