

Can Academic Freedom Survive the American Assn of University Professors?

Tim Ginsburg in The Chronicle of Higher Education on February 28, 2025.

Comments by John Teevan

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-academic-freedom-survive-the-aaup>

Ginsburg gives a blistering calling out of the AAUP's 'Committee A' for taking strained political views at a time when restraint and common sense may bring the university back from the brink of self-destruction at the hands of the overzealous. Instead, he notes, they have doubled down against barbarian governors and the president. "Into the valley of death rode the six hundred." You might remember that line of poetry.

- The issues in this article first support academic boycott which means departments collectively cutting off connections, Ginsburg calls it "a barely veiled subtext" with Israeli universities resulting in the cancellation of collaboration with Jewish academics. This is not merely new emphasis but a deliberate and bold reversal of the historic anti-boycott statement of the AAUP.
- The second issue is DEI, rather than discuss issues both internal and external to the use of diversity statements and offices, they believe it should be a core concern in hiring and evaluating professors. Ginsburg wonders why they even mention this issue which beyond its own flaws has become a highly public flashpoint.
- The third issue is institutional neutrality. This is another AAUP cornerstone favoring academic freedom that Committee A is jettisoning. How can a professor disagree with the statements of the University? Now the argument is that academic freedom requires such collective statements. How can institutional statements suddenly shift from harming the professors to now being essential to them. Ginsburg expresses amazement at this nonlinear complete about face.

Ginsburg's further explains this confusion in terms of academic freedom and shared governance. The AAUP is asserting that collective action *is* free speech, including the encampments, and that collective statements far from the University of Chicago's non-neutrality *are* shared governance. Puzzled? Yes, we are.

Raising the four banners of faculty tenure, shared governance, academic freedom, and free speech is fine, but using them as blunt weapons to defend strange opinions mystifies Ginsburg. Are these zealots bent on harming the universities or do they see themselves as purists bent, if necessary, on martyrdom? They ignore and even reverse not only a century of AAUP understandings, attract enemies, and they also harm their own schools. Notably only 6% of tenured profs are neither white (81%) nor Asian (13%).

Harm? When a department takes a political stance, the doctoral candidates and junior faculty become intimidated. Plus, the university shifts from inquiry to advocacy. How can a university give up inquiry? Or is that the point?

My thought is that the AAUP claims are like the established and even ensconced bishops of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church: they are the experts and true spokespeople; their authority is unquestionable; they say as they have earned their tenure, the equivalent of divine approval. They claim to hold to entirely orthodox positions (academic freedom). They alone should dictate on all related matters (shared governance and free speech). While they do not use the words heresy, orthodoxy, authority, or divine, the ideas are there. Are these a secular example of the unreflective Medieval Church?

Ginsburg decries their stridency and one-sided view. He says they are making a mistake in each of their three pronouncements, especially turning the Chicago Statement on Neutrality on its head. They are closing the door to a proper reform that would be helpful in the post encampment era. Instead, they are inviting all the more reform, especially in the state schools that are under the control of politicians.

The AAUP has declared a political resistance or rebellion, but they will almost certainly lose.

But loss is coming anyway. Universities are losing credibility, especially in social sciences and even humanities. Strong enrollments give universities credibility, but enrollments have been trending down and the future enrollments seem dim. Besides, the 2024 encampments demonstrated that being a university president is an impossible task and even more so for one who comes from the fields of pure academics.

Worse, people are looking for alternative pathways to education or trades. Can this be a suitable time for university people with pure beliefs to isolate themselves as they risk drifting toward oblivion?

It seems to me that some ideologues have gone too far and have controlled the social, cultural, and political levers for too long. Like the 600, they may be on a pathway as in Tennyson's "valley of death." The university is not on the brink of extinction. Yet it will take a generation to burn off the dross of these fourth-generation children of the '60s who remember the slogans, who enjoy the smells and sounds of the streets and faculty lounges, but who have lost much of the gold only to risk becoming the dross incarnate.