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American Fatwa

A statement from AAUP President Cary Nelson

One expects heated public rhetoric in times of war. But evidence is increasing that American politics is indeed itself war by other means. From Web sites to blogs to television talk shows people are castigated—and even threatened—for the views they hold. This trend undermines the character of our public life and leaves some citizens frightened to speak their minds. Because faculty members have long contributed to democratic debate by expressing their views in the public sphere, it is especially notable and worrisome when they become targets of what nearly amount to an American Fatwa—public suggestions that they merit violent retribution in punishment for their comments on issues of concern. The virulent attacks on Frances Fox Piven are a particularly disturbing example.

Dr. Piven is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. In recent weeks she has been subjected to an onslaught of denunciations, including death threats posted on theblaze.com, a website maintained by a company owned by radio and television commentator Glenn Beck.

In his television programs, Mr. Beck has referred to Professor Piven dozens of times, describing her as “an enemy of the Constitution” intent on bringing about the “collapse of our economic system.” Responding to an article that Professor Piven published in the January 10 issue of The Nation saying that unemployed people should be staging mass protests, Mr. Beck asked in his January 17 television show, “Is that not inciting violence? Is that not asking for violence?” Public demonstrations can of course be entirely peaceful. Even civil disobedience is typically nonviolent. Mr. Beck’s remarks are unjustified.

Mr. Beck has—even more outrageously—linked Professor Piven’s support for social movements to terrorism, and a December 31, 2010, headline in theblaze.com declared, “Frances Fox Piven Rings in the New Year by Advocating Violent Revolution.”

Amid these relentless tirades, Professor Piven has herself begun to receive threats of violence.

The American Association of University Professors, since our founding in 1915, has championed the vigorous exchange of ideas both within and outside the academic community. We do not dispute the right of individuals and commentators to strenuously question or protest the writings of academics. Nor can any professor claim immunity from criticism, however acid and
from whatever quarter. But it is despicable to threaten physical harm to Professor Piven for expressing her views.

No news organization or commentator can justify or should tolerate threats to do physical harm to a professor or to any author. We join others in strongly urging those who are critical of Professor Piven’s writings to advance their positions in ways that foster responsible criticism and debate.

—Cary Nelson
AAUP President