

Director's Report | January 31, 2017

Orwell's *1984* has become a best-seller. Reversing the date from the year he wrote it: 1948 – Orwell depicts the dystopic future of never-ending war. But that extension of the Cold War does not speak to the malaise that sits like a fog over Columbia these days. In his January 29 letter to the University, President Bollinger writes of the origin of this fog: “As I have said on many occasions, it is critically important that the University, as such, not take stands on ideological or political issues. Yet it is also true that the University, as an institution in the society, must step forward to object when policies and state action conflict with its fundamental values, and especially when they bespeak *purposes and a mentality that are at odds with our basic mission.*” (my italics).

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* comes a lot closer to where we are today. In this vision of the near future, firemen are state agents ordered to set fires, ordered to burn remaining caches of hidden books wherever they are found. Everyone has walls of real-time video links to the State's media. War is in the past, nothing much at all is in the future. The book ends though, with a precious vision: men and women, young and old, flee into the woods, each having memorized a single book. Together they form a moving, renewable, living library. This is all they can do but it is not nothing: they embody what they value.

We know no one at Columbia who is not upset, chronically and deeply, since the election. We know this is true of the Administration, and the President's letter certainly embodies this distress. We know it is true of our students, and the cluster of suicides this month can have no other meaning. But what of ourselves and our colleagues; that is, what of the faculty? When I was a member of the administration about 30 years ago Isidore Rabi told me the following story. Rabi was in Low's Faculty room to hear the newly arrived President of the University, Dwight Eisenhower, give his inaugural talk to the faculty as a whole. Eisenhower averred that the faculty were the most important employees of the University. Rabi raised his hand, stood up and said “Mr. President, we are not employees of the University; we are the University.”

How can we, the faculty and colleagues of the University seminars, properly respond to this need to protect what the University values, with a sense of full obligation? In *Spectator* an anonymous student tells of his or her suffering in these days, and quotes Cornell West to ask that we all do better at expressing “radical tenderness and militant kindness.” That's my agenda for us today and for now.

I am pleased to announce that at the meeting of the Advisory Board two days after President Bollinger's letter was sent to us all, Board members unanimously voted to form a new University Seminar so that they could begin a series of private conversations amongst themselves on how the Seminars might best continue to be wellsprings of radical tenderness and militant kindness for our members, and for the many larger communities to which the 3000 members of our 90 Seminars contribute.

As a member – but not the Chair! – of this new Seminar, I look forward to these discussions. I hope that each of you will take the time to send the new Seminar's Chair, CUNY Professor George Andreopoulos - also the Chair of the Human Rights Seminar – your thoughts about how our office might best help to preserve and protect these fundamental values in these difficult times.



Bob Pollack
Director, The University Seminars