

The
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Robert J. Zimmer
Chancellor, University of Chicago

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Webinar

Moderator: Lee C. Bollinger
President, Columbia University

Introduction

President Barbara Van Allen

Okay, good morning and welcome to the 633rd meeting of The Economic Club of New York in its 114th year. I'm Barbara Van Allen President and CEO of the Club. As many of you know, The Economic Club of New York is the nation's leading nonpartisan forum for discussions on economic, social and political issues, and our mission is as important today as ever as we continue to bring people together as a catalyst for civil conversation and innovation. A special welcome to members of the ECNY 2021 Class of Fellows.

This is a select group of diverse, rising, next-gen business thought leaders. We're also pleased to welcome students from the Gabelli School of Business at NYU, the Columbia Business School, the CUNY Graduate Center, and Rutgers University.

It's a pleasure for me to welcome our special guest today, the Chancellor of the University of Chicago, Robert Zimmer. Bob served as President of the University of Chicago from 2006 to 2021, before transitioning to the role of Chancellor and was also granted the title of President Emeritus of the Board of Trustees.

As Chancellor, Bob focuses on the continuation and evolution of strategic initiatives of the university, reinforcing the enduring values of the university and its distinctive approach to research, education, and impact, continuing key relationships of the

university that span many aspects of university life and work and advancing high-level fundraising.

Bob was also a University of Chicago faculty member and administrator for more than two decades, specializing in the mathematical fields of geometry, and I'd name all the subsets of that, but I'm not sure I can even pronounce them correctly. As University of Chicago administrator, he served as Chairman of the Mathematics Department, Deputy Provost, and Vice President for Research and for the Argonne National Laboratory. He also served as Provost of Brown University from 2002 to 2006.

Today's program will be a conversation, and we're fortunate to have Club member and President of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger. Lee is Columbia's first Seth Low Professor of the University, a member of the Columbia Law School faculty, and one of the nation's foremost First Amendment scholars. For this event, we'll be using the chat box so you can enter questions directly into the chat box for consideration. We will end promptly at 10:45. As a reminder, this conversation is on the record. We do have some national media on the line. Gentlemen, it is just an honor to have this conversation happen here at the Economic Club. Without any further ado, Lee, I'm going to turn the mike over to you.

Conversation with Robert J. Zimmer

LEE BOLLINGER: Thank you very much, Barbara. Bob, it's a real pleasure to be with you. You know we've served simultaneously in great institutions and have known each other through that and have experienced the great joys of these institutions and our roles and the really tough parts, which are frequent, and so it's really a pleasure to be with you.

So I want to guide you into the point in time when the University of Chicago issued the statement – I think it was 2014 – about free speech on campus, academic freedom and the like. There have been many moments in the history of the University of Chicago where these questions about what does free speech mean on a great research university campus. There have been many moments in the history of the University of Chicago where this has happened. But this was a very, very important moment and you spoke to it and I want to draw you into trying to describe what was happening then, what led to this statement, and what was the process?

So just to set the stage a little bit, the University of Chicago, Columbia University are private universities. And for purposes of the First Amendment, that means that we are free to – in theory – decide our own rules about freedom of speech. We don't have to comply with the First Amendment jurisprudence because we're private institutions.

That's different for the University of Michigan, where I was for many years, or Berkeley, University of California. Public universities are constrained by the First Amendment.

So we're talking about institutions and what you've done, Bob, is, in a sense, a choice that the institution can make. That's really, really important. The second thing to note is that these questions about free speech are very complicated because the rules for faculty are not exactly the same as the rules of the game for students. And then you have outside speakers who are invited in or guests or people who are honored, and all of these, and then you have also people living on our campuses. So there's a private kind of realm and a public realm and an academic realm, classrooms and research. So we're little cities in a sense and we have to figure out free speech for that world. So with all of that, Bob, tell us what happened at the University of Chicago and what led to the statement officially by you about free speech.

ROBERT ZIMMER: Well, this was a period when we were starting to see many universities dis-invite speakers because some segment of the university community thought they were bad and shouldn't be allowed to speak. And I felt that this was totally counter to the longstanding culture of the University of Chicago and that we could not let that sort of activity gain any momentum or even any presence at the University of Chicago.

Now, even though it was deeply embedded in the culture and one could go back and point to precedents, there was no clear statement of any formality that was a statement of principle on which to stand. And I think these things are very important and that the, you know, if you don't have a clarity of principle on which you're standing, then it can look like you're just acting, well, I'd like this rather than that, and that's not very useful for a university community. So I wanted a clear statement of principle.

We had one in a related way which was called the Kalven Principles, which was based on a faculty report written by law school professor, Harry Kalven, with the committee, but he was the chair of the committee. And that was a related matter, but not identical and so it didn't apply except in spirit. And that report had to do with the university taking positions other than things that were germane to the university as an institution. So political positions, for example, were not something that we do and that was clearly spelled out and why in the Kalven Report. And so I felt we needed a report like that, that that report wasn't directly speaking to the points that I was concerned that we would face because many others had faced it. And so I felt we needed a new, needed an additional report.

So the provost and I appointed a faculty committee, chaired by your good friend and mine, Jeff Stone, who – for those who don't know – likely is a distinguished First Amendment scholar, and there was a committee of maybe six or seven people from

around the university. And the charge to the committee was interesting. It wasn't what do we think about this? The charge was the university has a longstanding culture and commitment to free expression, articulate this and why. I mean articulate the university's position on this rather than, well, here's an interesting problem. Think about it and make up an answer.

So they did that and they did it very well and beautifully. And that report became a basis for our actions, which was making it very clear that we're not disinviting people. And where it came up, I mean let me say one thing about the reason for this because you mentioned the First Amendment, so it's not to comply with the First Amendment as you pointed out, but it was based, as articulated in the committee report and as many people at the university said over and over again, it has to do with the nature of what we believe is a great education and what we believe is a great research environment. And that demands that faculty and students are free to think and free to think independently. And as with everything, you need to practice.

So the idea of engaging in ongoing argument, discussion, listening to different perspectives, challenging others' assumptions, challenging your own assumptions, often the hardest part for people of course, that this was critical to providing an empowering education for students. And by empowering, what I mean is that they're going to go out into the world as independent thinkers who are going to confront difficult

problems. Whether it's social problems, personal problems, financial problems, they're going to need to think and to think independently and know how to do that. And providing that kind of education was something that we were committed to.

And similarly, for a faculty research environment, you need to have the capacity to think independently. Some people think this is only involved with social issues, but I will tell you, as a mathematician who headed off in a rather different direction than most people at the time – at the time I was writing my dissertation – that most people in that general area were headed off, it was very important, I saw and experienced firsthand the importance of an environment that supported independent thinking. And so our position is that as part of this education and research mission, faculty are free to invite who they want to and student, registered student groups, are free to invite who they want to. And just because somebody else doesn't like it, it doesn't matter. They can invite who they want to hear.

So this came up almost immediately because Luigi Zingales, who is a very distinguished professor in the Booth School of Business, invited Steve Bannon because he wanted to have a debate between Steve Bannon and other faculty members at Booth about what's reasonable position with respect to foreign trade. And, of course, inviting Bannon because he was so closely identified with Trump, caused a huge uproar, both among alumni and some faculty and some students saying how can you

allow this to happen, you must disinvite him.

And my answer was we don't disinvite people. Luigi wants to hear what he has to say, wants the students to hear what he has to say, wants him to have to answer questions. In fact, the debate was going to be with Austan Goolsbee, another faculty member at the Booth School, and of course who served in the Obama administration. So, of course, my answer was no, I'm not going to disinvite him. We don't disinvite anybody.

LEE BOLLINGER: I know the pain that can come with that too because in our case, of course, famously the Dean of the School of International Public Affairs invited Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, to come and speak when he was at the U.N. and I refused to do the same, that is, disinvite him, and set it up as a university event where I could challenge him so that it didn't end up being an event that only allowed somebody to speak. And then, of course, you know and I know that these can draw an enormous amount of heat and attention and criticism. And I'm sure you went through that.

And I agree completely, Bob, with the spirit of open inquiry and open discussion. In every convocation speech I give to entering students, I emphasize, as you do, you're going to be offended and you must learn how to do this. And my view is that I'm not sure if it's your view, but I think every generation has to learn free speech. I mean they don't come in from a junior high school, high school, and just naturally embrace free

speech. Some do, but most have to learn. And your point about you need to practice in having discussions where you face difficult ideas and things that are contrary to your beliefs. That's a profound point about the essence of universities. So I think the way you put all this is powerful and absolutely right and shared by me.

Let me come at this from another direction which is, you're right, we allow faculty and we allow students, although a little differently, to bring in speakers who are controversial. With respect to faculty, we do, we would not allow a faculty member to turn their class into a political event. So there are some limits on the faculty because of this Kalven-esque position that the university should not be taking political positions. So if a faculty member decided what I want to do is teach a course on policy that's consistent with the Democratic Party because that's what I believe is right, we would say that's denial of the spirit of academic freedom. But, okay, put that aside.

Students actually, I mean they can, under our principles, they can bring in almost anyone. I mean it can be really difficult, and sometimes people are invited to speak by students who are anti-Semitic or racist or have really, really difficult, harmful ideas, or they are thought to be that way. And I wonder what do you say in those contexts to students who say they may have the right to do it, but the university should take a position that this is not right. It's not good. So there's both the allowing them to do it, protecting their right to do it, but the values of the university that are put on the line. And

how do you handle that? Well, let me stop there, Bob, and let you deal with that.

ROBERT ZIMMER: Yes, those are, as you point out, potentially very difficult and complicated circumstances. And, you know, one thing I always point out, although I'm not sure it's the strongest argument in this particular case, but is people, when they say you should not let this happen, they're always imagining that whatever decision is made is going to comport with their particular viewpoint.

And the idea that you're going to hand off decisions to the free-speech committee or the speech committee, whatever you want to call it, that there's some group of people, because somebody's got to decide if you're going to get into that business, that there's going to be some group of people sitting around the table saying, okay, that person can speak or oh, no, they're too awful. You know I tell people you're imagining that they're all going to agree with you. How do you feel about what you're recommending if they actually are quite the opposite and have very different points of view? Are you really all that comfortable with that kind of structure? So I do say that.

But there is more to say because, for example, when there was that event in Charlottesville a couple of years ago, which was both racist and anti-Semitic, I did write a note to the community essentially denouncing it and saying that this was totally antithetical to the values of the university and I hate to use the word deplorable, but it

was really pretty horrible, a horrible episode. And I made it clear that that's what I thought and that I felt like I was representing the university in saying that. So, now that didn't take place on our campus.

LEE BOLLINGER: But if it had, in effect, not exactly the same thing, but if the speakers had been invited in who advocated White supremacy and anti-Semitic beliefs and thoughts and so on, you would feel comfortable saying they have the right to bring the speaker in, we'll protect the right, but the content of this, the subject of this, conflicts with deep university values as well. I mean you are comfortable with that distinction obviously.

ROBERT ZIMMER: Yes.

LEE BOLLINGER: And, you know, it's worth pointing out that this issue of protecting or choosing to have a system in which we will protect the rights of people who hold anti-Semitic, racist, bigoted, terrible points of view, we will protect it, that choice is a difficult one. In the United States, we've, in the Supreme Court, we've gone through periods where that was not protected and then in the 1960s, the choice was made to protect that. In Europe, it's not protected as we know. Free speech does not include neo-Nazi speech in Germany or anti-Semitic speech or racist speech. Canada has that. We're almost, you know, we're somewhat isolated among democracies in our choice to protect

that.

Have you had discussions with students about that choice? I mean when students come to you and say, why do we have a rule that allows these kinds of ideas to come into our community through invited speakers or maybe students themselves and faculty themselves even? So what do you say to them? I know I'm not going to debate the First Amendment with you, I'm sure you say, but here's why we have our own choice to protect, and what do you say to them, why that choice?

ROBERT ZIMMER: Yes, well, I say what I indicated at the beginning because this is the way to create the right environment for the best education and the best research environment. Now, in other words, we do it because the university has two missions and we want to fulfill them well. We don't want to be lousy. We want to be good at it. And that this is what's necessary to give you a great education and, as you say, you will be offended, but this comes with the territory. And I assiduously avoid talking about the First Amendment, as we discussed the other day, because, you know, there are people who know a lot about the First Amendment, you included, including all the arguments about this, that, and the other, and all the jurisprudence. And I have no standing to be talking about that. We have people on campus who have standing to talk about that, but I'm not one of them. I have, spiritually I read the First Amendment and I get inspired. It's an unbelievable statement. And so I have feelings about it, but that's my, the actions to

reading the First Amendment can't possibly be the basis for university policy and shouldn't be.

LEE BOLLINGER: Bob, let's shift to a larger kind of field. What are your thoughts about the state of American higher education, the great universities in the country, on this issue of tolerance, open-mindedness, academic freedom, free inquiry? You know, how do you, let me say, there is a lot of criticism of American universities now on that score and there's a lot of criticism that faculty are left leaning and they won't tolerate positions that are on the conservative side of the political spectrum.

The same is true with students and that there's this so-called cancel culture, which is really just another way of saying that there's too much intolerance and it's reflected in the academic world, which is shocking – the argument goes – because that's where, as you said at the very beginning, we ought to be leading on the idea of open-mindedness. So there's a very strong critique of the modern American university on the issue of tolerance and living by the ideals of academic inquiry. What is your take overall on that?

ROBERT ZIMMER: Well, I'd say two things. So, first, I think that a lot of universities could be – and from my point of view – should be, stronger on the issue around free expression. And I feel like it's so critical and so intrinsic to what a university should be, both in terms of its education and research environments that honestly I'm sometimes

quite surprised when places, particularly notable places, do not stand up and defend this in very active ways. So I think that that's a negative.

Now some of that is reflective of the larger culture and universities don't exist as islands, divorced from the culture around us. And, you know, we've entered unfortunately a period of time in which this kind of intolerance for others' views, hearing views that you disagree with, the response isn't they're wrong and here's why, which is a perfectly reasonable response, but rather their views are evil and they should not be allowed to promote them and people shouldn't be allowed to hear them.

And I think that, that's a really negative development in our culture. And as I often say, it's a mistake to politicize this, which is, you get this kind of, people don't want to hear things that they fundamentally disagree with and this happens from those on the self-identified Left and it happens from those on the self-identified Right. So it's not a Left thing or a Right thing. It's a problem with people and how they respond and the way our culture is accepting that kind of response as normal. And I think for universities to be doing that is really very sad.

LEE BOLLINGER: Yes. So, I mean one of the great opening statements in the First Amendment literature and jurisprudence is by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1920 in which he said, that's the beginning of sort of modern conception of free speech as articulated

by the Supreme Court, he says, “Persecution for the expression of opinions seems to me to be perfectly logical, but when people have come to realize that the best test of truth is the power to get itself accepted.” That was the articulation at the beginning and the power of it, I think, starts from this idea that people’s natural impulses are to be intolerant. Persecution is perfectly logical if you start with strong beliefs and you think that the counter-beliefs are dangerous and evil. And that means that at the very least that universities ought to be leading on that issue because we’re all about this openness and if it’s the natural state of human nature to be intolerant, it’s our job to try to counter that. And I assume you share that strong sense.

ROBERT ZIMMER: Absolutely.

LEE BOLLINGER: So one of the things I worry about, and I wonder whether you do, which is a dimension of what we’re talking about, which is there is a, in American political culture, a desire to criticize universities, to undermine their legitimacy and this can be for all kinds of political motivations. And sometimes I worry that the characterization of universities as being intolerant and filled with cancel culture and so on, that that critique is overdone and part of a political strategy to marginalize and undermine the trust in universities. Do you also feel that?

ROBERT ZIMMER: Yes, I think that this is another very dangerous tendency, which is

this desire on the part of some to de-legitimize universities, even to say they don't really add any value. And I think that is, one, a very ignorant statement, and two, one that is decidedly not in the nation's interests even though some of the people who are saying it want to proclaim their statements in the nation's interest. I think from the point of view of the competitive advantages of the United States, having a great higher education system, which it does, is a huge advantage and asset that gets demonstrated over and over again.

That doesn't mean there aren't problems. It doesn't mean one shouldn't be able to criticize them. But I think this sort of pile-on of, yes, there is a problem around free expression – we've seen that – but the piling on, on top of that, and therefore universities are worthless, is ignorant and reckless as a kind of statement.

LEE BOLLINGER: Yes, I think that's right. So we really want to emphasize this deep, deep strength of the university, the modern American university, and how successful it is for the society in developing new knowledge and being a place of real inquiry into things that matter to human beings.

Let's end on what are the ingredients of that, some of the ingredients. You come from the science side of the university, Bob, but you've seen it all now. One of the things I wonder about is this idea that we are open to the greatest talent in the world. Not just

the United States in talent, but the people from all over the world. So in today's world, there's sometimes concern, and there was in the last administration, a lot of concern expressed about students and faculty coming from China in particular and expressed alarms about stealing of knowledge and stealing of information. And, of course, sometimes put in terms of secrets.

But I wonder if you could just articulate, how you articulate for people who are concerned about allowing foreign students into our laboratories and into our classrooms and into our research, why it makes sense to have this kind of policy that we are completely open about. We're happy to educate people to the very limit of what we know, from all over the world, and have them go back and try to do that in their societies, in their nations. That's a choice we've made and it's been a powerful choice, but explain it, because a lot of people, I think, find it difficult to understand why we would be so open with knowledge.

ROBERT ZIMMER: Yes, well, I think there are several different angles on this. Let me say first that we've been, particularly with respect to China, we've been pretty aggressive in engaging with China. We have a center in Beijing. We have an even bigger center in Hong Kong. We do in Delhi and Paris as well, but they are less controversial. And the sense of sharing of ideas is very palpable.

Now, some of the reasons I think this is so important (audio issue), you know, with respect to science, it's a big mistake to think that we really know all the stuff and we're giving it to other people. There's a huge amount we learn from people from other places and this is both for people who are distinguished and senior in their career, where they have done a lot and the case for younger people with new and fresh ideas. So I think there is a genuine exchange of ideas. It's not as if we've got all the stuff and people come and try to take it from us and we're such dunces, we just give it to them. Everybody learns something and everybody gets value.

And one of the other issues, maybe a little bit away from science in this particular issue, but I think exceedingly important is that it's very important that people in the United States understand more about China and that people in China understand more about the United States. And I think that it's probably the case that the understanding about China and the United States is really pretty low. Most people have no experience, no connection. And I do think that this understanding of different cultures, different assumptions, different histories and how that's impacted how people are thinking about the present is extremely important. And it's important so that people understand the other people and just from a nation-state point of view are less likely to make miscalculations which are really dangerous. And so I think, just this exchange of people leading to increased understanding of cultures, history and society is extremely important and adds value to everybody.

LEE BOLLINGER: Thanks, Bob. Two very important points about the ways in which we benefit by the knowledge that others bring to our system, our nation, and the importance of developing more knowledge about China in particular, but about the world more generally. Thanks. It's been a pleasure, Bob.

ROBERT ZIMMER: It's great to talk to you, Lee, as it always is, and great to see you. And I will say that when we have thoughts about other universities and who do we think has the same sort of values and so on, Columbia is always on our mind.

LEE BOLLINGER: Yes, vice-versa. Thanks, Bob. Barbara...

PRESIDENT BARBARA VAN ALLEN: Yes, thank you both. Lee and Bob, this was just terrific. The insights were really wonderful, and we really appreciate you both taking time out of your very busy schedules to share it today.

I'm pleased to report that we do have a number of upcoming speakers. And as always, we encourage our members to invite guests. On December 2nd, we have Lareina Yee, Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company, talking about their 2021 Women in the Workplace Report, the largest study of women in corporate America. Jonelle Procopé, the CEO of Apollo Theater, is going to be moderated in a conversation with Charles Phillips on December 3rd, and that will be an exciting one. Carla Harris, the Vice

Chairman of Global Wealth Management and Senior Client Advisor at Morgan Stanley, is going to join us on the 7th. Ken Bentsen, the President and CEO of SIFMA, and Dr. Lindsey Piegza, the Chair of the Economic Roundtable there at SIFMA, will be giving us SIFMA's latest economic survey results on December 7th. We are looking forward to returning to our first in-person event on December 9th with Gina Raimondo, the Secretary of Commerce. She's going to share insights on the administration's efforts to strengthen business ties, the supply chain challenges, and spur economic development and job growth. We're excited about that. Cathie Wood, the CEO and Chief Investment Officer of ARK Invest, is going to be in a conversation with Art Laffer, the founder of Laffer Associates. That will be on December 13th. They'll be looking at her approach to the markets and investment and cutting-edge technologies. And then our final event, another virtual, will be Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, President of Spelman College, December 14th. She will be discussing her perspective on leadership and advancing the next generation of Black entrepreneurs in her role as one of the top historically Black colleges.

Finally, I want to take a moment to recognize those of our 339 members of the Centennial Society who joined us today as their contributions continue to represent the financial backbone of support for the Club and our programming. So thank you everyone, especially, of course, Bob and Lee. And please everyone, stay healthy and safe, and we hope to see you at our next event. Thank you.