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Academic freedom is under fire across the world, from Hong Kong, where the Chinese government's crackdown on open discussion has spurred an exodus of scholars from universities, to the United States, where there is a rising tide of anti-intellectualism and assaults on free inquiry. The effort to undermine this cornerstone of American democracy has been driven by former President Trump and his administration, members of Congress, state governors, and legislators. Alas, it also comes from faculty and students on the ideological right and left, and even from some presidents of the country's research universities. These are powerful forces that must be overcome.

The defense of academic freedom is never easy because the university is not a cloister and is no more a safe space from criticism or conflict than the society at large. Thus, there will be unpopular opinions expressed in scholarly research and in the classroom. But it is often unpopular opinions that shift paradigms, fell orthodoxies, and advance knowledge and inquiry to new levels of achievement. As the Kalven Committee stated in its 1967 report on the university's role in political and social action in the United States, "a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting." De facto speech codes, the idea of "privileged knowledge," and weaponizing misunderstood concepts such as "critical race theory" all limit research on political grounds and threaten academic inquiry from within its own environment. To cancel speeches, to sanction students or faculty for their views, to protect oneself from the upsetting ideas and language that are encountered in great texts and novels may "purify" universities but only by diminishing them. American academician Robert Hutchins, perhaps the greatest defender of academic freedom, said that the problem with witch hunts was "not how many faculty would be fired for their beliefs, but how many who think they might be..."

The university has a central role in the growth of knowledge, the exposure of students to diverse thoughts and differing views, and the preparation of a next generation for civic life. If that role is being undermined from outside or even within the university, its leaders should rise to its defense, even if it means jeopardizing their own jobs, or removing those leaders who are a threat. It is a public principle worth defending at a high personal cost. When called for, such courageous action will educate the public and legislators on the importance of academic freedom. (F: Parti estratte dall'articolo di Science)