UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy

The Challenge to University Autonomy in an Illiberal Era:

Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Ben Zdencanovic and David N. Myers*

with the assistance of Dr. Rose Campbell, Prof. Eddie Cole, and Cecelia Fischer

*** Dr. Ben Zdencanovic is a Postdoctoral Associate at the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy**
Prof. David N. Myers directs the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy

studying change to make change

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the unprecedented scale and scope of political interference in higher education by the Trump administration, including the August 8, 2025, Department of Justice ultimatum to the University of California seeking $1 billion in penalties and sweeping policy changes at UCLA. Our report situates this moment within the longer U.S. history of state pressure on universities, from the late-19th century through the McCarthy era, the Vietnam War protests, and into the present-day wave of global illiberalism. Drawing on historical precedents in the United States and international case studies from Hungary, India, and Turkey, we contextualize the current existential threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. We conclude with strategies to safeguard academic freedom, secure independent funding, strengthen legislative protections, and mobilize public support for the essential civic role of higher education.

Historical Precedents in the United States

- Pre-WWII: The 1894 Richard T. Ely case at the University of Wisconsin.
- WWI & the Red Scare: The Espionage and Sedition Acts.
- Post-WWII McCarthyism: The UC loyalty oath crisis of 1949–51.
- Vietnam War Era: Angela Davis.

Global Illiberal Context

- Hungary
- India
- Turkey

Recommendations for Strategies

- Reaffirm and defend academic freedom.
- Engage state and local allies to safeguard institutional independence.
- Pursue legislative protections against ideological interference.
- Cultivate private philanthropic support to offset political funding risks.
- Forge domestic and international academic alliances to share best practices.
- Educate the public about the civic and economic value of higher education.
- Expand outreach and public education on democracy, authoritarianism, and free expression.
- Engage in self-examination and promote open debate within institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report appears at a critical juncture in the history of higher education in the United States, and particularly, of UCLA. On August 8, 2025, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a memorandum to the University of California (UC), seeking over $1 billion to restore $584 million in federal research funding for UCLA. The Trump administration had previously frozen the research funds for what it said was the university's "acting with deliberate indifference in creating a hostile educational environment for Jewish and Israeli students" following the protests of spring 2024. The proposal also demanded sweeping changes in university policy related to student protests, gender identity in sports, and admissions preferences and scholarships based on race and ethnicity.

The ultimatum to UCLA comes in the wake of settlements from several elite private universities accused of permitting antisemitism on campus, including $221 million from Columbia University and $50 million from Brown University. But the amount demanded of UCLA is by far the largest yet in the Trump administration's ongoing assault on institutions of higher learning. In response to the DOJ's memorandum, newly-installed UC president James B. Milliken said in a statement that "a payment of this scale would completely devastate our country's greatest public university system as well as inflict great harm on our students and all Californians."

Never before has an American presidential administration expressed and sought to act as expansively on its antipathy to institutions of higher education, which the administration casts as elitist bastions of "wokeness" that should be brought to heel. The administration's weaponization of antisemitism, in particular, has been channeled into explicit demands that place in jeopardy hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars in research funding. The threat of losing such vital resources has placed universities across the country, including UCLA, in a precarious position: either they submit to financial settlements imposed by the DOJ, which may include attempts to limit university autonomy and academic freedom, or they refuse to submit and risk fiscal disaster.

While the present-day threat is perhaps without precedent in its scale, this is not the first time that U.S. state actors have sought to intervene in the affairs of universities and impose restrictions on established practices or even the right to free speech. In Parts I and II, we discuss two eras in the history of the United States (pre- and post-WWII) in which there were attempts to restrict free speech in our nation's universities. Alongside this historical survey, we offer in Part III a brief comparative perspective on the contemporary moment of global illiberalism, in which universities in Hungary, India, and Turkey–among others–have been subjected to heavy-handed measures to restrict their academic freedom and capacity to make critical decisions on personnel, curriculum, and intellectual priorities.

These cases remind us that threats to universities are not unknown in our country or abroad. Both in the past and in the present moment, political actors have attempted to impose their will on institutions of higher education and transform them into tools to advance a certain political agenda. What can be done? At the end of the report, we offer a number of strategies to help institutions of higher education navigate the tight and often terrifying straits in which they find themselves today.

II. EXTERNAL PRESSURES IN THE U.S. PRIOR TO WWII

An early episode of external pressure on academic freedom in the United States occurred at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the 1890s, involving prominent economist Richard T. Ely. A Professor of Political Economy and a founder of the American Economic Association, Ely had built a national reputation for promoting progressive views on questions of labor, poverty, and agricultural economics (in what is known as the "Progressive Era" in U.S. history). Ely's politics drew the ire of many conservatives in the Wisconsin state government, including Oliver Elwin Wells, the recently elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Incensed by Ely's support for local unionization efforts, Wells pressured University of Wisconsin President Charles Kendall Adams and the Board of Regents to remove Ely from his teaching position. In 1894, Wells published a scathing open letter (originally published in *The Nation* and later republished nationally) denouncing the "attacks upon life and property... from the colleges, libraries, and lecture rooms" of the University of Wisconsin.

Richard T. Ely, professor of economics, political science, and history at the University of Wisconsin, c. 1910. The UW–Madison Collection (S04065), University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives.

The national attention on Ely prompted the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents to launch an investigation. The Regents, however, found that it would be against the interests of the state of Wisconsin to dismiss a scholar "even if some of his opinions should, in some quarters, be regarded as visionary." Such an action, the Regents determined, "would be equivalent to saying that no professor should teach anything which is not accepted by everybody as true." In addition to clearing Ely, the Regents articulated what came to be known as the "Wisconsin Idea": that "the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead," and furthermore, that the university "should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found." In this early test, the Wisconsin Regents delivered a crucial precedent in protecting academic freedom from politicized external interference.

However, the World War I era, which marked some of the most sustained and far-reaching suppression of civil liberties and free speech in United States history, would be another turning point for government pressure on academic freedom. Amid wartime fears of homefront disloyalty and domestic espionage, especially at the hands of "enemy aliens" and the foreign-born, Congress passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918. Together, the two Acts banned "treasonous" print matter and made it a crime to "utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the United States and its government. Over 2,000 people were prosecuted under the two Acts, particularly socialists, pacifists, anarchists, and other political radicals.

Although the Espionage and Sedition Acts are today best remembered for the prosecution of prominent political activists such as socialist Eugene Debs and anarchist Emma Goldman, the Acts also had a profound impact on American universities and academic freedom. Dozens of academics were dismissed from their posts for alleged pro-German or pacifist ideological beliefs, and several others were indicted under the Acts themselves. One of the most notable examples is that of pacifist and unorthodox economist Scott Nearing. Denied tenure at the University of Pennsylvania on political grounds in 1915 and fired from the University of Toledo in 1917 for his participation in the American Union Against Militarism, Nearing was arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act for espousing pacifist views. While he was later found not guilty at trial, the case marked the end of Nearing's academic career.

Radical economist Scott Nearing, November 6, 1915. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-82851).

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), founded in 1915, took the first steps toward formally codifying principles of academic freedom in its founding document, "Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure." Upon the entry of the United States into World War I, however, the AAUP succumbed to the pressures of the wartime atmosphere and retracted its unqualified support for academic freedom. "We have to recognize that some things are just at present vastly more important than is academic freedom," said A.A. Young, committee chairperson of the AAUP. In a 1918 report on academic freedom during wartime, the AAUP concluded that important exceptions included incidents of disobedience to wartime laws and encouragement of draft evasion, and called on German academics in the United States to avoid making statements on the war.

Following a period of continued repression in the post-World War I "Red Scare," academic freedom in the United States underwent a period of relative recovery and growth in the interwar years. Controversies remained on campuses over the teaching of topics such as evolution and critiques of corporate power in the Great Depression, but the AAUP and other organizations became increasingly vocal in their support for academic freedom. Nevertheless, by the end of World War II, academic freedom had survived more as an aspiration than a codified set of standards.

III. EXTERNAL PRESSURES POST-WWII: FROM ANTI-COMMUNISM TO ANTI-WAR PROTEST

The “Second Red Scare” after World War II was another major turning point in the history of external political pressure on universities. A crucial early test of academic freedom in the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War involved loyalty oaths at the University of California in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The California State legislature’s Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities (also known as the Tenney Committee) led a campaign to root out alleged communist subversives in state institutions, including the University of California system. In response to pressure from the legislature (including threats to cut university funding and budgets), UC President Robert Sproul and the UC Board of Regents instituted a mandatory loyalty oath for faculty in 1949. The oath required all faculty to affirm not only allegiance to the Constitution of the United States and California, but also to declare that they were not members of the Communist Party.

The loyalty oath requirement sparked a wave of resistance from faculty, culminating in the dismissal or resignation of 39 professors and 84 staff members who viewed the oath as a First Amendment violation and refused to sign on principle. Fifty-five courses were canceled due to a lack of teaching personnel, and the UC’s reputation suffered as several leading universities and academic professional associations vocally condemned the measure. In 1951, the California Court of Appeals ordered the dismissed faculty to be reinstated, but the episode set an important precedent for legislative threats to academic freedom and faculty governance.

“Non-signers of the Loyalty Oath — University of California Regents’ Meeting (August 25, 1950).” California Loyalty Oath Digital Collection (BANC PIC 1959.010--NEG, Part 2, Box 36, [34107.05]), Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

As opposition to the Vietnam War escalated in the 1960s, California and the University of California system became a national epicenter of student activism (especially UC Berkeley). The California state legislature, dominated by Republicans during much of this period, viewed student protests not as legitimate political expression but as subversive, unpatriotic threats to public order and state authority. Conservatives in Sacramento introduced a series of bills calling for harsh penalties for student demonstrators and the expansion of police powers on public university campuses.

California Governor Ronald Reagan, elected in 1966 on a platform that included an emphasis on "law and order" and a crackdown on campus unrest, moved swiftly to assert greater control over the University of California. Reagan slashed university funding, added new members to the Board of Regents in order to remove UC President Clark Kerr, demanded the firing of faculty perceived as radical, and deployed the National Guard and highway patrol officers to quash protests. The most notorious use of public force against student demonstrators was during the 1969 People's Park demonstrations in Berkeley, where state forces used tear gas and live ammunition on protestors, resulting in the death of one student and the injury of many others.

"Mayor Samuel W. Yorty surrounded by UCLA students who oppose Yorty's support of the Vietnam War, Los Angeles, Calif., 1966," photograph by Bruce H. Cox, March 26, 1966, Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection (uclalat_1429_b571_232176), Department of Special Collections, UCLA Library.

Among the most egregious examples of external political pressure on academic freedom under the Reagan governorship was the termination from the UCLA faculty of Angela Davis, an outspoken Black revolutionary and radical feminist. After Davis was offered a one-year appointment in the UCLA philosophy department in 1969, her politically radical background quickly became the subject of intense controversy. An exposé in the student paper *The Daily Bruin* (later revealed to be planted by an undercover FBI agent) outed her as a Communist Party member. The *San Francisco Examiner* followed with a story on Davis's involvement with the radical Black Panther Party. Soon after, California Governor Ronald Reagan intervened directly, pressuring the University of California Regents to terminate Davis's appointment.

"Angela Davis and Professor Donald Kalish, Los Angeles, 1969," October 7, 1966, Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection (uclamss_1429_b638_261055), Department of Special Collections, UCLA Library.

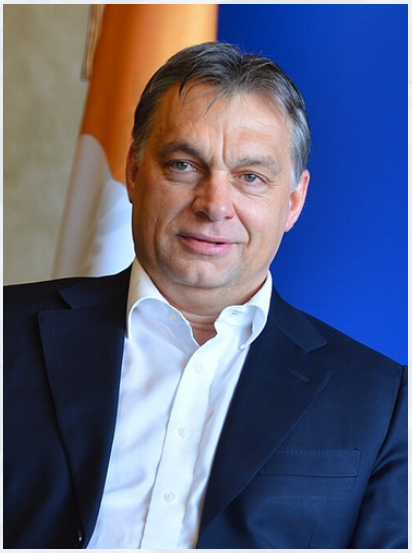
Despite opposition from UCLA Chancellor Charles E. Young and UC President Charles Hitch, and despite the academic senate's vocal defense of Davis's rights and qualifications, the Regents intensified their efforts to remove Davis from the UCLA faculty. As legal challenges and faculty support thwarted their attempts to fire Davis on the grounds of Communist Party membership alone, the Regents instead focused on allegedly inflammatory statements in Davis' public speeches. Ultimately, the Regents were successful in blocking her reappointment for a second year. In a 1971 report, the AAUP concluded that the Regents' motivations for removing Davis were politically motivated, and that Reagan and other state officials had applied strong and undue pressure on the university to eliminate what they saw as a politically (and racially) dangerous figure.

IV. EXTERNAL PRESSURES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SPHERE: THREE CASE STUDIES

During the dark days of Nazi and fascist control of Europe, universities were subjected to obtrusive interventions by the state, which set strict limits on who could teach, who was eligible to be a student, and what was to be taught. A few short months after Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany, the new regime set in place the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service in April 1933, which banned all non-Aryans from holding university professorships. What followed in the coming years was the elimination of Jews from any position in higher education and the penetration of Nazi propaganda into every corner of the university's functioning. This subordination of German universities, once the world's best, to Nazi norms is perhaps the most egregious institutional and moral failing of a higher educational system in history.

1. HUNGARY

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary example of a government-led assault on the autonomy and integrity of universities outside of the United States is Hungary. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who has been in office since 2009, has been a global leader in promoting what he calls "illiberal democracy," a political project that embraces an ethnocentric nationalist agenda which takes aim at institutions and individuals who fail to meet an ideological litmus test. In this regard, Orbán's regime has targeted Hungarian universities as bastions of liberalism and "wokeness" that must be brought under its control.

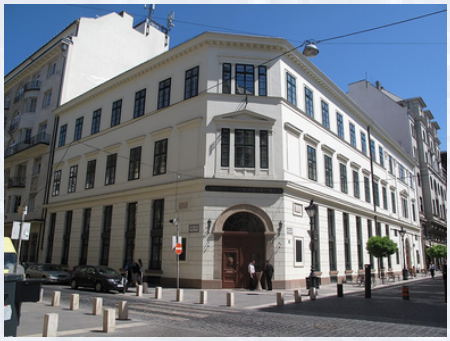


Viktor Orbán, January 11, 2013. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

One of the most notable acts of constriction of higher education in Hungary was aimed at foreign universities in Hungary. The parliamentary act of 2017 forced the Central European University—founded and financed by one of Orbán's enemies, George Soros—to move its degree programs from Budapest to a new campus in Vienna in 2018. That decision was later declared in 2020 to be a violation of European Union law by the European Court of Justice.

A second assault on university autonomy was the government decision in 2018 to remove Gender Studies from the list of accredited subjects at Hungarian universities. The effect was to shut down courses and programs in this field as of 2019. One of the declared rationales for the decision, as explained by Orbán's chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, was that "(t)he Hungarian government is of the clear view that people are born either men or women. They lead their lives the way they think best, but beyond this, the Hungarian state does not wish to spend public funds on education in this area."

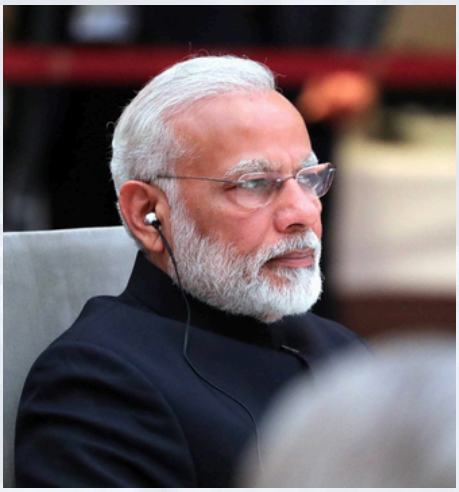
A third assault on free speech occurred in the passing of a parliamentary statute in 2021, at Orbán's behest, to transfer control of eleven universities to private foundations whose members were appointed by Orbán. This "foundationalizaton" of Hungarian universities has had the effect of placing supporters of Orbán in charge while diminishing the independence of these institutions. It has also placed financial control of universities in the hands of Orbán's allies.



The Central European University in Budapest in 2011. Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

2. INDIA

India is also a key site where the government has placed increasingly tight ideological strictures on universities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been in office since 2014, has sought to integrate the ideals of his right-wing Hindu party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), into the sprawling Indian university system. As a result, the international Academic Freedom Index placed India 156th out of 179 countries in its 2025 report, citing the power of "anti-pluralist" political forces in limiting freedom of expression and academic freedom.



Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, July 7, 2017. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Among the steps taken by the Modi government were:

- Restrictions on the right of university-based academics, as state employees, to criticize the government. In 2018, the University Grants Commission informed universities that the Central Civil Services Conduct Rules of 1964 would apply to its staff: the Rules prohibit government employees, including university staff, from "mak(ing) any statement of fact or opinion which has the effect of an adverse criticism of any current or recent policy of the central government or a state government."

- The appointment of university vice-chancellors and professors according to the degree of their ideological conformity with the BJP; the selection of vice-chancellors has been made without consulting university staff or requiring any academic background for the candidates.

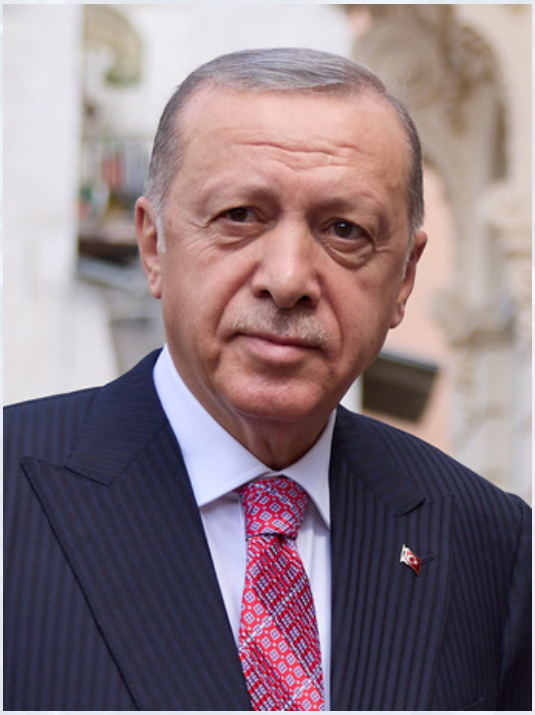
- Efforts to yoke curricula, syllabi, and textbooks to a Hindu nationalist agenda. For example, in 2018, the Modi government appointed a committee to draft history textbooks that advanced the proposition that "Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago, and…that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact not myth."

3. TURKEY

The regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has served as president of Turkey since 2014, has followed the general trend of illiberal governments around the world by imposing ideologically compatible personnel and ideas on universities in that country. A major impetus to restrictions on universities—and Turkish civil society more generally—was the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016, in the aftermath of which he and allies acted in dramatic fashion.

Among the actions directed against Turkish universities and academics were:

- The forced resignation of more than 1500 university deans.
- The firing of tens of thousands of university employees, including more than 6000 academics (some of whom were critical of Turkish military action against the Kurdish minority before the coup).
- The shuttering of 15 private universities.
- The granting of the authority to the President to appoint university rectors and to forego academic qualifications in making appointments.
- An amendment to the law of higher education in December 2016 that subjected faculty to draconian restrictions, including a prohibition on "mak(ing) statements or giv(ing) information to the press, news agencies, radio and TV channels" without express authorization.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ukraine on March 15, 2023. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

These examples are but three case studies of a strategy in the toolkit of illiberal politicians to exercise greater thought control over their populations. Universities are key sites of open inquiry, political expression, and well-honed criticism. The illiberal playbook is now being deployed in the United States, with the government taking aim at major institutions across the country, including UCLA. What can be done? The next section offers suggestions for contending with the assault on institutions of higher education, which have been such a significant source of innovation and opportunity in the United States.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVING THE CURRENT MOMENT AND THRIVING IN THE FUTURE

1. Call on political and academic leaders to fortify the principles of academic freedom and the right to free expression for all members of our academic communities. In parallel, academic leaders should resist attempts to marginalize, incarcerate, or deport anyone on the basis of their political beliefs.
2. Mobilize local and state officials to redouble their commitment to institutions of higher education in recognition of the huge economic, cultural, and intellectual benefits that they bring.
3. Propose to state legislatures that they codify protections for academic inquiry and institutional independence, and create legal buffers against external, politically driven interference.
4. Engage our institutions' private philanthropic partners with the aim of fortifying our shared commitment to scholarly innovation and momentum.
5. Build closer links and consortial relations with institutions of higher education at the state, national, and international levels with an eye to sharing best practices in an age of illiberal assault.
6. Undertake an active campaign to educate the broader public on the import of our institutions, what they contribute to the local environment, and how they embody the public good (e.g., by promoting economic growth, innovation, and class mobility).
7. Take our educational resources beyond campus walls to the general public, with open courses devoted to civics, democracy, authoritarianism, and freedom of expression.
8. As academics, we should engage in self-examination about what we do well and what we do not do well with the aim of creating a robust, honest, and passionate arena for debate.

Stay in touch!

Follow us to hear about LCHP activities in the coming year

@ucla.lchp

@ucla.lchp

@LuskinCenterforHistoryPolicy

Luskin Center for History and Policy

luskincenter@history.ucla.edu