

# FIRE

Foundation for Individual  
Rights and Expression

January 27, 2023

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**URGENT**

*Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (president@mit.edu, kornbluth@mit.edu)*

Dear President Kornbluth:

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends freedom of expression,<sup>1</sup> welcomes you to your new post as president of MIT. We were in touch with your predecessor, L. Rafael Reif, regarding several situations that jeopardized the Institute's core commitments to free expression and academic freedom. We write you today to offer our support in your new role and to seek clarity regarding a new censorship allegation against MIT that reportedly transpired during Reif's tenure.

As reported last night, former Secretary of State and former CIA Director Mike Pompeo alleges in his new book, "Never Give an Inch," that MIT canceled a planned campus speech over concerns that it would risk "offending" Chinese students at MIT and jeopardize the university's substantial funding from Chinese sources.<sup>2</sup> Pompeo's speech, for which a date had allegedly been set, was expected to include criticism of the Communist Party of China's alleged undue influence on American universities. Pompeo says he ended up speaking at Georgia Tech instead, which would place the incident around December 2020.

If substantiated, the Pompeo speech cancellation would be the third high-profile censorship controversy at MIT in as many years: In October 2021, MIT canceled renowned climate scientist Dorian Abbot's John Carlson Lecture over objections to his views on diversity

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<sup>1</sup> For more than 20 years, FIRE has defended freedom of expression, conscience, and religion, and other individual rights on America's college campuses. You can learn more about our recently expanded mission and activities at [thefire.org](https://thefire.org).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Murray, *The Mike Pompeo speech on China's influence on US universities that MIT killed*, N.Y. Post, Jan. 26, 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/01/26/the-mike-pompeo-speech-on-chinas-influence-on-us-universities-that-mit-killed>.

initiatives.<sup>3</sup> And in March of last year, MIT announced—then quickly backtracked—on a policy barring students and faculty from asking others to wear masks.<sup>4</sup>

As you know, MIT makes profound and important commitments to free expression for students and faculty, and “aims to create an atmosphere of intellectual excitement, a climate of inquiry and innovation in which each student develops a consuming interest in understanding for its own sake.”<sup>5</sup> Censorship in response to threat of controversy, or in response to pressure by powerful outside interests—including donors—is antithetical to this fundamental goal.

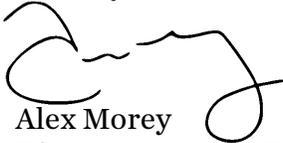
Today, universities’ commitments to these fundamental principles are frequently tested, but they must never waver.

As MIT’s new president, we are confident you will take the steps necessary to restore MIT’s reputation as a bastion of intellectual inquiry and ensure students, faculty, and invited speakers are never censored based on their views. An important step would be to institutionally adopt a strong free speech commitment, such as the Chicago Statement, which MIT’s faculty has already endorsed.<sup>6</sup>

FIRE is here to support the MIT community as it crafts policies and undertakes practices supporting a culture where all views can be heard and explored.

We respectfully request a substantive response to this letter by Friday, February 10. If you prefer, we could schedule a call. I’d love to talk.

Warmly,



Alex Morey  
Director, Campus Rights Advocacy

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Powell, *M.I.T.’s Choice of Lecturer Ignited Criticism. So Did Its Decision to Cancel.*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/20/us/dorian-abbot-mit.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Grant Welker, *MIT’s New Mask Policy Bars People From Asking Others to Mask Up*, NBC 10 BOSTON, Mar. 17, 2022, <https://www.nbcboston.com/boston-business-journal/mits-new-mask-policy-bars-people-from-asking-others-to-mask-up>; Jordan Howell, *VICTORY! MIT drops controversial new mask policy prohibiting requests for others to mask up*, FIRE, Mar. 24, 2022, <https://www.thefire.org/news/victory-mit-drops-controversial-new-mask-policy-prohibiting-requests-others-mask#:~:text=MIT%20drops%20controversial%20new%20mask%20policy%20prohibiting%20requests%20for%20others%20to%20mask%20up,-by&text=After%20pushback%20fr>.

<sup>5</sup> *MIT Policies: 1.1 Mission and Objectives*, MASS. INST. TECH., <https://policies.mit.edu/policies-procedures/10-institute/11-mission-and-objectives> [<https://perma.cc/ZMZ2-JF26>].

<sup>6</sup> Connor Murnane, *A thaw in the ice as MIT faculty adopt free speech-friendly Chicago Statement*, FIRE, Dec. 28, 2022, <https://www.thefire.org/news/thaw-ice-mit-faculty-adopt-free-speech-friendly-chicago-statement>.