On Campus

A Letter from President George Rupp

Fall 2001

Dear Fellow Columbians:

We now know with certainty that thousands of lives have been lost in the terrible tragedy of September 11, 2001. Among those thousands are dozens of members of the larger Columbia family: alumni and relatives of current students, staff, and faculty. The horrible numbers include Americans from across the country—and also citizens from around the world, not surprisingly from England, Germany, Japan, and Canada but also from Mexico, India, Australia, China and some thirty other nations, including such predominantly Muslim countries as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The sheer scale of the carnage is staggering, as is the global representation of those slaughtered in this heinous crime.

On behalf of the whole Columbia community, I express deepest sympathy for the loved ones of the victims. Even those of us who have not lost close friends or family members still share in a profound sense of loss at the wanton destruction of this horrific assault. We in fact suffer with the victims and the mourners, the literal meaning of the compassion that we cannot but feel.

Along with our acute yet also numbing awareness of the suffering of the direct victims and their grieving families and friends, we also know that the casualties of this tragedy extend much further. No community in this country or in any other country is exempt. We have all been diminished by these terrible deeds. We are fearful as we see the full horror of how distorted, how perverse, human motivation and action can become. And we must be on guard that we do not in turn also become instruments of hatred or captives of a self-delusion that prevents our acknowledging how others view us and thereby leads us into counterproductive actions.

In particular for us who are members of the larger Columbia family, we must be sure to maintain and strengthen the core values that characterize our common life. We are a community that encompasses and affirms diversity. We come from every

ethnic and religious tradition in this country and from many of the nations around the globe. We must continue to reach out across lines that mark unbridgeable divisions in much of the world. At precisely the time when the march of events threatens to drive us apart and turn us against each other, we must come together. We must rise to the challenge of rebuilding out of the wreckage that terror has wrought.

The rebuilding will be literal: the fabulous landmarks of the skyline of our city will be recreated. But the rebuilding must also go beyond literal reconstruction. We must build on our common humanity so that in the generations to come we—the human race—will see the devastation fueled by such hatred as an unthinkable self-inflicted wound.

Our Columbia community is one of the places where reconstruction in this larger sense must be an ongoing project. In this regard the response on campus to the current crisis has been encouraging. Students, staff, and faculty across all ethnic and religious divisions lined up to donate blood and organized donations of fresh clothing, towels, and toiletries for rescue workers—and donations of money to secure whatever was most desperately needed. The University lent special firefighting and heavy construction equipment to fire and police units, and when our own supplies ran out, purchased new crowbars, rope, hard hats, and other items to meet the continuing need at the World Trade Center site. We opened our facilities for emergency overnighting. We invited WNYC, bereft of power at its facilities near the crash site, to broadcast from our student-run WKCR radio station. Doctors, nurses, and other mental health professionals at our teaching hospitals were on special mobilization, and our mental health professionals organized volunteers to assist relief agencies.

Even as we continue to address immediate needs, we are looking ahead in planning research programs and forums across the campus, notably in the Law School and the School of International and Public Affairs, to examine how the United States and the international community move forward in ways that do not simply replicate the dead-ends of the past.

Along with such special studies and symposia, we must engage these issues at the center of the education we offer. In our classrooms we must confront the questions that divide us even when we pursue common programs of study. We must therefore resist the easy alternative of uneasy silence and instead engage the tough issues

that polarize our world. Such engagement will occur more readily in some programs of study than in others—for example, in international affairs or global policy or area studies or comparative law or religion. But in principle every course must be an arena in which respectful debate on fundamental disagreements is allowed and even welcomed.

Similarly, in our lives outside of formal courses, symposia, and research projects, we must work against ethnic or religious stereotyping and intolerance. To be specific, we must take special measures to counter hateful speculation or harassment directed against Arabs and Muslims. One indication of the need for such measures is the extent to which anyone who appears different may become the object of inappropriate attention—Sikhs, for example, who are neither Arabs nor Muslims but do wear their traditional headdress. It is unacceptable at Columbia to stigmatize entire peoples and traditions, even if responsibility is in fact established for the indefensible attacks visited on New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania.

Not only current students, staff, and faculty but also Columbia alumni worldwide are a resource for the ongoing task of building multi-ethnic, multi-religious communities that are both inclusive and just. We must face the fact that in the history of human experience we have not yet fully succeeded in creating such communities, which is why the task is so daunting. Yet as we mourn the victims of an unspeakable tragedy, we must commit ourselves all the more to reach out to each other across the lines of our differences and to work all the harder to realize ideals that so far have been only partially and imperfectly achieved. To reach out and to work together to build communities that bridge divisions in our pluralistic world is a challenge worthy of the core values that Columbians over the generations share. I urge all of us to address this challenge in the days, months, and years ahead.

Sincerely,

George Rupp
September 20, 2001



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >