

Remarks at May 17, 2024 MIT Special Faculty Meeting (as delivered)

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We've landed in a strange, ironic, tragic place at the end of this tumultuous academic year: a collision between academic freedom and the student movement protesting the war on Gaza. The latest twist in this path came about with the testimony of a highly deferential Columbia University president that was rewarded with a not-so-friendly visit from the House speaker a week later. We have yet to see from any American university leader a principled and courageous defense of academic freedom in the face of the McCarthyite political circus that continues to unfold in Washington, D.C.

In the meantime, what we have to live with is the current mess: an appeal to the use of force on our campus on a scale not seen since 1969; an excessive and clearly flawed disciplinary crackdown that has already involved multiple miscarriages of justice; an uncompromising assertion of academic freedom by a senior team that has always recognized limits to free expression; and a struggle to come up with the right words to respond to the appalling brutality of the war on Gaza (even while our leadership has shown no such difficulty in denouncing the horrific attacks of October 7).

If there is a silver lining to this mess, it is that faculty can now look forward to the administration emphatically standing up for academic freedom whenever the next effort to speak out against the carnage in Gaza is subjected to the Palestine exception to free expression. We now know that our leadership will no longer allow

a few social media accounts to bully all of us into an endless pattern of whack-a-mole style crisis management.

Some have said that nothing we say here at MIT can affect the outcome of the conflict in Israel and Gaza. After the encampment movement of the last few weeks and so much else that we have witnessed this year, I am not so sure. We've learned that we are in fact part of the conflict and not external to it: the ideas that shape the conflict are contested in American universities, and our government's policies subsidize and enable the epic cruelty of the war on Gaza. And since that is the case, we have every reason to make our relationship to this conflict a productive and educational one. The steps that some have outlined for an MIT role in the rebuilding of Gaza's educational system, combined with fair treatment of our student protesters, point the way forward.