Lack of Consensus About Free Speech on Campus Is a Virtue

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To the Editor:

I find the title of Geoff Shullenberger article, “[War and the Collapse of the Campus Speech Consensus](https://www.chronicle.com/article/war-and-the-collapse-of-the-campus-speech-consensus)” (*The Chronicle Review,* November 9), ironic. I doubt that we will ever achieve a consensus on the value and scope of free speech on colleges campuses. In a liberal democracy, like ours, that is a virtue rather than a vice. Having a consensus on this contestable issue will stale our political debates. We need to learn how to live with it to enhance our political pluralism, provided a speech does not incite violence against specific individuals or groups.

I commend Shullenberger for unmasking a presupposition underlying the present controversy. On the surface, the issue is camouflaged as “free speech,” but deep down it is primarily a political issue framed on Carl Schmitt’s infamous friend-enemy distinction leaving no room for adversaries with whom we may respectfully disagree. Those on my side, e.g., be they pro-Palestinians or pro-Israelis, are my friends and hence deserve to be heard, but those opposed to me are my enemies and hence must be “canceled.” Ulrich Baer’s tentative solution to restrict speech by those belonging to a privileged group who use it to dehumanize others seems a nonstarter. Debates on freedom of speech are not about who has the high moral ground to speak and for whom, but having the right to express one’s opinion even when it is offensive and potentially harmful to others. Given the controversial nature of freedom of speech, college administrators should err on the side of more rather than less of it.

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