Existing threats to academic freedom have been exacerbated by the political and economic climate following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, argued scholars at a conference held at New York University's new Frederic Ewen Academic Freedom Center at Tamiment Library on Thursday and Friday.

The conference, "Academic Freedom in an Age of Permanent Warfare," was the inaugural public event at the center, which was established at the university last year.

A number of speakers noted that academic freedom was under strenuous attack long before the 2001 attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The attenuation of tenure, comprehensive changes in university governance, and an increase in organized attempts from outside academe to influence research and hiring decisions had already altered long-held norms of academic freedom in American colleges and universities. But there was a consensus among participants that the changes in society and the university had become so profound that the entire notion of academic freedom and how to defend it are in need of revision.

"We may have to rethink how we guard academic freedom under a neoliberal or security-surveillance state," said Sheila Slaughter, a professor of higher education at the University of Georgia.

Speakers also pointed out that infringements on academic freedom became more acute during every armed conflict of the 20th century, and even at key moments in the cold war. But some participants looked darkly on the rhetoric that has accompanied the wide-ranging armed conflicts against terrorism in which America is enmeshed "a struggle that has already been dubbed "the long war" by prominent thinkers inside America's military. If academic freedom suffers in short bursts of conflict, speakers argued, how would it fare in a longer and less-well-defined conflict?
Rashid Khalidi, director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, observed that American wars of the last century "were limited wars. They had a start and an end date. These were not open-ended wars."

The best-attended of Friday's panels (at which Mr. Khalidi spoke) dealt with the question of academic freedom for scholars of the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Zachary Lockman, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at New York University, pointed to a "major escalation" of attacks on scholarship about the history of the region after the crisis of September 11, and what he saw as an increasing "conflation, often quite deliberate, of criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism." Denunciations inside and outside the academy, he said, "are the price we pay for trying to maintain our integrity."

Mr. Khalidi observed that the chilling effect of such attacks is felt less by tenured professors than their younger colleagues. "Think about the effects of these campaigns on a 25-year-old Ph.D. student," he said. "'Do I work on this third-rail issue, or something safe?'"

**A Wedge Between Disciplines**

Consideration of war's effect on scholarship on hot-button issues such as the Middle East and on academic freedom in general was one focus of the conference. But the consequences of increased ties between corporations and universities, and the manner in which core academic values are being displaced by those of business, was another prominent theme.

In her presentation, Ms. Slaughter noted that recent moves by public institutions such as the University of Colorado to gain powers held by corporations in a market economy "control of tuition price, increased flexibility in hiring and firing" had pernicious effects for academic freedom, including "a further erosion in faculty governance," a "preference among disciplines," and increased constraints in scholars' "ability to follow research where it leads."

David A. Hollinger, a professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley, saw particular problems for upholding academic freedom in public universities as a result of a fiscal arms race between those institutions and private universities. Disciplines that yield large grants and profits, located largely in the sciences, would gain in prestige and power over other areas of study. "There is a danger of a wedge being driven between scientists and humanists," said Mr. Hollinger.

In his view, that wedge is a dangerous one for academic freedom in general. "The defense of academic freedom needs to be broadly based," Mr. Hollinger argued. Divisions between disciplines, he continued, "make it harder to achieve solidarity across the lines. Scientists will have much less incentive to make common cause with humanists."

**Answering Attacks**
In his keynote address at the conference, Roger W. Bowen, a senior adviser at the Council of Independent Colleges, sketched out an ever-darkening picture for academic freedom in venues that include the federal courts and the court of public opinion.

As a past general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, Mr. Bowen noted that the divisions in the professoriate are not merely those between disciplines, but between tenured faculty and their contingent colleagues. Observing that roughly two-thirds of all faculty appointments are not on the tenure track, Mr. Bowen said that the professoriate was also "divided by caste, and academic freedom is the weaker for it."

Mr. Bowen urged more than solidarity in the face of wedges such as those described by Mr. Hollinger. He proposed specific legislative action through state assemblies and referenda both to protect academic freedom and bring the discussion of its value to the public.

"Academe needs to go on the offensive," he said, noting that 24 legislatures had rejected recent attempts by David Horowitz, a conservative activist, to have an "academic bill of rights" promulgated in their states. State-level protection, Mr. Bowen said, "may be the best deal that may be cut by American faculty today."

Andrew Ross, a professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University, also spoke of various types of solidarity as an answer to attacks on academic freedom. In his talk, he urged his audience to be aware of the complexity of ties between academe and business. "We're fond of our siege mentality," said Mr. Ross. "But the traffic goes in both directions." In particular, he observed, many businesses in the ideas industry have adapted and incorporated certain aspects of the university and academic freedom "collaboration, peer review, encouragement of open speech" into their own corporate ethos.

Mr. Ross argued that more tenured professors should take stronger positions in battling the increase in contingent faculty members and improving those colleagues' working conditions. He also added that they should be seeking to influence the conditions for academic freedom at branch campuses set up by American institutions overseas particularly those in places where there is no legacy of academic freedom or where laws exist that regulate speech.

Mr. Ross cited New York University's own plans for establishing a university in Abu Dhabi, and his view of the lack of vibrant debate on whether NYU will seek to replicate in that Middle Eastern country the hiring practices and academic safeguards in place on its campus in Greenwich Village. NYU Abu Dhabi, he said "will likely be a tenure-free university."

Copyright © 2008 by The Chronicle of Higher Education