

Thought Control for Middle East Studies

By Joel Beinin | March 31, 2004

A band of neoconservative pundits with close ties to Israel have mounted a campaign against American scholars who study the Middle East. Martin Kramer, an Israeli-American and former director of the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel-Aviv University, has led the way in blaming these scholars for failing to warn the American public about the dangers of radical Islam, claiming they bear some of the responsibility for what befell us on September 11. In 2003, proponents of this position took their complaints to Congress. The Senate is expected to review them soon, as it discusses the Higher Education Reauthorization bill.

The neocons initially urged Congress to reduce the appropriation for Title VI of the Higher Education Act. Since 1958 this legislation has provided federal funding to universities to support study of less commonly taught languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Now they want to set up a political review board to discourage universities and scholars from tolerating bad thoughts.

Last year 118 international area studies centers, including 17 Middle East centers, received about \$95 million for graduate fellowships, language training, and community outreach. The Middle East studies centers train the great majority of Americans who are competent in difficult Middle Eastern languages. No other institutions are now able to do this job on the required scale. Lack of Arabic speaking agents hindered the FBI from understanding some of the pre-September 11 clues that might have prevented the attacks. Fortunately for our safety, Congress rejected the neocon proposal to reduce support for foreign language study.

Having failed in their first effort, the neoconservatives are now attempting to assert political control over teaching, research, and public programs of the international area studies centers. In June 2003, Stanley Kurtz, a contributing editor of National Review Online and a fellow of the Hoover Institution, a conservative think tank located on the campus of Stanford University, testified before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. His testimony summarized the arguments of Martin Kramer's attack on American Middle East studies. Kurtz asserted that "Title VI-funded programs in Middle Eastern Studies (and other area studies) tend to purvey extreme and one-sided criticisms of American foreign policy." He urged legislators to take action to ensure "balance." Kurtz, Kramer, and other neocons such as Daniel Pipes of the

Middle East Forum who have written on this subject are concerned that Middle East scholars often say things American politicians don't want to hear—including criticism of U.S. Middle East policy and criticism of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Some might conclude that perhaps scholars who study the modern Middle East know something worth listening to. But the neocons already know what they want to hear. They have not been able to win in the marketplace of ideas. Critical and inconvenient thoughts continue to be expressed. So the neocons want the government to help crush wayward ideas.

Representative Peter Hoekstra (R-Michigan) obliged by introducing the International Studies in Higher Education Act, designated H.R. 3077. The bill passed the House of Representatives, after a suspension of the rules, by a voice vote in October 2003. The bill was then referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, which is now taking up the issue.

H.R. 3077 calls for establishing an International Higher Education Advisory Board with broad investigative powers "to study, monitor, apprise, and evaluate" activities of area studies centers supported by Title VI. The board is charged with ensuring that government-funded academic programs "reflect diverse perspectives and represent the full range of views" on international affairs. "Diverse perspectives," in this context, is code for limiting criticism of U.S. Middle East policy and of Israel.

Under the proposed legislation, three advisory board members would be appointed by the Secretary of Education; two of them from government agencies with national security responsibilities. The leaders of the House of Representatives and the Senate each would appoint two more.

This proposal represents a dangerous threat to academic freedom. The advisory board could investigate scholars and area studies centers, applying whatever criteria it pleases. The criteria almost certainly would be political. The whole point of the legislation is to impose political restraints on activities of Middle East centers.

The legislation, if passed, could actually diminish our national security. No first-rank university would accept direct government intrusion into the educational process. Such institutions would likely refuse to accept Title VI funding if it were subject to political oversight. The already dangerously low number of Americans competent in Middle Eastern languages would then be reduced.

Neocons believe it is better for the government to control teaching and research rather than to allow established policy to be questioned. But we are more likely to understand “why they hate us,” and what we can do about it when old ideas can be challenged without fear. Freedom, including academic freedom, is the best way to make Americans safe.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT MIDDLE EAST STUDIES:

Steven Heydermann, “Warping Mideast Judgments,” Chicago Tribune, March 14, 2004, online at: <http://www.campus-watch.org/pf.php?id=1070>

Martin Kramer, “Title VI: Turn on the Defogger,” March 17, 2004, online at: <http://www.martinkramer.org/pages/899529/index.htm>

Daniel Pipes, “Defund Middle East Studies,” New York Sun, February 24, 2004, online at: <http://danielpipes.org/article/1581>

“Middle East Forum,” Right Web Profile, Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC), March 2004, online at: <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/mef.php>

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