

July 22, 2013

An open letter to Mitch Daniels

Dear President Daniels:

We are writing in response to the recent news reports about emails you wrote while governor of Indiana. In those emails, you criticized the historian Howard Zinn and his work, and you sought to find ways to “get rid of” Zinn’s ideas in Indiana schools. However much we disagree with your past statements, we are more troubled by the fact that you continue to express these views today, especially since you are now speaking as the chief representative of Purdue University with the responsibility to embody the best of academic inquiry and exchange.

We appreciate the fact that you have articulated your support for the idea of academic freedom for tenured professors, but such reassurances do not go far enough. In this letter, we’d like to explain what we find so troubling about your continued insistence that Zinn’s works are “truly execrable” and fraudulent.

First, your assessment of Zinn’s work goes against the judgment of Purdue’s own faculty members, many of whom *do* include his work in their syllabi or in their published research—not to mention historians across the nation and the world. Whatever their political stripe, most experts in the field of U.S. history do not take issue with Howard Zinn’s *facts*, even when they do take issue with his *conclusions*.

Second, we note that you quote several scholarly critics of Zinn’s works in the statement posted on your Purdue President’s page. It’s important to recognize that Oscar Handlin and Arthur Schlesinger made assumptions about how to study and interpret history that were fundamentally at odds with Zinn’s assumptions. Handlin and Schlesinger and others of the so-called “consensus school of U.S. History” that flourished in the 1950s believed that they could use the sources generated by the people with power to speak for ALL Americans. In the 1960s, Zinn and many others of a rising generation of scholars questioned that original assumption and practice; they sought the voices and perspectives of people who did not have power. They discovered through diligent research that working people, black people, women, Native Americans, and immigrants expressed views that were at odds with their political, military, and economic leaders.

Such disagreements about scholarship in the fields of humanities and social science are not unusual. In fact, we expect that generational change in the academy and the publication of innovative, exciting work by scholars in good standing *should* spark this kind of debate. Such discussions make for better history and for better teaching in the wider community!

Third, we also note that you do not quote the many positive reviews of his work—just the kind of biased presentation you accuse Zinn of making in his publications. For every negative comment that you note in your letter, you can find a positive one published in expert venues. As just one example, Eric Foner, the Dewitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University and a former president of the American Historical Association, insisted in a review that appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* that Zinn’s *A People’s History* ought to be “required

reading.” On another occasion Foner said of Zinn, “Over the years I have been struck by how many excellent students of history had their interest in studying the past sparked by reading Howard Zinn. That’s the highest compliment one can offer to a historian.”

Throughout his career Zinn was a dedicated teacher, and until his death he was a well-respected member of the American Historical Association. You can find the association’s memorial to him, which details his contributions to the field of U.S. history here: <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1009/1009mem5.cfm>. To call him “a fraud” and to charge that he “purposely falsified American history,” as you do in your statement to the Associated Press released on July 17, and “irredeemably slanted,” as you do in the letter published on your Purdue President webpage, reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of academic discussion. Scholarly debates and disagreements create ferment that leavens the study of history. Without vigorous disagreements about the meaning of the American experience, the field would not have moved in such important directions as the study of women’s history, African American history, labor history, the history of sexuality, and so on. Moreover, to insist that Zinn’s critical perspective is anti-American is to miss his commitment to bringing out our better collective selves—living up to the great ideals of egalitarianism and democratic involvement upon which this republic was founded.

Fourth, we see that your response to the AP reporting draws a line between academic freedom in higher education and K-12 classrooms. And yet, in your January “Open Letter to the People of Purdue,” you suggest that the tenure system—the bedrock on which academic freedom in higher education is built—should be reconsidered: “The academies that, through the unique system of tenure, once enshrined freedom of opinion and inquiry now frequently are home to the narrowest sort of closed-mindedness and the worst repression of dissident ideas.” When we put this statement next to your excoriation of a respected scholar, we are concerned that in fact ideas that don’t find favor at the highest levels of our institution will be discouraged, and ideas that are celebrated by our top administration rather than by those scholars whose expertise makes them uniquely qualified to make such judgments will be promoted. Whether or not our fears reflect your point of view accurately, when we put your public statements together, we find them to have a chilling effect on untenured scholars and to affect the morale of Purdue’s long-time faculty as well.

Finally, we note that in the original emails you were concerned in particular with a summer institute taught at Indiana University for high school *teachers*, not students. Surely you don’t believe that fully accredited teachers need to be protected from Zinn, whatever you may believe about children being “force-fed” information that you find objectionable. We know better of our K-12 colleagues. As do all teachers, they need to read peer-reviewed scholarship from across the spectrum and be challenged with points of view that they may not hold; as we all do, they crave energetic, vibrant discussion with other professionals—just the kind of experience the program at Indiana University was designed to provide. And then, as all teachers should, they bring the insight and energy of such experiences back to their own classrooms.

We trust our colleagues to introduce young people to the facts of history, but also to the much more difficult, much more essential practices of critical thinking. We trust our K-12 colleagues to know how and when to present challenges to received knowledge and how to encourage their

students to judge such challenges for themselves. And we trust them to decide how and when to use controversial scholarship such as Zinn's in their classrooms. This kind of academic freedom is essential to all levels of education, whether within a tenure system or not. And we promise you, this kind of challenging, stimulating approach will result in better, more engaging education of all Indiana students, from our five-year old kindergartners, to members of Purdue's class of 2017, and beyond.

In the end, this issue transcends one author and one book. It concerns the very legitimacy of academic discourse. Scholarship emerges virtually every day that challenges the "conventional wisdom" of prior generations. Do we assess such scholarship critically, or do we censor uncomfortable ideas out of hand? The very viability of academic inquiry and the university's mission is at stake.

Sincerely,

Professor Susan Curtis, History and American Studies
Associate Professor Kristina Bross, English and American Studies

Supporting signatures from Purdue University

Janet Alsup, Professor, Department of English

S. Dorsey Armstrong, Associate Professor, Department of English

Elena Benedicto, Associate Professor, Department of English

Paul Benhamou, Professor Emeritus, School of Languages and Cultures

Tithi Bhattacharya, Associate Professor, Department of History

Samantha Blackmon, Associate Professor, Department of English

Evelyn Blackwood, Professor, Department of Anthropology

Richard Blanton, Professor, Department of Anthropology

Antonio Bobet, Professor, Department of Civil Engineering

George M. Bodner, Arthur E. Kelly Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, Education, and
Engineering, Department of Chemistry

T. J. Boisseau, Associate Professor, Department of History and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality
Studies

Patricia Boling, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science

Marianne Boruch, Professor, Department of English

Rebecca Bryant, Assistant Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing
Arts

Marianne Stowell Bracke, Associate Professor, Purdue University Libraries

Thomas F. Broden, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures

Cornelius Bynum, Associate Professor, Department of History

Robin P. Clair, Professor, Brian Lamb School of Communication

Rosalee Clawson, Professor, Department of Political Science

Elena Coda, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures

John Contreni, Professor, Department of History

Charles R. Cutter, Associate Professor, Department of History

Marlo David, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Women's Studies

Stephen M. David, Assistant Dean for International Programs, College of Education
Dorothy Deering, Associate Professor, Department of English
Ariel de la Fuente, Associate Professor, Department of History
Richard M. Dionne, Assistant Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing Arts
Paul Dixon, Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Nadine Dolby, Professor, Department of Curriculum Studies
Mohan Dutta, Professor, Brian Lamb School of Communication
John Duvall, Margaret Church Distinguished Professor, Department of English
Rachel Einwohner, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology
James Elicker, Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies
David Ertner, Professor, Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences
Peggy Ertner, Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Jennifer Foray, Associate Professor, Department of History
Alexander Francis, Associate Professor, Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences
Elaine J. Francis, Associate Professor, Department of English and Linguistics
Robert S. Freeman, Associate Professor, Purdue University Libraries
Geraldine Friedman, Associate Professor, Department of English
Nancy Gabin, Associate Professor, Department of History
Jackson T. Gandour, Professor, Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences
James R. Gilligan, Assistant Director, Office of Field Experience, College of Education
April Ginther, Associate Professor, Department of English
Sandor Goodhart, Associate Professor, Department of English
Sally A. Hastings, Associate Professor, Department of History
Aaron Hoffman, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science
Richard Hogan, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology
John P. Hope, Assistant Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Daniel Hsieh, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Caroline Janney, Associate Professor, Department of History
David Kemmerer, Professor, Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences
Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, Assistant Professor, Department of History
Anne Meis Knupfer, Professor, Department of Educational Studies
Roberta Kraft, Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing Arts
Ben Lawton, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Maren Linett, Associate Professor, Department of English
Christopher Lukasik, Associate Professor, Department of English
Dawn Marsh, Assistant Professor, Department of History
Robert P. Marzec, Associate Professor, Department of English
Jill P. May, Professor Emerita, College of Education
Robert May, Professor, Department of History
Clarence Maybee, Assistant Professor, Purdue University Libraries
Shannon McMullen, Assistant Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing Arts and American Studies
Daniel C. Morris, Professor, Department of English
Michael Morrison, Associate Professor, Department of History
Bill Mullen, Professor, Department of English and American Studies

Lynn R. Nelson, Associate Professor, Department of Social Studies Education, Retired
Mary Niepokuj, Associate Professor, Department of English
Alice Pawley, Associate Professor, School of Engineering Education
Lisa Lee Peterson, Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing Arts
Donald Platt, Professor, Department of English
Anatoli Rapoport, Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Jennifer Richardson, Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Meredith Richmond, Continuing Lecturer, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Aparajita Sagar, Associate Professor, Department of English
Iñigo Sánchez-Llama, Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Mary Schweitzer, Program Manager, Global Engineering Program
Melanie Shoffner, Associate Professor, Departments of English and Curriculum & Instruction
Maribeth Slebodnik, Associate Professor, Purdue Libraries
John R. Staver, Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Marcia Stephenson, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Harry Targ, Professor, Department of Political Science
Sharon Weiner, Professor, Library Science and W. Wayne Booker Chair in Information Literacy
Steven T. Wereley, Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering
Ronnie Wilbur, Professor, Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences
Jennifer William, Associate Professor, School of Languages and Cultures
Tatjana Babic Williams, Continuing Lecturer, School of Languages and Cultures
Fabian Winkler, Associate Professor, Patti and Rusty Rueff School of Visual and Performing
Arts
Harold D. Woodman, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Department of History