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Forbidden Words: Academic Freedom, Censorship, and University Presses

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Abstract

*A decision by Brandeis University Press to censor an invited new preface to my book, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, brought to the surface a number of questions central to the protection of academic freedom. Anonymous peer reviewers should not enjoy the power to overturn decision-making by press officials. Discussion of race, racism, and racial privilege must be included and protected in scholarly debate. Sometimes, academic gatekeepers confuse what is scholarly from what is political in an abusive effort to block academic discourse. Concerns over monetizing the academic book market should not predetermine a book's content. When otherwise-hidden violations of academic freedom become part of a broad public discourse, retaliatory measures intimidate untenured faculty, scholars of color, and women academics who fear damage to their own careers should they speak out.*

In an academic freedom controversy that eventually reached a popular national audience, Brandeis University Press, publisher of my most recent book, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, invited, approved, and then refused publication of a new preface for the book's fourth printing.¹ The back and forth, first played out through emails, phone calls, zooms, and later in an article and responses published

¹ Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018).

by the *Forward*, focuses several of the most important academic freedom questions: Who controls the dissemination of scholarly knowledge? When does anonymous peer review, intended to strengthen scholarly writing, become an abuse of power, an informal means of political gatekeeping? What happens when those charged with protecting academic freedom in the university lack the authority to do so? Finally, how do market forces and the monetization of the university undermine the most basic professional tenets of academic freedom?²

Just two years after the publication of *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, the racial landscape of the nation changed with the videotaped murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020. Much of white America entered a reckoning process, learning all we could about systemic racism, historic police violence against people of color, and especially against Black men. In the American Jewish community as well, generations of white liberal Jews faced uncomfortable truths about their history, their complicity in institutionalized racism, and the benefits offered most American Jews as a privilege of their racial status. Copies of the book, which took a critical look at the rise and fall of the interracial alliance between Blacks and white Jews during the 1950s and 1960s, sold at such a fast clip that the professional leadership at Brandeis University Press asked that, for the fourth printing, I write a new preface, connecting

² Ari Feldman, "Brandeis U. Press and a Historian Split over How to Talk about Jews and White Supremacy," *Forward*, December 20, 2020, <https://forward.com/news/460600/jews-white-supremacy-brandeis-black-lives-matter/>. Open letters for and against my position include Ari Y. Kelman et al., "Open Letter: Brandeis University Press Is Silencing Debate," *Forward*, December 23, 2020, <https://forward.com/opinion/460889/open-letter-brandeis-university-press-is-silencing-debate/>; and Sue Berger Ramin and Sylvia Fuks Fried, "Brandeis University Press Is Fully Committed to Open Debate," *Forward*, December 23, 2020, <https://forward.com/opinion/letters/460942/letter-brandeis-university-press-is-fully-committed-to-open-debate/>. For two op-eds arguing against my position, see Guila Franklin Siegel, "Talk of Jews Benefiting from White Supremacy Is Bad for Fighting It," *Forward*, December 24, 2020, <https://forward.com/opinion/461048/talk-of-jews-benefiting-from-white-supremacy-is-bad-for-fighting-it/>; and Jonathan S. Tobin, "A Toxic Race Curriculum Has No Place in Jewish Schools," *JNS*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/a-toxic-race-curriculum-has-no-place-in-jewish-schools/>.

the themes of my research with the current-day realities of race in America.³

At 2,371 words, the “New Preface” opened with a reference to Floyd’s murder and the national reckoning on race that followed. “Not since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, if not the Reconstruction era after the American Civil War,” I affirmed, “has the issue of racism reached as deep in the national psyche.” Acknowledging American Jews who “joined the call” by “protesting in the streets, rallying friends and neighbors on social media, or beginning their own accounting on racism in America,” I credited “Jewish leaders both lay and professional” for taking “a new look at their organizations as almost all-white entities.”

The “New Preface” tracked developments in the movement for racial justice, celebrating “a public pronouncement that would have seemed impossible to make just a few years earlier.” For example, Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, the nation’s leading progressive Jewish organization, took the unprecedented step of securing the signatures of over six hundred Jewish organizations in a full-page newspaper ad that proclaimed, “We speak with one voice when we say, unequivocally: Black Lives Matter.”⁴ I noted that on a much grander scale, white American Jews stepped up, mobilizing “across geographic, economic, generational lines,” contrasting with the earlier civil rights movement when most northern suburban Jews remained on the sidelines. “In brand-new synagogue, JCC and other Jewish community-based lectures,” my contested preface affirmed, “white American Jews demand to know the contours of a centuries-long history of Jewish support, complicity or benefit from institutional racism.”⁵

³ The unedited “New Preface” can be found at <https://marcdollinger.com/new-preface/>.

⁴ Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, “Majority of American Jews in Full Page *New York Times* Ad: ‘Unequivocally: Black Lives Matter,’” August 28, 2020, https://www.bendthearc.us/american_jews_black_lives_matter.

⁵ Yonat Shimron, “He Claimed White Jews Gained from White Supremacy: New He’s More Popular than Ever,” *RNS*, March 12, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/12/he-was-shot-down-for-suggesting-white-jews-benefitted-from-white-supremacy-now-hes-more-popular-than-ever/>.

The “New Preface” included white Jewish concerns over the rise in anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and even antisemitic sentiment among some on the left. “Even as this book details Jewish organizational leaders who downplayed the significance and threat posed by antisemitism among some in the Black community in the mid-1960s,” I wrote, “contemporary Jews have raised alarm bells over the anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and at times antisemitic statements of some Black activists.” In response, I noted, some white Jews demanded “that Black civil rights leaders repudiate their colleagues as a pre-condition for activism.” Those concerns grew “so large that they soon became the most frequently asked question in each and every one of my community-based Jewish social justice lectures, whether or not the subject of the Black Lives Matter movement was included in the talk.” In a coda to this tension between the communities, I asked whether “white Jews [would] make their support for racial equality contingent on Black support for the State of Israel and Zionism?”

I also reflected on Jews of color (JoCs) and the microaggressions and outright racism they experience in white Jewish spaces. In a line that later evoked the ire of the publisher, I argued that “Jews of Color have been erased from almost all of the historical literature in American Jewish history, this book included.” These omissions matter. American Jewry’s “rising consciousness about the presence of JoCs and their exclusion from most of organized Jewish life goes to the heart of a new and important historiographic challenge in the study of Jewish participation in the civil rights movement.” In fact, even the phrase “Black-Jewish relations,” I reminded readers, “implies Jewish whiteness.” Reflecting on feedback I had received from Jews of Color Initiative founder and executive director Ilana Kaufman, the preface asked what if “a person was both Black and Jewish? How would that challenge our historical as well as contemporary understandings of what it means to be Jewish in America?”⁶ In response, I called for scholars to “re-visit this history through a lens of racial privilege, investigating the ways this era’s Jewish activism should also be understood as a reflection of Jewish whiteness, power, and privilege.” If

⁶ Jews of Color Initiative, “Building and Advancing the Field for Jews of Color,” <https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/>.

successful, “each of the chapters would be refocused away from the Americanist or 1960s-centered historical rationales I posited in favor of one that embraces a racially-sensitive analysis of events.”

Most of all, the “New Preface” showed how American Jewish historical memory on questions of social justice often conflicts with the actual history, both during the civil rights movement of the immediate postwar years as well as in contemporary understandings of race and racism in the United States.

Romanticized notions of Jewish support for racial justice in the early post-war years tended to universalize the friendship between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as a metaphor for all Blacks and Jews. While many American Jews remember a consensus-based inter-racial alliance that brought a disproportionate number of white Jews in solidarity with Black activists, the historical literature also tells of Jewish organizational leaders who understood the depth of institutional racism, the limits of white Jewish liberalism, and the inevitability of Black Power’s rise. The political voices and strategies of Black Americans needed centering and amplification, they argued, while Black Power-inspired tactics could model a Jewish ethnoreligious revival.

While it offered hope for a new interracial alliance in the current era, the “New Preface” challenged white Jewish liberals to reflect on the limits of their commitment to racial equity.

Press leadership welcomed the finished draft, describing it as a “very thoughtful essay” and an “excellent overview of the issues of the last two years.” Labeling it “a strong essay,” the editorial director and executive director offered “to try to get it placed in . . . the *LA Review of Books*” as well. Even as the press editors opted to send the “New Preface” for anonymous peer review, reporting that they “also sent the piece to another person at Brandeis for their comments, and are waiting to hear back,” the communication proved clear: the professionals in charge of the

academic press approved this addition to the book's next printing and wanted to see it read by as many people as possible.⁷

What is considered best practice in a situation such as this? Should a new preface, invited by an academic press for inclusion in an already-published book, be subject to anonymous peer review? On one level, a case can be made that it should. As scholars, we should seek the best possible academic writing. Safeguarding the anonymity of reviewers is a must, especially for those who write in small fields where almost everyone knows one another. Only by keeping reviewers anonymous can academic press editors and their editorial committees obtain the most honest, critical, and truthful feedback. Armed with that specialized knowledge, university presses are better able to determine what they should publish and what they need to reject.

Only this time, the anonymous peer review process upended professional standards and harmed academic freedom. Just one day after the press's editorial team approved the "New Preface," another email arrived reversing that decision. "We sent the essay out to some other readers and now have their responses back," the executive director of the press wrote. "We know that the subject generates controversy and engenders different opinions." As a result, the email continued, "We have made the decision to go ahead and reprint the book as is." Alluding to the power held by the anonymous reviewer, the communication ended, "I know this is a change from my last email but we do have to take a wide range of opinions into account."⁸

A focus on the press's internal review process raises academic freedom alarm bells. First, a *preface* should not be sent for anonymous peer review. Unlike a book manuscript, a preface is not scholarly. Second, an *invited* preface should not be sent for anonymous peer review. When a press asks an author to write a new preface, it is essentially preapproving the content. Third, an *accepted* invited preface should not be sent for

⁷ Email to the author from the Brandeis University Press editorial director, October 13, 2020.

⁸ Email to the author from the Brandeis University Press editorial director, October 14, 2020.

anonymous peer review. Anonymous peer reviewers should not be able to exert more power than an academic press's own professional team. Fourth, the decision to reverse their publication decision occurred without the knowledge of the author. The right to academic freedom should permit a scholar to address concerns in their writing.

The troubling decision-making process described above masked deeper content-based concerns about the "New Preface" and its discussion of Black Lives Matter, the nation's racial reckoning, and the racial positioning of most American Jews in the postwar era. While abuse of the anonymous review process undermined academic freedom, the press's decision to censor specific content proves even more telling, and chilling. In this case, an attempt to speak truth about a complicated history of Jews, whiteness, power, privilege, and racism resulted in a dramatic abridgement of academic freedom.

The words "white supremacy" upset the anonymous reviewer. While the "New Preface" was not a reflection on white supremacy per se, it did use these words in a paragraph building to a larger historical point. "Physically distant from the nation's urban centers," I wrote, "suburban Jews lamented their lack of proximity to communities of color and the ways in which the last few generations of American Jewish social mobility have reinforced elements of white supremacy in their own lived experience." The assertion that American Jews' social mobility gained traction from a system of white supremacy, it seemed, crossed the line of acceptable historical argumentation. The only remedy: censorship.

In addition to being upset over use of the words "white supremacy," the anonymous reviewer also challenged use of the word "erased," as noted above, to describe the near-total absence of Jews of color from the historiography. This assertion should not have met resistance. The exclusion of marginalized populations from academic literature is well documented across the disciplines. Calling this out in American Jewish history did not seem too radical a claim. By acceding to the reviewer's concern, the press empowered an anonymous academic gatekeeper to determine which topics get debated and which ones do not.

Underlying the press's concerns about evoking the erasure of Jews of color, the "New Preface" also faced criticism from the editorial director

for adopting “too apologetic” a tone. As first described in the book’s epilogue, *Black Power, Jewish Politics* did not consider the historical experience of Black Jews, an error that demands correction as the historiography develops. Because I embraced that critique, and repeated it in the “New Preface,” the press pushed back, challenging the very notion of scholarly critique, reflection, and revision as core tenets of our work as academics.

We must welcome criticism, take time to assess its validity in our research, and change our arguments if we find it warranted. Academic freedom must protect scholars who are willing to change their minds on their own conclusions. Naming “white supremacy” and “erasure” proved a bridge too far, and showing the humility necessary to include those words also brought rebuke. In this case, it seemed as if deeper concerns about the telling of racism in US history proved more important than providing a platform for its debate.

Academic freedom, at its heart, must protect scholars who wish to advance discomfiting theses. University presses, more than trade presses to be sure, must protect academic freedom by publishing challenging arguments, especially when they shake up conventional wisdom and thinking. At no point should concerns from anonymous reviewers stop an important academic debate even before it has a chance to begin. This is even more important when the topic is as contentious, fraught, and emotion-filled as American racism. Here we find an uncomfortable nexus between academic freedom and larger social justice freedom movements. Restricting the former challenges the latter. Anonymous peer review should not be abused as a cover to stifle the free exchange of ideas. No anonymous reviewer should possess that much authority over discourse and no university press should accede to their censorship demands. Upset and debate is acceptable. Compromising academic freedom is not.

Beyond questions of the role of anonymous reviewers or the need for university presses to publish contentious content, this controversy also engaged the influence of capitalism and the monetization of scholarly books. Officials at the press insisted that the decision to “go to press” so quickly did not result from political disagreements or from an

abandonment of academic freedom. Instead, they argued, time was of the essence. Just 115 copies remained at the warehouse and any sort of delay would leave the shelves bare. The press couldn't allow time for a rewrite of the "New Preface" without risking lost book sales.

In addition, the editorial leadership of the press expressed an anonymous reviewer's concern that the "New Preface" itself would harm book sales. To make claims regarding white supremacy and erasure, to apologize for academic failures in the book, it seemed, would discourage potential readers from purchasing the book or recommending it to their friends. This, too, violates key principles undergirding academic freedom and distinguishing academic presses from their cousins in the trade market. The job of an academic press is to publish the best scholarly work available, without regard for its financial consequences.

Some years ago, in a story that I still find amusing, an academic press representative tried to convince me to publish with them because they budgeted a \$7,500 loss on every book they published. Even though it sounds backward, this academic press wanted me to know they were more committed to academic freedom, to the advancement of knowledge, than they were to financial profit. This academic press official communicated an important point: scholarly books don't make money. They are not intended to be a profit center for their universities. Instead, administrators plan on losing money in order to protect their mission of advancing knowledge. Academic freedom demands that university presses place the advance of scholarly knowledge at the center, without pressure for scholars to tailor their words to promote book sales.

The press's concerns over the bottom line also raise deeper questions about how market-based priorities provided cover for content-based censorship. As several scholars would later remark, the book sold out its first three print runs *because* of its thesis around Jews, race, and racism. The "New Preface," then, if anything, would have promoted book sales, since it would continue speaking to the very audience already interested in, and buying, the book. If boosting book sales was going to enter the academic publishing equation, it should have encouraged inclusion of the "New Preface."

So why did the press fear that publishing the “New Preface” would harm future book sales? Why would a good-selling book all of a sudden reverse its sales numbers? Because the identities of the peer reviewers as well as their written reports remain hidden, we don’t know. One could conclude that the book’s thesis, accepted in the initial anonymous review process, did not land as well on a different pair of academics selected to comment on the “New Preface.” Perhaps one reviewer’s treasure is another reviewer’s trash. If this proved to be the case, then it’s all the more reason to platform scholarly debate by publishing it. In some kind of irony, it seems, the press may have permitted the individual concerns of an anonymous reviewer to censor the very content that could have increased its profits.

Since the “New Preface” was not going to be a part of the book, and honoring the press’s view that it would land better as an op-ed, I suggested that the press publish it as an opinion piece in the Brandeis University–sponsored alumni magazine. This compromise proposal brought the issue of academic freedom into focus yet again. Was the decision not to publish the “New Preface” a legitimate act of scholarly critique or was it rooted in an attempt to squelch discussion of white supremacy and Jews of color? If the professional staff at the press believed that the “New Preface” deserved publication, though not in a scholarly book, then this compromise addressed those concerns. The press refused to pitch the idea to the magazine, claiming it rarely enjoyed success in such proposals. More and more, it seemed the press objected to the content itself, refusing to help advance the words into print, regardless of format.

Next, I asked the press leadership for permission to share the “New Preface” with four of the leading scholars in the field, hoping it would bring a reconsideration. As I wrote to the press after their reviews arrived, “The response has been overwhelming, both in the depth of the commentary and the intellectual and professional upset about what has transpired.” Two scholars criticized the “New Preface” for not going far enough. One offered that the piece was actually “too scholarly” and failed to adequately call out Jewish complicity in systemic racism today. The other asked me “to go further than you already have” in the critique. One

reviewer wrote, "I also appreciate your candor about how you might have rewritten certain pieces with the insights you've gained from conversations with Jews of Color." Another described the press's call for a more scholarly new preface "absurd," sending a separate unsolicited email with just four words: "I would fight this."

Most of the feedback centered on the press's use of anonymous peer reviewers and its willingness to reverse its publication decision as a result. This "smacks of outside political pressure which is itself unconscionable," one wrote, while another reflected that it was "totally unprofessional from an ostensibly independent, academic, intellectually committed press."⁹ Playing on both gender and seniority, several reviewers called for broad discourse in the field, the academy, and beyond. They encouraged me to continue pushing back. Scholars without the protection of tenure as well as faculty of color and women face a more challenging professional environment should this occur to them.

Compiling comments into an email report, I submitted the feedback to the press, concluding with the following paragraph:

I am convinced that the press erred in its decision not to print the New Preface. As I stated in an earlier email, I believe that we are at an inflection point in our profession. It seems to me that the anonymous reviewer(s) critiques reveal a pedagogy that's no longer accepted in the field. The line between scholarship and politics, especially on a book in political history, cannot be easily separated. The identity categories of the author, especially if it's a white author writing on Black Power, matter. That the press has applied this scholarly standard to a non-scholarly new preface is also problematic. Ironically, the call to make the New Preface more scholarly and less political is itself a political act, especially when it's done in the shadows. I ask that you reconsider your decision not to publish the New Preface.¹⁰

⁹ Email to the author from the Brandeis University Press editorial director, November 30, 2020.

¹⁰ Email from the author, November 30, 2020.

Since the print edition of the book was, by now, in production, I asked the press to add the “New Preface” to the electronic edition of the book, along with a promise that they would include it in the print edition should it sell out its current run. In a short reply, the press refused the offer, writing, “We are very sorry that you feel that your views and those of the press are divergent.” Then, the press proposed “that we sell through the reprint and then revert the rights to you so that you can publish the book in the way that you think fit.” Their unsolicited return of the book rights landed as a doubling-down in their abandonment of academic freedom. Given the choice between publishing the “New Preface” or walking away from the entire book, the press chose the latter. Releasing the rights to the book, it seemed, proved an easier pill to swallow than seeing the “New Preface” in print, under the press’s aegis.

With more and more scholars hearing of the unfolding controversy, word leaked to the national Jewish press and led to a feature article in the *Forward*, the national Jewish newspaper of record. While the article focused on the preface’s use of the words “white supremacy,” a topic of keen interest for many of the newspaper’s readers, media coverage of the controversy escalated academic freedom concerns. In the quotes it provided to the newspaper, the press fired a warning shot across academia’s bow: challenge the internal review procedures and risk public, professional, and personal retaliation.¹¹

Even though the decision to reject the “New Preface” occurred before any opportunity for a rewrite, news coverage reported that “the directors of the press see an author who refused to accept constructive criticism.” A press official, after boasting of a “long track record at Brandeis of publishing cutting-edge research in a wide range of fields,” concluded that “the only thing we’re uncomfortable with is bad scholarship,” implying that the “New Preface” fit that description. Another press official characterized the “New Preface” as “not only wrong but deeply hurtful” before accusing scholars critical of the press’s decision of engaging in cancel culture, bullying, and “doing great harm.” At its worst,

¹¹ Ari Feldman, “Brandeis U. Press and a Historian Split over How to Talk about Jews and White Supremacy.”

and in a public challenge to my emotional stability, the press concluded that my decision to challenge its decision could only have occurred since I was “under a great deal of pressure.”¹²

This public rebuke landed on scholars who feared the implicit message it was sending to more vulnerable faculty. As several female colleagues related to me (privately), if this is what happens to a senior white male colleague who dares challenge the system, can you imagine what it would be like for the rest of us? An untenured colleague, reflecting on her own race-themed manuscript-in-progress, communicated simply, “They’re not ready for me yet.”

Samira Mehta, assistant professor in the department of Women and Gender Studies and the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, wrote a piercing analysis of the racial and gender power dynamics play in an as-yet unpublished article. “When *The Forward* article came out,” she wrote, “my social media feed was filled with Jewish Studies scholars condemning Brandeis University Press for their actions. I remained quiet, not because I do not care, but because I have been hesitating about whether to say anything and if I spoke, what to say about the piece, especially given my own experiences of persistent racism in Jewish Studies as a field.”

Mehta, a finalist for a National Jewish Book Award and a full-time academic at a major research university, should have little reason to fear for her professional future. On these matters, she enjoys strong institutional support on her campus. Yet she wonders about her future in the academy “if we cannot, as scholars, talk about Jews and white supremacy at the historical distance of 50 years.” With this episode, Mehta argues, “Brandeis’s decision means that there is one less press for junior scholars who are working on race issues, at a time when resources are shrinking overall. It also means that junior scholars working on race need to worry that if they do responsible work examining overlapping privilege and power they risk being marginalized in the field.”

Interrogating the gender and racial power dynamics at play, Mehta noted that this experience did not bring me professional harm and in fact

¹² Feldman, “Brandeis U. Press and a Historian.”

raised my public profile. Several other academic presses made unsolicited offers to publish the book with its “New Preface” included. “The fact that this is going well for him,” Mehta notes, “is a mark of his privilege—the earned privilege of his academic reputation but more importantly the privilege of a white Jewish man in Jewish Studies. Other scholars, junior scholars, women scholars, scholars of color, would likely not fare so well.” At her most blunt, Mehta concluded, “If a senior scholar with all of the white, male, ‘Ashkenormative’ privilege of Marc Dollinger finds himself censored as a bad scholar for how he represents white supremacy and Jews, his example tells me that I certainly cannot do that work as a relatively junior scholar who is a Brown, female, Jew-by-Choice.”

This is the greatest threat to academic freedom. When presses are able to make examples out of the most-protected scholars, it sends a clear message to everyone else in the academy: keep quiet, don’t complain, and leave the abusive power structures in place. When future manuscripts sent for anonymous peer review center on issues of racism and white supremacy, and include the lived experiences of people of color, academia’s ability to publish quality scholarship faces increased threat, and academic freedom faces its biggest test

After publication of the news article, a group of nine leading scholars issued a public no-confidence letter to the press. “The role of scholarship is to use critical tools of research and interpretation to open conversations, not shut them down . . . ,” they wrote. “We are reliant on responsible editors who value academic freedom, even when our scholarship puts forward challenging or new ideas.” They concluded that “the press has vacated its responsibility to its author, our field, and the public. Our trust in the Brandeis University Press has been eroded.”¹³

In response, the press wrote that it was “happy to report that for the first time in its history, Brandeis University Press as an independent university press has a new academic editorial board . . . to review the present situation and Brandeis University Press’s procedures more

¹³ Kelman et al., “Open Letter.”

generally. We will be looking closely at the role of series editors, the peer review process, and the author-editor revision process.”¹⁴

The academic editorial board investigation gives Brandeis University Press the opportunity to reaffirm the importance of academic freedom and the vital role university presses play in its protection. By recognizing the errors it made and instituting guardrails to ensure they never happen again, Brandeis University Press could start to regain the trust and confidence it has lost in this process. More important, it could become, once again, a locus point for critical debate on the most important social issues of the day.

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¹⁴ Ramin and Fried, “Brandeis University Press Is Fully Committed to Open Debate.”