

T.C. Campbell on Academic Freedom

Three themes for this story are 1) a 1971 letter sent to Eugene Sydnor (Chairman of the Education Committee of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) by Lewis F Powell, Jr., 2) serious loss of academic tenure from that time to the present, and 3) the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court in 2010. I suggest they are profoundly connected.

Powell, a NY corporate lawyer and lifelong Democrat, wrote his 1971 memo to the Chamber of Commerce entitled "Attack on American free enterprise system". He contended that "no thoughtful person can question the fact that the American economic system is under broad attack ... often by the same individuals and organizations who seek to undermine the enterprise system." It was a monumental and personally passionate statement. His concerns mostly focused on university campuses (especially the social, economic and political sciences) as the "single most dynamic source" of the problem. He argued that the very survival of the free enterprise system was at stake and that something had to be done. He proposed that the Chamber could lead the U.S. business community to collectively confront this problem.

Although Powell cited the importance of "academic freedom" (freedom of speech), he did not make this distinction sufficiently clear. He suggested proposals on how the Chamber could suggest for universities a staff of speakers, a speaker's bureau, and evaluation of textbooks to restore and assure "fair and factual treatment of our system of government and our enterprise system", in a way that contrasts with "the systems of socialism, fascism and communism." He said these proposals could help insure academic freedom and a sense of balance to reflect the interests of the free enterprise system. He suggested that the Chamber could urge "faculty balance upon university administrators and boards of trustees". He suggested similar activities for influencing the media and scholarly journals and public "books, paperbacks and pamphlets".

His suggestion of professional and educational balance was desperately needed—a reasonable point of view. But then, he makes the extraordinary statement that, "...as every business executive knows, few elements of American society today have as little influence in government as the American businessman, the corporation, or even the millions of corporate stockholders." And by government, this included public institutions like academia. How things have changed since that time!

Powell vigorously argued for protection of academic freedom but, for him, this meant more freedom for the business community to exercise its influence on university campuses. His prognosis was completely at odds as to what eventually came to pass. Academic freedom, in the form of tenured positions, began a serious decline from this time forward, from about 1975 until the present day, from about 60-70% for example to about 30% a mere 30 years later. In contrast, the proportion of funding for

corporate-sponsored research increased from about 30% to 70%. The issue of most consequence was, in my experience, its effect on the funding of biomedical research, which now reflects corporate interests far more than human health interests.

Of even more significance in my opinion was the outcome of greatest consequence was the 2010 Supreme Court decision, Citizens United, which greatly increased the opportunity for corporate funding of public elections. Winners, to a great extent, are those who can raise the most money from powerful corporations. Once elected, politicians then will favor their funders, especially at the national level, such as in naming department secretaries then using taxpayer dollars to subsidize corporate interests. That decision, according to the views of many observers, is likely the most damning and effective decision to seal the fate of academic freedom both on university campuses and in the public discourse writ large.

These developments are especially egregious in the human health arena, first by supporting production of food that causes human illness then by supporting drug development to cure illness. Public health be damned. With academic freedom now being mostly impotent, it is almost impossible to honestly criticize scientific research findings that may be in the interests of human health but not in the interests of the corporate world.

Many examples of this problem can be cited. At George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, an especially egregious corruption of its academic affairs has occurred with millions of dollars of funding from conservative-leaning donors like the Charles Koch Foundation reported in 2018

[*What Charles Koch and Other Donors to George Mason University Got for Their Money - The New York Times*](#)

It was an especially corrupt and secret arrangement with university officials that could only be revealed by court activity.

At Cornell University, at least \$12 million of Gates Foundation money has been used to support development of genetically modified enterprises for the Foundation worldwide. [\[Gates Foundation Grants Additional \\$6.4million to Cornell's Controversial Alliance for Science\]](#). The basis for that work has been seriously challenged but not at Cornell.