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The Blueprint for Silencing Dissent in US Higher Education

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Abstract

This essay examines the institutional architecture of censorship in US higher education during geopolitical crisis, with emphasis on the suppression of pro-Palestinian advocacy. Inspired by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model, this study theorizes a three-step "academic censorship playbook" through which universities manufacture moral panic, weaponize policy and surveillance infrastructures, and retroactively sanitize ideological suppression through narrative revision. Tracing patterns across McCarthyism, the Vietnam era, post-9/11 surveillance, and the 2023–24 campus crackdown, the analysis reveals how institutions operate not as neutral stewards of inquiry but as politically entangled actors beholden to state power, donor influence, and reputational control. This structural alignment has profound implications for academic freedom, institutional legitimacy, and democratic discourse. Furthermore, this research reveals the embedded structural biases within academia that reinforce prevailing sociopolitical hierarchies. The essay concludes by calling for systemic reforms grounded in intellectual pluralism, structural accountability, and strengthened protections for scholarly freedom.

US higher education institutions are entrusted with a foundational mission: to safeguard academic freedom, foster critical inquiry, and serve as engines of democratic engagement. However, during geopolitical or sociopolitical controversy, universities often subordinate their commitments to the imperatives of political expediency, donor influence, and institutional self-preservation (Schrecker 2010). Ironically, it is precisely in moments of crisis that critical debate is most essential to preserve democratic integrity. Such institutional deviation undermines both higher education's public mandate and its academic stewardship.

The 2023–24 escalation of violence in Israel-Palestine has triggered a national reckoning on US campuses, revealing the fragility of academic freedom in moments of political controversy. In response to pro-Palestinian advocacy, universities have enacted sweeping measures: Faculty have been suspended, terminated, or placed under investigation (Stevens 2024); student organizations have been deregistered, denied funding, or subjected to disproportionate scrutiny (ACLU 2023; Binday 2024); and campus protesters have faced surveillance, doxing, disciplinary sanctions, and direct violence (Friedersdorf 2024; Hill and Orakwue 2023). In a historically unprecedented move, multiple university presidents were summoned before Congress to justify their institutions'

responses to pro-Palestinian advocacy—framed not as legitimate political expression but as evidence of a national crisis of campus antisemitism (US House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2023). These events do not represent isolated lapses but instead reveal a broader institutional pattern in which political dissent is reclassified as danger and thus subject to suppression.

This moment echoes McCarthyism, when universities dismissed left-leaning faculty members (Schrecker 1986). During the civil rights and Vietnam War era, student and faculty protests against racism, segregation, and US militarism were not only violently suppressed but also cast as existential threats to national security (Heineman 1994). In the post-9/11 era, those who identify as Arab, Muslim, and South Asian faced increased surveillance and retaliation (Heins 2013). Such recurrences reveal a structurally embedded pattern: Universities have functioned less as neutral forums of inquiry than as disciplinary institutions aligned with dominant political imperatives.

To examine this paradox, the present analysis draws on Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model—originally developed to explain how structural filters within mass media systems manufacture ideological conformity by privileging dominant political and economic interests. Applied to higher education, the model illuminates how universities similarly privilege narratives aligned with state and corporate interests, while marginalizing dissenting or subversive forms of knowledge.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, this essay proposes a three-part framework—an academic censorship playbook—that articulates the recurring strategies by which universities regulate, contain, and suppress political dissent:

1. First, universities **manufacture moral panic by constructing and publicly penalizing ideological adversaries**, thus legitimizing intervention under the guise of preserving campus safety, institutional order, or reputational integrity. Select dissenters are strategically targeted—subjected to reputational harm, professional isolation, or termination. Their treatment functions as a calculated deterrent, signaling to others that dissent carries material and symbolic consequences.
2. Second, **universities often weaponize institutional policies and surveillance infrastructures** to enforce ideological conformity. Formal mechanisms—such as student conduct codes, reporting protocols, and digital monitoring systems—are selectively mobilized to constrain particular political expression. These practices transform administrative neutrality into a tool of repression, signaling that deviation from dominant norms carries sanctioned risk.
3. Third, institutions **retrospectively revise the narrative**, recasting acts of ideological suppression as neutral, necessary, or even benevolent responses to disorder. This process obscures the political nature of the intervention, reinforces collective amnesia, and absolves institutional complicity—thereby falsely preserving universities' self-presentation as apolitical stewards of truth and academic integrity.

By illuminating this institutional "playbook," the present analysis demonstrates that the suppression of scholarly discourse is neither random nor episodic but instead structured and profoundly embedded within the academy's response to geopolitical and sociopolitical tensions.

Although each strategy warrants discussion beyond the constraints of this essay, the concentrated synthesis that follows broadly demonstrates the mechanisms by which academic institutions regulate dissent and consolidate ideological conformity. Higher education institutions can (and should) apply this framework to critically interrogate their own historical and ongoing roles in constraining intellectual freedom. Through such efforts, universities can begin to fulfill their foundational mission as democratic institutions—dedicated to critical inquiry, intellectual pluralism, and the advancement of knowledge in service of a more just and equitable society.

Manufacture Moral Panic by Constructing and Penalizing Ideological Adversaries

Academic censorship often begins not with overt repression but with the discursive framing of a perceived threat. Such campaigns unfold in three phases: casting dissenters as existential threats, amplifying the threat through media and political discourse, and publicly penalizing dissent to deter others. Dissent is reimagined as deviance—a danger to institutional integrity, societal order, or national security—thereby justifying repressive measures (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978).

Universities have historically participated in this process. During the McCarthy era, the House Un-American Activities Committee policed political ideology through public hearings and blacklists, prompting institutions to enforce conformity. At the University of California, the board of regents imposed a loyalty oath in 1950, resulting in thirty-one terminations; over 100 faculty nationwide lost positions under similar pressures (Heins 2013; Schrecker 1986). These dismissals were not isolated policy decisions—they were performative acts of ideological purification designed to signal compliance and suppress resistance.

The pattern persisted through the civil rights and Vietnam War era. Following Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 condemnation of the Vietnam War, federal agencies escalated surveillance and suppression of Black political resistance. Student organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society were framed as existential threats (Church Committee 1976; Garrow 1981). In 1969, Angela Davis was not reappointed to a faculty position at the University of California, Los Angeles, due to her Communist Party affiliation and vocal antiracist, antiwar politics. Despite faculty support for her, the board of regents—pressured by Governor Ronald Reagan—dismissed Davis, symbolically warning others against ideological deviation (Heineman 1994).

After 9/11, the "radical Muslim academic" replaced the communist as the ideological adversary. Religious, cultural, and political identities were collapsed into security threats (Alimahomed-Wilson 2018). Universities surveilled Arab and Muslim scholars, targeting them as reputational risks (Peek 2003). For instance, in Sami Al-Arian's case, his Muslim identity and pro-

Palestinian advocacy were treated as proxies for terrorism, signaling that critiques of US foreign policy would be deemed institutional threats (Bayoumi 2015).

The logic intensified after October 7, 2023. US and Israeli leaders cited the memory of 9/11, thereby reactivating a collective trauma and situating the attacks within a global counterterrorism narrative (Neria and Sullivan 2011). A now-debunked claim that Hamas beheaded forty Israeli babies was amplified by the media, and even President Joe Biden (Chance, Greene, and Berlinger 2023). The invocation of "forty" carried symbolic weight: echoing Orientalist tropes like "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," which cast Arab figures as inherently violent and deceitful (Said 1978), and Judeo-Christian themes of divine judgment—positioning Palestinian solidarity as a threat to sacred order (Crane 1926; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998). This framing recast Palestinians as archetypal villains in an imagined civilizational clash, stripped of political legitimacy and unworthy of rights, empathy, or due process. Such narrative constructions draw from imperial logics that historically justified colonial violence by rendering the colonized morally unintelligible.

This narrative construction laid the groundwork for state-led performance: the ideological adversary, once symbolically cast, now had to be publicly repudiated if the institution were to avoid being charged with moral failure. In December 2023, the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce convened nationally televised hearings to investigate alleged campus antisemitism. What began as a review of safety concerns became a performative spectacle of public shaming. The presidents of Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology were aggressively interrogated—not for procedural lapses but for refusing to categorically condemn pro-Palestinian speech. In this forum, academic leadership was framed as moral failure unless it aligned with prevailing orthodoxy. Neutrality and due process were recast as complicity, rendering leaders ideologically suspect. These hearings personalized institutional accountability and weaponized it to deter dissent across higher education. Such public disciplining rituals function not simply to punish but to govern—producing institutional compliance through fear, internalized surveillance, and anticipatory self-censorship (Brown 2015).

This redefinition of dissent quickly spread. In 2024, Maura Finkelstein, a tenured Jewish, anti-Zionist anthropologist at Muhlenberg College, was dismissed after reposting a meme criticizing Zionists (Quinn 2024a). Although the administration cited a nondiscrimination policy, she was suspended without a hearing and later terminated. The AAUP (2025) concluded that her dismissal violated due process and academic freedom. Her case underscored that even Jewish identity offers no protection when dissent challenges Zionist orthodoxy. Since October 7, at least thirty faculty have faced suspension, nonrenewal, or termination for pro-Palestinian speech (Quinn 2024b). These actions serve a deterrent function, transforming disciplinary examples into warnings that mark the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Students fare no better. The same mechanism of constructing ideological threats and punishing dissent publicly has been replicated in the treatment of student groups. In late 2023,

Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace—two of the most visible student organizations advocating for Palestinian liberation—were suspended or banned across multiple institutions, including George Washington University, Columbia University, and Brandeis University (Palestine Legal 2024). Administrators cited vague safety violations, often without evidence. Since October 7, over 3,200 protest-related arrests have occurred on more than 130 campuses (Ulfelder 2025).

By transforming dissenters into deviant adversaries, universities justify censorship not as coercion but as moral stewardship. Yet symbolic vilification alone is insufficient to sustain long-term repression. To exert lasting control, moral panic must be weaponized through institutional policy—translated into surveillance infrastructures, bureaucratic codes, and disciplinary mechanisms that formalize the containment of dissent. In this way, repression becomes routinized, embedded in the daily governance of academic life under the guise of neutrality and order.

Weaponize Institutional Policies and Surveillance Infrastructures

The second phase of censorship is rarely enacted through overt prohibition alone. More often, it takes shape through policies and surveillance infrastructures that appear neutral or safety-driven—yet function to suppress dissent (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Once a moral panic is manufactured and ideological adversaries are constructed, universities translate political pressure into internal enforcement mechanisms that formalize repression.

Historically, universities have used policy to operationalize ideological conformity. During the McCarthy era, loyalty oaths, background checks, and political screening were embedded into faculty contracts and hiring practices. Though not federally mandated, these practices aligned with state priorities, enabling universities to remove faculty who failed to meet ideological expectations. This persisted during the civil rights and Vietnam War era, as universities expanded conduct codes, enacted vague "time, place, and manner" regulations, and selectively denied recognition to activist groups. The FBI's COINTELPRO surveilled student organizers, while universities disciplined them under policies designed to regulate "disruption" or "civility" (Heins 2013; Schrecker 1986).

Surveillance and punishment became internalized and bureaucratized under institutional governance (Church Committee 1976). After 9/11, federal surveillance integrated into campus administration. Programs like the PATRIOT Act, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, and the Student and Exchange Visitor Program enabled data collection on international students (Maira 2014). Administrators worked with agencies through the FBI's Campus Liaison Program, while groups like Campus Watch targeted faculty critical of US or Israeli policy. Though framed in terms of safety, these surveillance measures enforced ideological discipline.

In the digital age, surveillance has shifted from institutional control to decentralized networks of intimidation. Across the country, faculty members and students have been targeted by doxing platforms like Canary Mission, which label pro-Palestinian advocates as "extremists" and

compile digital dossiers to damage their academic and professional futures (Bridge Initiative 2025). These blacklists have been cited or mirrored by authorities: In 2025, US immigration officials detained Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish Fulbright scholar at Tufts University, allegedly influenced by her Canary Mission profile. Although universities do not author these blacklists, their continued silence about their use raises serious ethical questions regarding institutional responsibility. At the University of Michigan, administrators hired private security firms to monitor pro-Palestinian students without notifying them. Reports revealed that agents trailed students on and off campus, recorded conversations, and engaged in harassment, including allegedly attempting to strike a student with a car (Perkins 2025). These actions have raised serious concerns about student privacy and civil liberties, creating chilling effects across the academy.

Alongside surveillance infrastructures, institutional policies are weaponized as tools of ideological enforcement. Whereas loyalty oaths once codified political conformity, today this role is increasingly played by anti–boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) laws and the widespread adoption of the controversial definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)—measures that function less as protections against discrimination and more as instruments of political orthodoxy. Legal scholars and civil rights groups argue that anti-BDS laws violate the First Amendment by punishing individuals and institutions for participating in peaceful, constitutionally protected boycotts (ACLU 2023; Palestine Legal 2024). The IHRA definition, originally intended to combat antisemitism, has drawn widespread criticism—including from its principal drafter and major Jewish organizations—for framing criticism of Israeli state policy as antisemitic, thereby threatening free expression and academic freedom (Jewish Voice for Peace 2021; Stern 2019; T'ruah n.d.).

Increasingly, federal frameworks are being actively embedded into university policy**.** President Donald Trump's (2019) Executive Order 13899 directed federal agencies to apply the IHRA definition when assessing Title VI violations, pressuring institutions to adopt the same standard internally. Columbia University overhauled its disciplinary infrastructure, added surveillance, and restructured entire departments under the pretense of fighting antisemitism—even though it refused to adopt the IHRA definition (Reyes 2025). These measures were implemented to satisfy federal scrutiny and avoid losing funding. Harvard University settled civil rights complaints by agreeing to incorporate the IHRA definition into its nondiscrimination policy (Krupnick 2025)**.** This now enables disciplinary action not just for actual harassment but also for certain expressions of political critique. These cases demonstrate how contested legal frameworks are now operationalized through campus governance—transforming ideological agendas into enforceable policy and redefining dissent as discrimination.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, attempts to sanction or punish campus speech have originated from university administrators, rather than student complaints or external pressure, marking a shift: Censorship is no longer reactive but internalized (Stevens 2024). At Columbia and NYU, deans and administrators authorized mass suspensions

and campus policing in direct response to protest activity. At UCLA in April 2024, a pro-Palestinian student encampment was attacked by a pipe-wielding mob deploying chemical agents, while campus security and law enforcement failed to intervene. The following night, rather than safeguarding the students, the university authorized a police raid that resulted in over two hundred arrests and the dismantling of the encampment (UCLA Faculty Association 2025). However, the harshest consequences have frequently fallen on international students, who face not only academic sanctions but also immigration-related reprisals. Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian graduate student at Columbia University, was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement in March 2025 after appearing in a protest video. Although Khalil holds legal permanent residency and faced no criminal charges, he spent more than three months in federal detention before his June 20 release. Khalil has since filed a $20 million lawsuit against the Trump administration (Laughland 2025).

Universities have become instruments of ideological enforcement. By embedding political orthodoxy into surveillance regimes and policy infrastructures, institutions convert dissent into a liability. The cumulative effect is not just compliance but transformation: Universities internalize external pressure, codify it into policy, and deploy it to police speech, restructure discipline, and target marginalized communities. With enforcement complete, the institution must secure its legitimacy—not through further action but through control of memory. Censorship shifts from punishing dissent to rewriting its meaning.

Retrospectively Revise Narratives of Institutional Ideological Control

Institutional suppression of dissent rarely ends with the disciplinary act itself. Instead, it is extended and normalized through the strategic production of historical revisionism. After the controversy subsides, universities routinely engage in narrative reconstruction—recasting ideologically charged decisions as apolitical measures of administrative prudence. These retrospective justifications perform a critical ideological function: They enable institutions to obscure political complicity, reassert moral legitimacy, and codify an official memory in which repression is reframed as responsible governance (Lukes 2005; Schrecker 1998). Over time, what began as political suppression becomes memorialized as institutional necessity, transforming contested actions into commemorated norms.

This revisionist logic was overt during the McCarthy era. Though clearly motivated by Cold War political coercion, university officials later publicly defended the mandatory loyalty oath as essential to "safeguard the University's integrity against outside political influence"—a phrase institutionalized in the University of California's internal memos and later preserved in official campus histories. These rhetorical moves reframed ideological conformity as a requirement for institutional preservation, converting a politically repressive policy into a gesture of bureaucratic stewardship (Heins 2013; Schrecker 1986). As media coverage echoed this framing, the original political context was gradually stripped from public memory and replaced with a narrative of responsible leadership.

The May 4, 1970, shootings at Kent State University represent a defining episode in historical revisionism that often follows such repression. During a demonstration against the US invasion of Cambodia, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed students, killing four and injuring nine. Despite photographic and eyewitness evidence showing students fleeing or standing passively, university and state officials swiftly recharacterized the protest as a violent uprising. Public statements emphasized "campus unrest" and property destruction, deflecting attention from the political content of the protest and recasting it as a threat to institutional stability (Aftoora-Orsagos and Rubinkam 2024; Heineman 1994). In the aftermath, official narratives framed the shootings as an unfortunate but necessary response to chaos. The ideological roots of the protest—the antiwar movement, resistance to imperial expansion, and student civil disobedience—were systematically erased from both administrative responses and public discourse. Terms like "tragedy" and "loss" depoliticized the violence and deflected blame (Gitlin 1987). Institutional memory was curated to present the university not as a site of political conflict but as a neutral party forced to manage unrest. These revisions functioned not only to deflect accountability but also to reestablish legitimacy and authority through the strategic manipulation of narrative (Foucault 1977; Lukes 2005).

Through this strategic rewriting of history, universities absolve themselves of complicity, deter future acts of resistance, and reinforce dominant ideological norms—all while preserving the illusion of open intellectual inquiry (Giroux 2014). Ultimately, institutional control is sustained through not only punishment but also memory. Carefully curated narratives valorize compliance, pathologize dissent, and produce a historical record in which political suppression is remembered as principled leadership. This process reveals the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the academy's self-image, its rhetorical allegiance to intellectual freedom, and its practical allegiance to the preservation of power (Lukes 2005).

Discussion

The systematic exploration provided by this research underscores the recurrent and pervasive nature of censorship within US higher education, revealing that institutional commitments to academic freedom often yield to more immediate imperatives aligned with prevailing power structures. Historical and contemporary analyses demonstrate how academic institutions, far from acting solely as impartial forums for scholarly debate, often reinforce dominant ideological interests through policies and practices that disproportionately marginalize scholars whose perspectives diverge from the mainstream or challenge systemic hierarchies (Giroux 2020). Across eras, those with marginalized identities or dissident politics—from Angela Davis to Maura Finkelstein—have faced the harshest institutional reprisals, revealing how dominant political and economic interests shape which knowledges are legitimized, which are suppressed, and whose voices are silenced—thus reinforcing structural inequality in academia.

Recent federal intervention in university governance marked an unprecedented escalation in the politicization of higher education. The Trump administration froze $2.2 billion in research

grants and $60 million in contracts to Harvard University after the institution refused to adopt the IHRA's definition of antisemitism (Winter and Romine 2025). After months of suspended funding and political pressure, Harvard reversed course and adopted the definition. Without a single proven violation, Harvard's research revenue and philanthropic base were wielded to enforce ideological compliance, illustrating that today entire institutions, not merely individual scholars, can be threatened with existential fiscal reprisal for protecting contested expression.

We thus have come to a new horizon of repression. When ideological conformity is tied to the survival of an entire institution, academic freedom shifts from a personal right to an institutional liability. To confront and dismantle the growing attacks against higher education, genuine institutional transformation is necessary. First and foremost, institutions must engage in a self-reflective acknowledgment of the academy's complicity in perpetuating structural inequities through historical and ongoing censorship practices. Candid dialogues are needed that critically evaluate universities' historical roles in reinforcing existing societal hierarchies, particularly recognizing how marginalized or politically vulnerable scholars and students are disproportionately impacted. This reflexive engagement would position institutions to authentically recommit to fostering inclusive intellectual environments that actively protect and promote diverse perspectives, scholarship, and critical inquiry.

Second, and more specifically, higher education institutions must engage in intentional structural reform designed to meaningfully uphold scholarly autonomy and intellectual diversity. Strengthened governance models are required that enable faculty members to substantively influence institutional decision-making processes, particularly in relation to academic policy, hiring practices, tenure and promotion decisions, and responses to external pressures. Such strengthened governance mitigates unilateral administrative actions driven by financial dependency or political expediency, thus protecting faculty members whose research directly critiques existing power structures (Reichman 2019).

Finally, institutions must diversify and democratize their funding models. A narrow base of ideologically aligned funders compromises institutional independence and emboldens the censorship of scholarship that departs from donor expectations. By cultivating ethically transparent, broad-based support for academic research, universities can reduce their susceptibility to coercive influence (Altbach 2016). Another crucial dimension of structural reform is enhanced institutional accountability through transparent policy frameworks and formalized protections for scholarly expression. Clearly articulated institutional commitments to academic freedom, backed by enforceable grievance mechanisms, help prevent retaliatory disciplinary actions motivated by ideological or political disagreements, thereby preserving intellectual integrity and reducing the chilling effects of punitive measures (Schrecker 2010).

The fundamental role of higher education as a catalyst for critical inquiry and transformative knowledge production depends on confronting and dismantling institutional mechanisms that perpetuate systemic inequalities through censorship (Giroux 2020; Reichman 2019). Dissent suppression is structural, dictating whose voices are heard or silenced. If universities are to

uphold their stated commitment to intellectual freedom, scholarly rigor, and meaningful inclusion, they must go beyond rhetorical assurances and enact substantive protections for academic discourse (Chemerinsky and Gillman 2017; Finkin and Post 2009). The legitimacy of higher education rests not in its ability to appease power but in its willingness to challenge it, ensuring that universities remain spaces where knowledge serves truth, justice, and the pursuit of democracy (Kundnani 2014; Salaita 2015).

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