

Condi Rice, Christine Lagarde: “Women of Power” Honored by America’s Academia

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Global Research, May 17, 2014

[Reader Supported News](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Women's Rights](#)

The American Condoleezza Rice, 60, Iraq War architect, and the French Christine Lagarde, 58, International Monetary Fund managing director, have little in common beyond being women of power who have contributed to the misery of millions of people they never cared to meet. And now they have another quality in common, cowardice under fire, albeit only verbal fire after they were invited to speak at college commencements.

Rutgers University invited Rice to speak (for \$35,000 and an honorary degree) and Smith College invited Lagarde (compensation undisclosed).

Student and [faculty objections](#) to Rice started [in February](#) and [continued to grow](#) for months. The Rutgers administration held firm, Rice kept quiet. On April 28, some [50 students](#) staged a sit-in at the Rutgers president’s office. The president refused to talk with them and they dispersed when Rutgers threatened to arrest them.

In a letter ironically foreshadowing his bald hypocrisy on free speech and academic freedom, Rutgers president [Robert Barchi](#) had written in March:

We cannot protect free speech or academic freedom by denying others the right to an opposing view, or by excluding those with whom we may disagree. Free speech and academic freedom cannot be determined by any group. They cannot insist on consensus or popularity.

Students and faculty objected to Rice for her participation in lying her country into war in Iraq, and even more so for her defense of widespread American use of torture in the “global war on terror.” An [online petition](#) by a 1991 Rutgers grad collected 694 signatures opposed to Rice, and campus petitions gathered hundreds more. In a lucid indictment of Rice’s apparent criminality, published in The Chronicle of Higher Education the day before [Rice withdrew](#), Rutgers history professor [Jackson Lears](#) wrote:

Rice sanctioned the use of torture and has continued to defend it even after a top aide warned that she and her colleagues were violating the law. To invite her to address the Rutgers graduating class, and then to award her a doctor-of-laws degree, is a travesty of all the ideals the university embodies. Our students deserve better. Most of all, they deserve the truth.

Officially, Rutgers showed no interest in truth, history, morality, etc.

Rice did not engage issues like war or torture in her withdrawal statement, arguing instead

that the crucial issue was the party-time nature of commencements. She said she was “honored to have served my country,” without mentioning any specifics. She did not explain why her [controversial performance](#) in office wasn’t as obvious to her in February as it became in May. Bowing out of the May 18 graduation as of May 3, [Rice’s statement](#) on her Facebook page read in part:

Commencement should be a time of joyous celebration for the graduates and their families. Rutgers’ invitation to me to speak has become a distraction for the university community at this very special time.... I understand and embrace the purpose of the commencement ceremony and I am simply unwilling to detract from it in any way.

Despite Rice’s belated withdrawal, Rutgers faculty and students went ahead with a planned, six-hour teach-in on May 6 because, as three [participating professors](#) wrote, “we concluded that the need remained for a scholarly exposition of Dr. Rice’s responsibility in the lies leading to the Iraq war and the implementation of the unprecedented torture policies under the Bush administration.”

In an exercise of actual academic freedom, Rice was invited to the teach-in when it was first planned, but she did not attend. President Barchi expressed the corporate position that Rutgers stood “fully behind” inviting Rice to the commencement (where only the speaker has freedom of speech). The teach-in ([on YouTube](#)) began shortly after that official statement, and the professors wrote:

It was an event that will be remembered because there has not been one like it for a very long time. The lecture room of the Student Activities Center was packed by a crowd of more than two hundred students and faculty members, many sitting on the floor, others standing anywhere they could, all listening with the utmost attention to the poignant speech of human rights attorney Jumana Musa, then to the illuminating exposés of our panelists, to whom Rutgers University – the real Rutgers – is forever indebted.

And we all stood up to applaud [the six students](#) who represented the ‘No to Rice’ movement that organized the demonstrations of the last ten days: the enthusiastic commitment they expressed to humanistic values was a reminder that there is real hunger among our students for more knowledge of history, of foreign cultures, of the very notion of ‘culture,’ of political science, of economics, as well as a deep interest in questions related to ethics, public policy and the place of media in our culture. Students like these give a special meaning – and responsibility – to our teaching and research.

Rutgers was against students learning about unapproved reality

No free speech was harmed in the unfolding of these events, except at the Rutgers president’s office (where student speech was met with threats of arrest). By cutting and running, Condoleezza may have lost a paid venue (her [net worth](#) is about \$4 million), but she has hardly been muzzled; on the contrary, her exercise of her own free speech got us into a deceitful, destructive [failure of a war](#) for which millions of Iraqis continue to pay with their own freedom and lives. The Rutgers administration lost students’ respect for promoting an apparent war criminal, but there’s no sign the administration is sensitive to any of that.

Academic freedom is a big winner at Rutgers, where faculty let some air and light into the

discussion of 15 years of American crimes against humanity that are usually left to fester down the memory hole. And perhaps the biggest winners are Rutgers students, whose determined integrity allowed their voices to be heard on an issue of principle that the Rutgers administration got wrong on both substance and morality.

Like Rutgers, Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, announced its choice of commencement speaker in February and protest began soon after, but the two protests are very different responses to two very important elephants in our collective cultural-political living room. Where Rice is emblematic of the elephant of illegal war, torture, war crimes, and crimes against humanity about which we are not supposed to speak, Lagarde represents the much tidier elephant of financial plunder and economic “austerity” that probably leaves millions more innocent people to suffer and die without hope.

It's not that [Christine Lagarde](#) sold people an illegal war as Rice did, but as head of the [International Monetary Fund](#) (IMF) since 2011, she carries out a prior ordained policy that is as inhumane as it is merciless. In Ukraine now, some people are hoping that [\\$17.1 billion](#) from the IMF will somehow help to save a country that can hardly pay for gas these days. But that \$17.1 billion is not a gift, it is a loan to a country that can't support its current debt load, and so, thanks to the IMF, Ukraine can look forward to another decade or more of even worse debt servitude than it has suffered in the past. The IMF's \$17.1 billion is typically reported as a good deed, but there are 46 million Ukrainians (except for a small number of oligarchs and bankers) who will have no reason to be grateful for this “beneficence.” The IMF has just bought the right to be the unelected ruler of Ukraine, and the purchase is so sweet, the Ukrainians will have to pay for it – with interest.

Objections to Lagarde are institutional and philosophical

Christine Lagarde is a well-regarded attorney whose specialties were antitrust and labor issues. She has held several French government posts, including Minister of Finance. She was the first female chairman of the international law firm Baker & McKenzie. She is an undeniably accomplished woman about whom the worst, easily available personal criticism is her apparent callousness toward the Greeks in 2012. Any real skeletons she may have remain tucked away in her closet.

Opposition to Lagarde at Smith was not personal, as an [online petition](#) made clear:

By selecting Ms. Lagarde as the commencement speaker we are supporting the International Monetary Fund and thus going directly against Smith's values to stand in unity with equality for all women, regardless of race, ethnicity or class. Although we do not wish to disregard all of Ms. Lagarde's accomplishments as a strong female leader in the world, we also do not want to be represented by someone whose work directly contributes to many of the systems that we are taught to fight against. By having her speak at our commencement, we would be publicly supporting and acknowledging her, and thus the IMF.

Even if we give Ms. Lagarde the benefit of the doubt, and recognize that she is just a good person working in a corrupt system, we should not by any means promote or encourage the values and ideals that the IMF fosters. The IMF has been a primary culprit in the failed developmental policies implanted in some of the world's poorest countries. This has led directly to the strengthening of imperialist and patriarchal systems that oppress and abuse women worldwide.

Smith's trustees haven't said why they wanted to honor the IMF

Not surprisingly, Smith's administration stood by its invitation to Lagarde, and there is little evidence of campus ferment even at the low level on the Rutgers campus. There was one report of a quiet campus sit-in by 40 students earlier in May. But apparently Lagarde is thin-skinned as well as guarded in her public persona. According to Smith president Kathleen McCarthy in a [May 12 letter](#) to the college community, Lagarde withdrew "in the wake of anti-IMF protests from faculty and students, including a few who wrote directly to her," which might seem pretty thin-skinned for someone with [a net worth](#) of \$4 million (and annual, [untaxed income](#) of about \$630,000) whom [Forbes ranked](#) as the 7th most powerful woman (35th most powerful person) in the world.

According to McCarthy, Lagarde retreated with the same lame excuse Rice used, not wanting to be a party-pooper. As quoted by McCarthy, Lagarde wrote: In the last few days, it has become evident that a number of students and faculty members would not welcome me as a commencement speaker. I respect their views, and I understand the vital importance of academic freedom. However, to preserve the celebratory spirit of commencement day, I believe it is best to withdraw my participation.

Back in February, [Lagarde observed](#) that income inequality was increasing globally, citing the United States and India in particular. Delivering a lecture in London, she said, "In India, the [net worth](#) of the billionaire community increased twelve-fold in 15 years, enough to eliminate absolute poverty in this country twice over.... [Inequality] leads to an economy of exclusion, and a wasteland of discarded potential." She did not suggest doing anything particular about this kind of global impoverishment for the vast majority of people on the planet.

Reaction to Lagarde's renegeing on a commitment is [reportedly mixed](#) on the Smith campus. Unlike at Rutgers, there is no teach-in or other communal effort to explore the issues raised by IMF activities. The argument, as in President McCarthy's letter, is limited to supporting or opposing the choice of a speaker, and is not about the vast damage the IMF does in the name of economic stability. And it's also not about the startling cowardice of a powerful woman who can't find the wee bit of courage it might take to face a bunch of 20-something, well-mannered Smith College women who [might disagree](#) with her or even, God forbid, say something rude to a global administrator of cruel and unusual policies. What is it with these people who lack the fortitude to speak to an audience not in total awe of their magnificent selves?

As [Katherine Sumner](#), Smith '14, wrote: "It was in a Smith classroom that I first learned about the problems that the IMF has wrought on the Global South, and how those problems have affected women's lives for the worse. As a graduating senior, I would be disappointed, to say the least, if a representative of that institution were honored and endorsed by a community that I am a part of."

Needless to say, that is not the perspective with which this story is covered in [mainstream media](#), where actual issues of substance and the events are presented with a tone of supercilious trivialization, as in the [Washington Post](#) story that began: "The *commencement speaker purity* bug has hit Smith College." [Emphasis added.]

Rice and Lagarde were not subjected to "commencement speaker purity" or any other form of censorship. They were faced with coherent intellectual challenges to the core value of

some of their most significant activities, and they did not rise to that challenge. And they bailed. They exercised self-censorship, deploying a spurious excuse rather than even attempting to engage in a serious debate. They did not act boldly and address the legitimate concerns of students and faculty with honesty and respect. That would have been too close to actual academic freedom. Instead these women of power fled the field rather than face an audience that might show *disappointment*. They retreated when the game wasn't rigged in their favor; they folded when the institution failed to guarantee them commencement *audience* purity.

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