

# Protecting Speech on Campus

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The University of South Florida and Gov. Jeb Bush dishonor the ideals of public universities by trying to fire a Palestinian professor whose anti-Israel statements have produced threats to the campus and a decline in contributions. Wartime is precisely the moment when unpopular views and the role of a university as an open forum for ideas must be most vigorously defended.

The case involves Sami Al-Arian, a tenured professor of computer science active in the Islamic movement. In 1988, he gave a speech in which he called for "victory to Islam" and "death to Israel." Last September, in a television appearance, Mr. Al-Arian was reminded of his words 14 years ago and asked about militant Muslims whom he had invited to the university. Mr. Al-Arian distanced himself from his previous statements and from violence of any kind. Nevertheless, the next day, the university, in Tampa, received hundreds of phone calls and e-mail messages, some threatening the university and others threatening Mr. Al-Arian.

The university has sent him a letter of dismissal. It said that he failed to make clear on television that he was not representing the University of South Florida and that his presence on campus was such a disruption that the business of the university could not proceed. Both complaints are groundless and make a mockery of free speech and academic freedom. Governor Bush has compounded the problem by publicly backing the university's approach.

University officials say they are not getting rid of Mr. Al-Arian because of his views. That is disingenuous. The documentation they have produced focuses on the "disruption" he is said to have caused and refers repeatedly to a drop in contributions. In other words, Mr. Al-Arian's politics are costing the university too much so it wants to get rid of him. If Mr. Al-Arian were a moderate receiving threats from militant Muslims, there is little doubt that the university would stand up for him.

The First Amendment protects not only those whose ideas Americans like but, more important, those whose ideas they abhor. American universities are the envy of the world partly because they encourage robust debate.

Since Sept. 11, some have attacked universities for being insufficiently patriotic. In November, an organization called the American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued a repugnant report called "Defending Civilization." It attacked dozens of professors for having reacted to the terrorist attacks in ways its authors considered inappropriate.

Free speech and academic freedom must be blind to politics. Conservatives deserve as much protection as liberals. Critics of affirmative action have been harassed or threatened at colleges. Firing a professor because his views are causing others to criticize or threaten the university is a betrayal of the academic code. No campus should be run that way.