



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

November 17, 2008

William Creeley
Director of Legal and Public Advocacy
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education
601 Walnut Street
Suite 510
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Mr. Creeley:

I received your letter of November 3, regarding the decision to cancel the appearance of Professor William Ayers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). This decision was made, appropriately, at the campus level, and I have asked UNL Chancellor Harvey Periman to respond to your letter directly. I have enclosed for your information an opinion piece I published in the Omaha, Lincoln, and campus newspapers two days after the cancellation of the Ayers appearance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J.B. Milliken".

James B. Milliken
President

JBM/dt

cc: Harvey Periman, Chancellor, UNL
Linda Pratt, Executive Vice President and Provost, NU

enclosure

Free Expression of Ideas is the Foundation of Democracy

By James B. Milliken
President, University of Nebraska
October 18, 2008

The announcement this week that William Ayers had been invited to speak at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln generated an enormous outpouring of public opinion, most of which has been critical of the university. I understand the reactions of many people to Ayers's scheduled appearance, and I share their view of Ayers's past actions. It has by now been widely reported that the invitation was extended by the College of Education and Human Sciences last February, well before Ayers's notoriety was elevated in this year's presidential campaign. Also, it is a fact that Ayers holds a distinguished professorship at one of the nation's outstanding public universities, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and that he is considered a leading expert by those in his field. I have no doubt whatsoever Ayers was invited by the College—based solely on his academic achievements—to present a scholarly lecture.

Those involved in planning the event made a decision to cancel Ayers's appearance. So the immediate controversy no doubt seems over for many, especially those outside the University, but some very important issues remain. As uncomfortable as this experience has been, it serves as an important reminder that universities are founded on, and owe their success to, the principle of open exchange of ideas, free from political or popular pressure. Free expression is a foundation of our democracy itself, which depends on more speech, not less, to inform thoughtful decisions. And this principle is tested most strenuously when the speech is most objectionable.

This will not go down as the University's or our state's finest hour, although there will always be disagreement over why that is the case. Many—including the Governor—suggested that Ayers be barred from campus by the president or the Board of Regents. I believe that such an action, which would override the faculty, dean, and campus leadership, would not have been appropriate at a university. And notwithstanding overwhelming popular opinion and very strong feelings about Ayers' reprehensible terrorist acts, I believe such an act of censorship by the University system's leaders would have damaged the University.

Over the 140-year history of the University of Nebraska, a great number of individuals with highly controversial opinions, teachings and personal histories have spoken on our four campuses – not so that we may embrace or endorse their ideas or pasts, but so that students can be exposed to many ideas and learn critical thinking, faculty can explore and challenge ideas and scholarship, and the entire University community can be exposed to diversity of thought. This is the essence of a University.

The United States was founded on principles of freedom of expression. That is among our greatest strengths as a nation, and that must be among our strengths as a university.

