

Free Speech, Repugnant Speech (5 Letters)
The New York Times
February 3, 2005

Hamilton College Corrections & Clarifications

	Article	Corrections & Clarifications
1	<p>To the Editor:</p> <p>Re "College Cancels Speech Over 9/11 Remarks" (news article, Feb. 2): The uproar over the scheduling and subsequent cancellation of a speech by Ward Churchill, who wrote an essay in which he disparaged the victims of 9/11, has been wrongly characterized as a dispute over the right of free speech.</p> <p>Mr. Churchill clearly has the right to his views no matter how abhorrent. Instead, the issue should be framed to consider whether or not Hamilton College gives support and legitimacy to his opinions by inviting him to speak.</p> <p>The First Amendment is a treasured right; it must be protected and treated with reverence.</p> <p>Perhaps those who present forums to college students should investigate those who are offered the privilege of speaking, so as to be able in effect to express a collective outrage at those whose opinions, while they are free to make them, do not need to be given a soapbox.</p> <p>Dean R. Brown New York, Feb. 2, 2005</p>	<p>Once Ward Churchill had been invited here, once he had accepted that invitation, this became a matter of free speech. The wisdom of the invitation was no longer the issue; the educational principles of our College were.</p> <p>Free speech inevitably upsets and outrages people. We personally find Churchill's heartless statements about the victims of 9/11 deplorable. But the test of free speech occurs precisely in situations such as these. And we should remember that the views of any and all speakers on a campus are their own.</p>
2	<p>To the Editor:</p> <p>Cancellations of appearances like Prof. Ward Churchill's at Hamilton College invariably provoke protests in the name of freedom of</p>	

	<p>speech and academic freedom.</p> <p>Academics must have the right to speak freely, in and out of the classroom. They also have the obligation to argue their case intelligently, avoiding grossly defamatory labels like "little Eichmanns," applied to the victims inside the World Trade Center on 9/11.</p> <p>Such ill-chosen comparisons debase the language, a process already well established by the 1960's, when some protesters against the Vietnam War compared Lyndon B. Johnson to Hitler and called policemen "fascist pigs."</p> <p>Unless citizens, and especially academics, use properly defined words and carefully chosen comparisons, they cannot profitably communicate with each other. Mr. Churchill's behavior attracts attention and outrage, but it substitutes for a reasoned presentation of any valid arguments he may have. It encourages the belief that he lacks such arguments.</p> <p>In any case, the refusal to give a campus forum to one guilty of such behavior cannot qualify as a denial of academic freedom nor of freedom of speech.</p> <p>Seymour Becker New York, Feb. 2, 2005 <i>The writer is professor emeritus of history at Rutgers University.</i></p>	<p>While we believe firmly in the ability of our students to weigh and distinguish truth from falsehood and to make their own decisions about the validity of ideas, we also respect reason, responsibility, ethics, integrity and decency. According to those standards, there were better choices than Ward Churchill. The invitation having been extended, however, we felt constrained to leave it open lest anyone argue that this College had made less than a full commitment to the principle of free speech.</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>To the Editor:</p> <p>I'm sorry that Ward Churchill will not be speaking at Hamilton College. I took three of his classes at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and I have to say he was by far the best teacher I ever had, not because I agreed with everything he said but because he opened my mind to a whole new world and</p>	

	<p>always encouraged critical thinking.</p> <p>Yes, Mr. Churchill's comments about 9/11 were insulting, but the cancellation of his speech only furthers his hypothesis: The powers that be will always suppress dissenting voices, especially when those dissenting voices challenge the legitimacy of power.</p> <p>I think that he's talking about Gov. George E. Pataki, who spoke out against the remarks and the invitation.</p> <p>John Peabody San Luis Obispo, Calif., Feb. 2, 2005</p>	<p>We agree with former U.S. Senator Adlai Stevenson who once defined a free society as a place where it is safe to be unpopular. But we also agree with Martin Luther King who said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Principles matter, freedom matters, and honesty, decency and sacrifice matter. Silence on any of these is a violation of our fundamental principles and our mission as a place of higher learning. Ultimately, the safety of our students and visitors to the campus superseded Mr. Churchill's right to speak.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>To the Editor:</p> <p>I was disturbed to read that the president of Hamilton College canceled Ward Churchill's talk because of threats.</p> <p>It is one thing for the panelists to cancel. It is quite another for the president to cancel the event to ensure safety.</p> <p>Thanks to the president's decision, those who want to silence controversial speakers on campuses now know what to do: make anonymous threats.</p> <p>That's not a lesson a college should be teaching. Investing in security at the event would have been a wiser decision.</p> <p>Sherryl Kleinman Chapel Hill, N.C., Feb. 2, 2005</p>	<p>Hamilton did its best to protect what we hold dear, the right to speak, think and study freely, but the safety of our students and guests has to be weighed more heavily than anyone's right to speak. At the time the decision was made to cancel the event, there were more than 100 threats of violence directed at Mr. Churchill, Hamilton's President and the College in general. In the case of those directed at the College, law enforcement authorities are investigating five threats that they deem credible. The event was canceled on the recommendation of safety personnel who said they could not ensure the safety of those in attendance.</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>To the Editor:</p> <p>Surely Hamilton College should allow Ward Churchill to speak at the college - and request him to devote the evening to readings from The New York Times's "Portraits of Grief."</p>	<p>In response to public reaction and to our own concerns, we directed the Kirkland Project to create a forum in which to confront Mr. Churchill's views. The panel would have included four speakers, including Churchill and his wife, Natsu</p>

	<p>Anne Mendelson North Bergen, N.J., Feb. 2, 2005</p>	<p>Saito, and Hamilton professors Richard Werner and Philip Klinkner. Speakers' views are, as always, their own. They are independent of the College.</p>
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