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Letter to the editor: Spectator fails to properly address Frontiers incident

by [Robert Pollack](#)

To the Editor:

Spectator has not yet dealt with the significance of [Monday's lecture](#) by Professor Hughes. I was there—let me try to explain what I heard and saw.

His performance was not a way of introducing quantum mechanics. It was an introduction to a set of lectures that include the emergence of nuclear weapons from the science of quantum mechanics and the emergence of non-governmental groups accumulating nuclear-fissionable material as an unexpected threat we must all face in this century.

It was this new risk, he said, that was so scary that one had to be prepared to strip away all preconceptions and start from scratch. Professor Hughes intended to pass on the fact that his material is a shocking aspect of today's life. He shocked, and now will be teaching about what is really shocking, to an audience no longer so easily able to keep an emotional distance.

As a professor of biology now teaching in Frontiers of Science and as a former dean of Columbia College, I warrant that his performance got his audience of 550 first-year students to set down their defenses against thinking about nuclear war and the transition from 60 years of peace after the Cold War to an unknowable future with emerging risks of nuclear-fissionable material used for violent ends.

That's what great teaching is about, and that's why academic freedom must always include the freedom to teach the most difficult of ideas. It is also what the Core Curriculum is about—or should be, at least. I am very proud to know that Frontiers is a part of the Core Curriculum, and it is my fervent hope that my colleagues will assure its continued presence in the Core.

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