

Remarks at May 17, 2024 MIT Special Faculty Meeting
(extended written version)

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It is frequently argued that in demanding the termination of war related research at MIT, SACC is violating the concept of a politically ‘neutral’ university; that individual scientists should be guaranteed the “academic freedom” to pursue any research which interests them or which they consider to be important. It is feared that the introduction of political criteria to judge the appropriateness of specific research projects would undermine the university’s unique position in society as the last haven of free thought, destroy its independence, and open it to attacks by pressure groups from both the left and the right.

That paragraph is from a 1969 statement of the Science Action Coordinating Committee (SACC).¹ Substitute SAGE for SACC and it’s clear we haven’t moved very far in terms of the positions on either side of the debate over MIT’s relationship to military research.

We’ve been told that the students don’t understand the academic freedom issue and think it is not principled. I agree they don’t think it is principled. I am less sure they fail to comprehend it. In effect, they are saying as to the administration’s argument about academic freedom what the administration has been saying to the

¹ Records of the Science Action Coordinating Committee, MIT Archives, AC 0349, box 1, folder 20.

student protesters about free expression all year long: just because you can research something doesn't mean that you should, at least not in connection with institutional partners who violate certain norms.

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. It's worth recalling how the latest twist in this path came about: with the testimony of a highly deferential Columbia University president before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. That encounter is rightly seen, in my view, as one of the low points in the history of academic freedom in the United States — and it only earned President Shafik a not-so-friendly visit from the speaker of the House of Representatives a few days 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., with no end in sight. Hopefully one day that defense will come — if and when university leaders are prepared to assert it not just to justify quashing student protest, but also to speak truth to power.

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; a hastily improvised, excessive, and clearly flawed disciplinary crackdown that has already involved at least four or five miscarriages of justice; and a 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 Israeli government's war on Gaza (even while our leadership has shown no such difficulty in denouncing the horrific attacks of October 7). The administration team does not even pretend to tie its uncompromising theory of academic freedom position to any existing scholarship or AAUP statement, or to the

work of any faculty committee past or present. The theory is striking insofar as it would extend academic freedom from the realm of ideas to the choice of institutional partners and to the nature of research funding.

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 (and even being willing to call upon the use of the police power if necessary) whenever the next effort to speak out against the carnage in Gaza is subjected to the Palestine exception to free expression. We no longer need worry that our leadership will allow a handful of social media accounts to bully all of us into an endless cycle of whack-a-mole style crisis management hovering constantly in fear on the edge of the next Tweet or Instagram post. The legal intimidation of MIT, for its part, should now be seen in light of the demonstrated willingness of counter-protesting faculty and students to enter into the midst of – and try to provoke – the very student protest encampment they say has made life at MIT unsafe for them.

Last fall, we heard that nothing we say here at MIT can affect the outcome of the conflict in Israel and Gaza. I wondered about that comment at the time, and in the months since, the nagging doubts have piled up. After the encampment movement of the last few weeks, it is now crystal clear 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 (for those of us who are U.S. citizens) subsidize and enable the epic brutality of the war on Gaza. 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.