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May 31, 2005

President Susan Hockfield
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Ave
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Dear President Hockfield,

We are senior members of the small community of independent physicists who work in the area of science and security. For the past two decades, we have read with appreciation the major analytical contributions that Professor Theodore Postol's research group has made to the U.S. debate over missile defense. This work has been path breaking and presented so lucidly that it has had a major impact on the debate. MIT should be proud of this group. Its contributions exemplify the impact that independent scientists protected by academic freedom can make to clarifying controversial public-policy issues.

We were distressed when Professor Postol became embroiled in a public debate with MIT's administration in 2001 and have been concerned by the toll that debate has taken in damaging both MIT's reputation and the health of Professor Postol's research group. However, we were pleased to learn a year ago that Provost Brown had decided that Prof. Postol's concerns did require investigation.

We were nonplussed in December, however, when President Vest announced that MIT has been blocked from conducting an investigation of the integrity of the work that is done at a laboratory that it runs. We understand that the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has classified all the relevant documents, including the report of MIT's own initial inquiry. We understand further that MDA has informed MIT that even a committee with all the necessary clearances would not be allowed access to the documents because MDA has determined that there is no need for an investigation and therefore that the committee would have no "need to know" the classified information.

We are concerned that, despite former President Vest's statement that "we continue to seek the approval needed so that the investigation can proceed," MIT appears to have accepted MDA's edict as legitimate. In our view, MDA's position that MIT has no need to know whether fraud is occurring in the research that it manages for the federal government is unacceptable and flies in the face one of the fundamental rationales for having universities manage such research. We believe that MIT's position should simply be that it will not manage research whose integrity it is not allowed to verify.

In this connection it may be of interest to know that one of us (J. A.) currently chairs the University of California's National Security Panel, which reviews the weapons programs at the Los Alamos and Livermore nuclear weapons laboratories and the other two have served on its review panels. One of the University's requirements is that this committee -- or its specialized subcommittees -- be allowed to review all of the work done in these laboratories, including even special compartmented intelligence programs.

Finally, on a separate matter, we have difficulty understanding your recent suggestion to Prof. Postol that he gain access to the materials that MIT supplied to the DOD Inspector General in response to his complaint of retaliation by making a Freedom of Information request to the DOD. Why cannot MIT provide him with these materials in the spirit of our American tradition of fairness?

Sincerely yours,

John Ahearne by FvH

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