

UFF From the President

Florida Outlaws Faculty Teaching and Research in Five Countries

At the end of the 2006 legislative session, Governor Jeb Bush signed a bill that prevents faculty from teaching or conducting research in so-called “terrorist states.” The bill effectively shuts down all educational activities in Cuba, Syria, Iran, North Korea, and the Sudan. These are the countries currently listed by the Department of State as “state sponsors of terrorism.”

The bill, [“Travel to Terrorist States,”](#) specifically prohibits any use of state funds “to implement, organize, direct, coordinate, or administer activities related to, or involving, travel to a terrorist state.” The legislative language not only prohibits the use of state funds for academic travel; it also prohibits the use of outside grants because state funds would be required to

process the grant by a university or community college.

The sponsor of the bill, Rep. David Rivera (R-Miami), said that faculty could still find private donors to sponsor travel as long as funds are not processed through a Florida higher education institution. But even assuming that a professor has a multi-millionaire friend willing to sponsor this research, there is still a problem. To get credit from the institution for the completed research, it would require the use of state administered funds for recognition of “activities related to or involving travel.”

Filling out an annual activities report and asking for official recognition of work completed, which involves use of state supported time and materials, could be a criminal act, even if a professor conducted and wrote up the reported research on private time and at private expense.

Because almost all private colleges and universities accept some form of financial aid from the State of Florida, they fall under the bill too and are specifically included in the



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legislation. The travel ban so completely rules out teaching and research by Florida faculty in the countries named that journalists have dubbed this phenomenon [“Florida Isolationism.”](#)

What are the immediate effects of the bill? The list of research and teaching activities terminated by this new Florida law is not finished yet, but we already know enough to assess the damage.

- This law brings to an end research in marine biology on the coral reefs between Miami and Cuba. Why are the coral reefs dying? How are development patterns affecting the

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reefs? What changes would make a difference in protecting the reefs? Jeb Bush and the Legislature decided we do not need to know. As a result, the conservation efforts to protect biological diversity, which depend on this research and hold the potential for benefiting the United States and Cuba, as well as other parts of the world, come to an end.

- On July 1st, all scientific research in the region on climate change, the spread of disease, the effects of oil spills, and agricultural productivity, among other things, was abruptly terminated. Researchers had to scramble to collect all data and records and shut down operations within thirty days, as Science reported. (Science Magazine, Vol. 312 6/6/06)
- Longitudinal studies of the causes and effects of migration patterns, requiring interviews across generations and spanning decades, are suddenly destroyed by politicians. The University of Florida, which has the largest collection in the world on Cuban history and documents, must immediately shut down operations that build its collection.

- At the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, where forty faculty members study Cuban and Cuban-American issues, research has become impossible.
- Archeological research in the five named countries must be abandoned, which means that the sites will be looted, and the research destroyed.
- Faculty cannot accept a Fulbright Fellowship or foundation grant if the country is listed by the State Department at the time the grant is offered.
- Every time a national administration decides there are political goals to be served by adding new countries to the list, destruction of the magnitude we see now in Florida will reoccur. Florida becomes a political minefield for academic projects. As a consequence, Florida sends

a message: serious researchers and teachers need not apply.

These are some of the most immediate and visible effects. As bad as these are, the long-term effects are even worse and explain why the academic community is so strongly opposed to the bill.

United Faculty of Florida, which is affiliated with the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, stands opposed to this bill and is preparing for both legal and legislative action. We are not alone. The [American Association of University Professors](#) wrote a letter to the Governor objecting to the law. The faculty senate at Florida International University joined the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) in filing suit, and the Chancellor for the universities, Mark Rosenberg, is on record as against it. In June the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates, representing all university faculty senates in Florida, voted to join the ACLU suit.

United University Professions, the AFT affiliate in New York, with 30,000

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members in the state universities, considered at its annual convention in September the UFF resolution opposing the travel ban. The 350 delegates voted unanimously for the resolution. The council of community colleges represented by AFT in California just passed the same resolution.

When the nine thousand delegates at the convention of the National Education Association were debating the motion in July against the Florida law, which was to pass by a near-unanimous vote, a teacher from Miami who had emigrated from the Soviet Union told me the collapse of Eastern European regimes at the end of the Cold War did not come from military victories, but it came from the realization that a more open way of life was valuable and attainable. This reminded me of a comment made by Chancellor Rosenberg: Even at the height of the Cold War, there were as many scholars teaching and conducting research in the USSR as at any time in that region before or after. Educators see immediately that shutting down the educational process for those who might find something of value in our ways is counterproductive and makes no sense – even if national security is the only value at stake.

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The bill is counterproductive because ignorance is counterproductive. It is impossible to understand global and regional challenges to the United States if we isolate ourselves from and remain ignorant about those who challenge us. As a nation we commit ourselves to our own destruction by framing policies for national security based on false assumptions about those we fear. When we shut down channels of communication, information, and education, we weaken ourselves in relation to others and in relation to our own future viability. Failing to understand the full dimensions of threats to the United States or to the international community does not serve either national or international interests.

The debate over knowledge about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is the most dramatic and telling example illustrating the thesis that government officials should not be trusted to present the only information citizens receive on an issue. But there is a more subtle point, often emphasized by Sen. Bob Graham, about the intelligence gathered by the

Central Intelligence Agency for its reports to the President: a reduction of human intelligence operations in favor of electronic surveillance was a primary cause of the misreading of events leading to the disaster on September 11.

It is worth noting that human intelligence relies heavily on the use of academic sources generated by research inside countries where there is sentiment against the United States. Whether the research is scientific or historical in nature, it can lead to conclusions that challenge assumptions and prompt a change in policies.

We live in an age when it is dangerous to rely exclusively on government officials for the truth; and it is doubly dangerous to rely on government officials who politicize the process of gathering information and insulate themselves from evidence they do not want to consider. The nation suffers from these miscalculations, and the entire world suffers from the effects when a superpower is on a collision course.

But the value of education is not only in learning more about “the enemy.” It is also a matter of affecting others in ways that make them less likely to demonize us, less likely to think of us as their enemy, more likely to learn from us, and much more likely to introduce some of our ways into their ways of life. U.S. educators in every country change the images people have of the United States and cause them to be more curious about and open to the freedoms we enjoy.

The government’s contempt for academic

freedom and constitutional principles adds to the pernicious effects of this bill and sends even more signals to faculty across the country and the world that Florida is not in their future. Imagine working in a state where politicians tell you what you can and cannot study and teach – a state where they place boundaries on research and scholarly investigations. Imagine a state where people do not want to know what is currently happening in the countries that concern them most. What will be attractive to educators about moving into a state of ignorance?

Florida is digging its own academic grave with this legislation. The parameters of the mind are smaller here. The horizons of intellectual activity are narrower when we look across the sea from the land of Florida. No wonder journalists call this phenomenon “Florida Isolationism.”

The mindlessness of such policies, in an era of international peril, affects everyone. It is time for educators and citizens to stand up for the value of education. ■

Treasury Department Accuses Faculty of “Trading With the Enemy”

As Florida constricts information and knowledge in the academic world, it adds to what has become a crisis for constitutional democracy in the United States.

In this decade, we have seen a steady erosion of the system of checks and balances that guarantee freedom in our form of democracy and a concentration of power in the executive branch.

The Constitution in general and the Bill of Rights in particular were designed to distribute power so that no one branch or official could gain a stranglehold on information and claim the authority to act

based on restricted knowledge of a situation. This principle is exactly what had been called into question by the government restrictions on scholarship that have been imposed at both state and federal levels.

At the same time that Florida is moving to shut down independent academic sources of information that could challenge what government officials have to say about a country, the Treasury Department is taking similar actions at the federal level. It has issued regulations prohibiting scholars in the U.S. from maintaining contacts

with other scholars in any of the five countries designated by the State Department as “state sponsors of terrorism.”

In fact, when a scholar from Iran had an article accepted by a journal in the United States, a professor who was copy-editing the article was contacted by the Treasury Department and threatened with charges of “trading with the enemy” unless he ceased the activity. The journal editors cancelled the article to avoid charges. Another journal accepted the article, and the [American Association of University Presses](#) filed suit to stop punitive actions.

-T.A.