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## TRB FROM WASHINGTON

### Talk Show

by **Peter Beinart**

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On Friday, September 14, Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) hosted a panel entitled "How to think about the Islamic-Afghan Terrorist Threat." Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., Director of SAIS's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, served as both moderator and as a panelist. In his extemporaneous presentation, Fairbanks said the United States could respond to September 11 in one of two ways. It could retaliate against the governments that supported the attack. Or it could limit its response to Osama bin Laden and his followers. Fairbanks--a self-described conservative--argued for the former, in part because the United States wouldn't be able to find bin Laden himself. And then he said something stupid: "I'll bet anyone here a Koran on that."

After the presentations the audience asked questions. In response to a question about which governments might be responsible for the September 11 attacks, Fairbanks said, "I think that at the top of the list are Iraq, Pakistan, and the Palestinian Authority," and then he went on to say, "Unfortunately, Palestinians hate us and that's a painful fact..." At which point a woman in the crowd interrupted. She called his talk "a pathetic attempt at stand-up comedy," and accused him of "innuendos intended to encourage and to assist people in conducting hate crimes ... toward Muslims...." Fairbanks tried to regain the floor, but she interrupted him again. He apologized for the Koran comment, but when she interrupted him yet again,

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he called for her to be removed. Security never came, but eventually the woman stopped speaking and the forum ended.

On Sunday Fairbanks learned from a colleague that Stephen Szabo, the interim dean of SAIS, was concerned that his comments might be deemed offensive. The dean wanted a letter of regret. Fairbanks agreed. The two men negotiated the wording and, on Monday, a letter was sent to everyone who had been invited to the panel. Fairbanks thought the unpleasantness was over.

Two days later Fairbanks was fired. In a letter, Szabo explained that his position--director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute--was being eliminated. Szabo later insisted to me that the firing was prompted not by the substance of Fairbanks's comments but by the panel's chaotic nature, which convinced him that Fairbanks was ill equipped for an administrative role. Fairbanks could retain the less prestigious title of research professor. [Update: After this article was published, Dean Szabo reversed his decision, and agreed to allow Fairbanks to continue as director.]

Ever since September 11 the American left has been warning that war fever threatens free speech. The day after the World Trade Center fell, *The American Prospect* explained that "a number of government agencies and their cheerleaders would be clearly tempted to lock the Bill of Rights away in some basement dustbin of the National Archives." On September 27 novelist Barbara Kingsolver told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that "Patriotism threatens free speech with death." And, on October 1, Richard Reeves published an op-ed in *The New York Times* entitled "Patriotism Calls Out the Censor."

But patriotism didn't cost Charles Fairbanks his job. He lost his job because of identity politics paranoia. In other words, he lost his job because of the culture of the American left. And his case reminds us that when the left condemns the war against terrorism for threatening free speech, its real motive may not be devotion to free speech at all. Its real motive may simply be hostility to the war against terrorism.

It is historically true, of course, that America's wars have sometimes led to the suppression of antiwar speech. And it is also true that since September 11 several scattered incidents have continued that ugly tradition. Two small-town newspaper columnists, one in Texas and one in Oregon, have been fired for

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suggesting that President Bush's decision not to immediately return to Washington after the attacks was cowardly. And after "Politically Incorrect" host Bill Maher declared on the air that America's practice of shooting cruise missiles at faraway targets was more cowardly than what the hijackers did, presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer stupidly warned Americans to "watch what they say, watch what they do."

You may have heard about these incidents because they've received a great deal of attention. But you probably haven't heard about the professor at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, who was placed on indefinite leave for offending students with a series of confrontational questions about why Muslims condemn the World Trade Center attacks but don't condemn terrorism against Israel. Or the Penn State professor who said on his website that it was worth killing innocents in order to topple the governments of Afghanistan and Iran--and then received an e-mail from a top administrator warning him that Iranian and Afghan "students would find such comments insensitive and perhaps even intimidating." Or the officers of the Berkeley Student Senate who proposed raising the school newspaper's rent because it ran a cartoon that depicted two Arabs wearing turbans--with a flight manual in the background--on their way to hell.

These attacks on free speech also continue an ugly tradition--the tradition of speech codes and ideological witch-hunts that has stained university life over the past two decades. In academia, the precinct in which it holds the most sway, the left's record on free speech was not good before September 11 and it has not been good since September 11. The main difference is that, since September 11, the specter of censorship has become a way to discredit the war against terrorism, so some on the left have appropriated the free speech rhetoric that until last month they generally eschewed.

The point is that free speech is always balanced against competing principles. Justifying the protests against the school newspaper, Robert Chala of Berkeley's Arab Student Union and Students for Justice in Palestine said, "Freedom of speech should not come at the cost of anyone's safety." John Ashcroft would probably agree. The question is what constitutes a threat to someone's "safety" and what does not. For the left, speech that offends minority students constitutes an implicit threat to their safety and therefore merits suppression. Threats to national security--or rhetoric that offends those who suffered on September 11--do not. What distinguishes leftists from other

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Americans, then, isn't their commitment to civil liberties but their lack of commitment to the anti-terrorism efforts with which those civil liberties may conflict.

On that particular conflict, by the way, the left may be entirely correct. We should be wary of the argument that safety during times of war requires restrictions on free speech; such restrictions are usually just a way to protect the government from legitimate criticism. A professor who declares that he is voting for Osama bin Laden for president should suffer no retaliation whatsoever from his university. But you don't have much credibility on that point unless you're equally wary of censoring language that offends ethnic and racial minorities. And, for the last 20 years, the left hasn't been wary of that at all--quite the contrary. Just ask Charles H. Fairbanks Jr.

**PETER BEINART is the Editor of TNR.**

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