A glorious morning for a commencement, the sky a blue tent cut with wisps of clouds over the Columbia University campus. From time to time a plane bisected the air above, an accidental eavesdropper on the passage of time and the celebration of joy. Clear weather, low-flying jets: it’s what some New Yorkers still can’t help thinking of as a 9/11 day.

All over America graduating seniors are being reminded of what they – and their parents – can scarcely forget. Most of them left home and arrived on campus in September 2001. But that knowledge is particularly sharp here in New York. Some students chose to leave afterward, to migrate to the quiet college towns so many of their high-school classmates had chosen in the first place. But most stuck. After all, if they were scared off by what had befallen the Trade Center, then it meant the terrorists had won.

Four years have passed, and it occurs to me, surveying the Columbia undergraduates, their blue gowns mimicking the blue sky, that the terrorists did win. Since September 11 we’ve become more like them. The essence of the way zealots think about the world is polar: good and evil, holy and profane, them and us. “At times it can seem like your day-to-day life is an exercise in choosing sides,” Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia, said in his commencement address. In the years since the class of 2005 entered college, America has become a country that sets its young people the terrible example of closed minds. The terrorists wanted to kill infidels. We only aim to silence them.

President Bollinger, who has recently navigated a pitched battle about academic freedom and civil classroom discourse on his own campus, described intellectual inquiry thus: “To learn to ask: ‘Is that true? Maybe there’s something to what she just said. Let me think about it. That’s interesting. Maybe I should change my mind. I changed my mind.’” When is the last time you can honestly remember a public dialogue, or even a private conversation, that followed that useful course? To shy away from rigorous intellectual engagement is not new for undergraduates: in 1998 a study done by an anthropologist at Grinnell College reported the most common discussion model among students was stating what they were certain they already believed, not learning what they did not or exploring the views of those with whom they disagreed. Eighty-four percent of the first-year class believed that one of the paramount values of the college was to make sure all its members felt comfortable. “Exploring new ideas, encountering people with different values, learning a new discipline’s way of thinking and having someone point out a flaw in one’s argument – these can be uncomfortable experiences,” Carol Trosset noted in her findings.

But what was once the comfort level of 18-year-olds has now become the guiding principle of a nation, with ease to be found only among the like-minded. Today’s graduates have also learned that having strongly held beliefs means expressing contempt for those of others, particularly if you are a cable-TV talk-show host and can interrupt incessantly or extravagantly mime disarmament. (Note to the class of 2005: bad manners are bad manners, whether at the dinner table or on-camera.) Politicians and pundits are now no better than corner men in an ideological prizefight.

It’s no wonder, after the conspiracy that took place right under our noses came to fruition on September 11, that we have become a nation of conspiracy theorists. But everything now is a conspiracy: a rightwing conspiracy, a Clinton conspiracy, above all a media conspiracy. When NEWSWEEK retracted its story in which an unnamed source claimed an investigation had turned up desecration of the Qur’an by interrogators in the Guantanamo Bay detention center, conspiracy theorists went wild: the magazine was a liberal hotbed of hatred for the military, the magazine was set up by the Pentagon to mask the administration’s own malfeasance. No one believes in mistakes anymore, in the reporter who mistakenly believed a source was trustworthy, the editors who trusted the reporter’s skill and judgment. Mistakes are an inevitable byproduct of work done by human beings under deadline pressure. But today, human error in so many arenas has been supplanted by the ubiquitous suggestion of sinister forces.

So the young men and women who began their college years in the shadow of September 11 graduate in its shadow as well. The intolerant, the monomaniacal, the zealots driven by religious certainty engineered the worst attack on American soil, and the result has been intolerance, monomania and zealotry driven by religious certainty. President Bollinger cited the contempt of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the legendary Supreme Court justice, for the man who “knows that he knows.” If Holmes lived today, of course, he would be either lionized or demonized. And he would find, much to his sorrow, that America had been hijacked by those who cannot tell the difference between opponents and enemies, between disagreement and heresy, between discussion and destruction.