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Controversy in the Classroom:

A statement by the AAUP's Committee A

Advertisements have appeared in the campus press by an organization, "Students for Academic Freedom," calling on students to report professors who try to "impose their political opinions" in the classroom. This is not the first time that self-appointed watchdogs of classroom utterances have focused on the professoriate: The John Birch Society undertook that role in the 1960s, an organization called "Accuracy in Academia" did so in the 1980s, and "Campus Watch" assumed that role for professors of Middle Eastern studies after September 11, 2001. What is different is that this organization purports to rely on AAUP principles in condemning the introduction of "controversial matter having no relation to the subject" and to take upon itself the mission of defining what is in and out of bounds.

The AAUP has long maintained that instructors should avoid the persistent intrusion of matter, controversial or not, that has no bearing on the subject of instruction. Any such practice would be expected to be taken up as part of the regular evaluations of teaching routinely conducted in higher education, evaluations that commonly include surveys of student experience.

The advertised call goes well beyond a concern for poor pedagogy, however. It rests on a right, claimed in the name of academic freedom, not to be confronted with controversy in the classroom—not, at least, beyond what the organization conceives of as germane to the subject as defined by it. The project's stated purpose, as its ad puts it, is to rule out of bounds any reference to the war in Iraq in a course whose "subject" is not the war in Iraq, or statements about George W. Bush in a course that is not about "contemporary American presidents, presidential administrations or some similar subject."

Controversy is often at the heart of instruction; good teaching is often served by referring to contemporary controversies even if only to stimulate student interest and debate. If these watchdogs have their way, a professor of classics, history, ethics, or even museum administration could make no reference to the Iraq conflict or to George Bush—in their courses on the Roman Empire, colonialism, the morality of war, or trade in the artifacts of ancient civilizations—because the "subject" of these courses is not this war or this president. Contrary to defending academic freedom, the project is inimical to it and, indeed, to the very idea of liberal education.