Look Beyond the Words

By Andrea Alban-Davies

“If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, man- kind would be no more jus- tified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justi- fied in silencing mankind.”
— John Stuart Mill (1806- 1873), On Liberty, 1859

I am writing in regard to the E-mail circulated by Robert Tarulli in the name of the Military in Business Association of Columbia Business School. Mr. Tarulli called on students of the business school to sign a petition for the removal of Professor De Genova, on the grounds that he made what some deem to be inappropriate remarks at an anti-war teach-in here at the university on 26 March. Said peti- tion “will be sent to President Bollinger demanding that he remove this individual from the Columbia community.”

I now call on this same student body to write to President Bollinger and ask, instead, that he uphold argu- ably the most important right given to us by our constitu- tion – the right to freedom of speech. Ask him to respect Professor De Genova’s right that he exercised when mak- ing his comments; ask him to encourage each member of our community to speak his or her mind without fear of any repercussions. I call on each of you to see beyond Professor De Genova’s words and do this because the impli- cations of the removal (or discipline) of this professor are further-reaching and more serious than it is possible for most of us to comprehend today. It is fundamental that each of us understand that the fate of our freedom of speech as members of the Columbia community hangs in the bal- ance beside that of Professor De Genova. If we allow any action to be taken against this man, we will give unlimited power to the voice of popular opinion, which we may not agree with the next time around; and it will be a slippery slope.

Regardless of the content of Professor De Genova’s remarks and how repugnant they may be in our eyes, I know that we all must

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