In 2003, during a fifth-grade current-events lesson about the United States’ newly begun war in Iraq, a student asked Indiana teacher Deborah Mayer if she had ever attended an anti-war protest. Mayer told the class that she had driven by such a protest a few days earlier, and had honked her horn in support. Her school board declined to renew Mayer’s contract, noting that she had deviated from the board’s approved curriculum. And four years later, a federal appeals court upheld the board’s decision on similar grounds.

Across the country, Mayer’s defenders decried the apparent assault on her “academic freedom.” But K-12 teachers in America have never enjoyed such freedom in a manner that university academicians would recognize. During wartime especially, school boards and courts have discouraged or blocked teachers from engaging their students in an open, critical dialogue about controversial ethical and political issues. Zimmerman’s talk will explore these restrictions, the fate of the teachers who broached them, and the implications of this history for contemporary democracy.

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