

Full transcript of Ahmadinejad Speech at Columbia University

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INTRODUCTION: LEE BOLLINGER, PRESIDENT, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK
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(Note: The Iranian Presiden't comments are those of his interpreter in English)



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaking at
Columbia University

MR. BOLLINGER: I would like to begin by thanking Dean John Coatsworth and Professor Richard Bulliet for their work in organizing this event and for their commitment to the School of International and Public Affairs and its role — (interrupted by cheers, applause) — and for its role in training future leaders in world affairs. If today proves anything, it will be that there is an enormous amount of work ahead of us. This is just one of many events on Iran that will run throughout the academic year, all to help us better understand this critical and complex nation in today's geopolitics.

Before speaking directly to the current president of Iran, I have a few critically important points to emphasize. First, in 2003 the World Leaders Forum has advanced Columbia's long-standing tradition of serving as a major forum for robust debate, especially on global issues. It should never be thought that merely to listen to ideas we deplore in any way implies our endorsement of those ideas or our weakness of our resolve to resist those ideas or our naivety about the very real dangers inherent in such ideas. It is a critical premise of freedom of speech that we do not honor the dishonorable when we open our public forum to their voices; to hold otherwise would make vigorous debate impossible.

Second, to those who believe that this event should never have happened, that it is inappropriate for the university to conduct such an event, I want to say that I understand your perspective and respect it as reasonable. The scope of free speech in academic freedom should itself always be open to further debate. As one of the more famous quotations about free speech goes, it is an experiment as all life is an experiment. I want to say, however, as forcefully as I can that this is the right thing to do, and indeed it is required by the existing norms of free speech, the American university and Columbia itself.

Third, to those among us who experience hurt and pain as a result of this day, I say on behalf of all of us that we are sorry and wish to do what we can to alleviate it.

Fourth, to be clear on another matter, this event has nothing whatsoever to do with any rights of the speaker, but only with our rights to listen and speak. We do it for ourselves. We do it in the great tradition of openness that has defined this nation for many decades now. We need to understand the world we live in, neither neglecting its glories nor shrinking from its threats and dangers. It is inconsistent with the idea that one should know thine enemy — I'm sorry — it is consistent with the idea that one should know thine enemies, to have the intellectual and emotional courage to confront the mind of evil, and to prepare ourselves to act with the right temperament. In the moment, the arguments for free speech will never seem to match the power of the arguments against, but what we must remember is that this is precisely because free speech asks us to exercise extraordinary self-restraint against the very natural but often counterproductive impulses that lead us to retreat from engagement with ideas we dislike and fear. In this lies the genius of the American idea of free speech.

Lastly, in universities we have a deep and almost single-minded commitment to pursue the truth. We do not have access to the levers of power, we cannot make war or peace, we can only make minds, and to do this, we must have the most fulsome freedom of inquiry.

Let me now turn to Mr. Ahmadinejad.

First, on the brutal crackdown on scholars, journalists and human rights advocates. Over the past two weeks, your government has released Dr. Haleh Esfandiari and Parnaz Azima and just two days ago, Kian Tajbakhsh, a graduate of Columbia with a PhD in Urban Planning. While our community is relieved to learn of his release on bail, Dr. Tajbakhsh remains in Tehran under house arrest, and he still does not know whether he will be charged with a crime or allowed to leave the country.

Let me say this for the record, I call on the president today to ensure that Kian will be free to travel out of Iran as he wishes. (Applause.) Let me also report today that we are extending an offer to Kian to join our faculty as a visiting professor in Urban Planning here at his alma mater in our Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and we hope he will be able to join us next semester. (Applause.)

The arrest and imprisonment of these Iranian Americans for no good reason is not only unjustified, it runs completely counter to the very values that allow today's speaker to even appear on this campus, but at least they are alive.

According to Amnesty International, 210 people have been executed in Iran so far this year, 21 of them on the morning of September 5th alone. This annual total includes at two children, further proof, as Human Rights Watch puts it, that Iran leads the world in executing minors.

There is more. Iran hanged up 30 people this past July and August during a widely reported suppression of efforts to establish a more democratic society. Many of these executions were carried out in public view, a violation of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a party. These executions and others have coincided with a wider crackdown on student activists and academics accused of trying to foment a so-called "soft revolution." This has included jailing and forced retirement of scholars. As Dr. Esfandiari said

in a broadcast interview since her release, she was held in solitary confinement for 105 days because the government believes that the United States is planning a velvet revolution in Iran.

In this very room, last year we learned something about velvet revolutions from Vaclav Havel, and we will likely hear the same from our World Leaders Forum speaker this evening, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile. Both of their extraordinary stories remind us that there are not enough prisons to prevent an entire society that wants its freedom from achieving it.

We at this university have not been shy to protest the challenge — and challenge the failures of our own government to live by our values, and we won't be shy about criticizing yours. Let's then be clear at the beginning. Mr. President, you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator. And so I ask you — (applause) — and so I ask you, why have women, members of the Baha'i faith, homosexuals and so many of our academic colleagues become targets of persecution in your country? Why, in a letter last week to the secretary-general of the U.N., did Akbar Ganji, Iran's leading political dissident, and over 300 public intellectuals, writers and Noble Laureates express such grave concern that your inflamed dispute with the West is distracting the world's attention from the intolerable conditions in your regime within Iran, in particular the use of the press law to ban writers for criticizing the ruling system? Why are you so afraid of Iranian citizens expressing their opinions for change?

In our country, you are interviewed by our press and asked to speak here today. And while my colleagues at the law school — Michael Dorf, one of my colleagues, spoke to Radio Free Europe, viewers in Iran a short while ago on the tenants of freedom of speech in this country — I propose further that you let me lead a delegation of students and faculty from Columbia to address your universities about free speech with the same freedom we afford you today. (Applause.)

Secondly, the denial of the Holocaust. In a December 2005 state television broadcast, you described the Holocaust as “a fabricated legend.” One year later, you held a two-day conference of Holocaust deniers. For the illiterate and ignorant, this is dangerous propaganda.

When you have come to a place like this, this makes you, quite simply, ridiculous. You are either brazenly provocative or astonishingly uneducated. You should know — (applause) — please — you should know that Columbia is the world center of Jewish studies — us a world center, and now in partnership with the — Institute of Holocaust Studies.

Since the 1930s, we provided an intellectual home for countless Holocaust refugees and survivors and their children and grandchildren. The truth is that the Holocaust is the most documented event in human history. Because of this, and for many other reasons, your absurd comments about the debate over the Holocaust both defy historical truth and make all of us who continue to fear humanity's capacity for evil shudder at this closure of memory, which is always virtue's first line of defense. Will you cease this outrage?

The destruction of Israel. Twelve days ago you said that the state of Israel cannot continue its life. This echoed a number of inflammatory statements you have delivered in the past two years, including in October 2005, when you said that Israel “should be wiped off the map”, quote-unquote. Columbia has over 800 alumni currently living in Israel. As an institution, we have deep ties with our colleagues there. I have personally spoken — personally, I have spoken out in most forceful terms against proposals to boycott Israeli

scholars (in/and ?) universities, saying that such boycotts might as well include Columbia. (Applause.)

More than 400 — more than 400 — more than 400 college and university presidents in this country have joined in that statement.

My question then is, do you plan on wiping us off the map too? (Applause.)

Funding terrorism: According to reports of the Council on Foreign Relations, it's well-documented that Iran is a state sponsor of terror that funds such violent groups as Lebanese Hezbollah, which Iran helped organize in the 1980s, Palestinian Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. While your predecessor government was instrumental in providing the U.S. with intelligence and base support in the 2001 campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, your government is now undermining American troops in Iraq by funding, arming and providing safe transit to insurgent leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr and his forces. There are a number of reports that you also link your government with Syria's efforts to destabilize the fledgling Lebanese government through violence and political assassination.

My question is this: Why do you support well-documented terrorist organizations that continue to strike at peace and democracy in the Middle East, destroying lives and the civil society of the region?

The proxy war against the United States troops in Iraq — in a briefing before the National Press Club earlier this month, General David Petraeus reported that arms supplies from Iran, including 240- millimeter rockets and explosively formed projectiles, are contributing to, quote, "a sophistication of attacks that would by no means be possible without Iranian support." A number of Columbia graduates and current students are among the brave members of our military who are serving or have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. They, like other Americans with sons, daughters, fathers, husbands and wives serving in combat, rightly see your government as the enemy.

Can you tell them and us why Iran is fighting a proxy war in Iraq by arming Shi'a militia targeting and killing U.S. troops?

And finally Iran's nuclear program and international sanctions: This week, the United Nations Security Council is contemplating expanding sanctions for a third time, because of your government's refusal to suspend its uranium enrichment program. You continue to defy this world body by claiming a right to develop a peaceful nuclear power, but this hardly withstands scrutiny when you continue to issue military threats to neighbors. Last week, French President Sarkozy made clear his lost patience with your stall tactics, and even Russia and China have shown concern.

Why does your country continue to refuse to adhere to international standards for nuclear weapons verification, in defiance of agreements that you have made with the U.N. nuclear agency? And why have you chosen to make the people of your country vulnerable to the effects of international economic sanctions, and threaten to engulf the world in nuclear annihilation? (Applause.)

Let me close with a comment. Frankly — I close with this comment frankly and in all candor, Mr. President. I doubt that you will have the intellectual courage to answer these questions. But your avoiding them will in itself be meaningful to us. I do expect you to exhibit the

fanatical mindset that characterizes so much of what you say and do. Fortunately I am told by experts on your country that this only further undermines your position in Iran, with all the many good-hearted, intelligent citizens there.

A year ago, I am reliably told, your preposterous and belligerent statements in this country, as at one of the meetings at the Council on Foreign Relations, so embarrassed sensible Iranian citizens that this led to your party's defeat in the December mayoral elections. May this do that and more. (Applause.)

I am only a professor, who is also a university president.

And today I feel all the weight of the modern civilized world yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for. I only wish I could do better. Thank you. (Cheers, extended applause.)

MR. COATSWORTH: Thank you, Lee.

Our principal speaker today is His Excellency the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mr. President. (Applause.)

INTERPRETER: The president is reciting verses from the Holy Koran in Arabic. (Not translated.)

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Oh, God, hasten the arrival of Imam al- Mahdi and grant him good health and victory, and make us his followers and those who attest to his (rightfulness?).

Distinguished Dean, dear professors and students, ladies and gentlemen. At the outset, I would like to extend my greetings to all of you. I am grateful to the Almighty God for providing me with the opportunity to be in an academic environment, those seeking truth and striving for the promotion of science and knowledge.

At the outset, I want to complain a bit on the person who read this political statement against me. In Iran, tradition requires that when we demand a person to invite us as a — to be a speaker, we actually respect our students and the professors by allowing them to make their own judgment, and we don't think it's necessary before the speech is even given to come in — (applause) — with a series of claims and to attempt in a so-called manner to provide vaccination of some sort to our students and our faculty.

I think the text read by the (dear ?) gentleman here, more than addressing me, was an insult to information and the knowledge of the audience here, present here. In a university environment, we must allow people to speak their mind, to allow everyone to talk so that the truth is eventually revealed by all. Most certainly he took more than all the time I was allocated to speak. And that's fine with me. We'll just leave that to add up with the claims of respect for freedom and the freedom of speech that is given to us in this country.

In many parts of his speech, there were many insults and claims that were incorrect, regretfully. Of course, I think that he was affected by the press, the media and the political sort of mainstream line that you read here, that goes against the very grain of the need for peace and stability in the world around us.

Nonetheless, I should not begin by being affected by this unfriendly treatment.

I will tell you what I have to say, and then the questions he can raise and I'll be happy to provide answers. But for one of the issues that he did raise, I most certainly would need to elaborate further so that we for ourselves can see how things fundamentally work.

It was my decision in this valuable forum and meeting to speak with you about the importance of knowledge, of information, of education. Academics and religious scholars are shining torches who shed light in order to remove darkness and the ambiguities around us in guiding humanity out of ignorance and perplexity. The key to the understanding of the realities around us rests in the hands of the researchers, those who seek to undiscover (sic) areas that are hidden, the unknown sciences. The windows of realities that they can open is done only through efforts of the scholars and the learned people in this world. With every effort, there is a window that is opened and one reality is discovered.

Whenever the high stature of science and wisdom is preserved and the dignity of scholars and researchers are respected, humans have taken great strides towards their material and spiritual promotion. In contrast, whenever learned people and knowledge have been neglected, humans have become stranded in the darkness of ignorance and negligence. If it were not for human instinct, which tends towards continual discovery of the truth, humans would have always remained stranded in ignorance and no way would have discovered how to improve the lives that we are given. The nature of man is, in fact, a gift granted by the Almighty to all. The Almighty led mankind into this world and granted him wisdom and knowledge as his (kind ?) gift, enabling him to know his God.

In the story of Adam, a conversation occurs between the Almighty and his angels. The angels called human beings an ambitious and merciless creature and protested against his creation, but the Almighty responded, quote, "I have knowledge of what you are ignorant of," unquote. Then the Almighty told Adam the truth, and on the order of the Almighty, Adam revealed it to the angels.

The angels could not understand the truth as revealed by the human beings.

The Almighty said to them, quote, "Did not I say that I am aware of what is hidden in heaven and in the universe?" unquote. In this way, the angels prostrated themselves before Adam.

In the mission of all divine prophets, the first sermons were of the words of God, and those words "piety," "faith" and "wisdom" have been spread to all mankind. Guiding the holy prophet Moses — may peace be upon him — God says, quote, "And he was taught wisdom, the divine book, the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is the prophet appointed for the sake of the children of Israel, and I rightfully brought a sign from the Almighty. Holy Koran — (inaudible word) — sura," unquote.

The first words which were revealed to the holy prophet of Islam call the prophet to read, quote, "Read, read in the name of your God, who supersedes everything," unquote. The Almighty, quote again, "who taught the human being with the pen," unquote; quote, "the Almighty taught human beings what they were ignorant of," unquote.

You see in the first verses revealed to the holy prophet of Islam words of reading, teaching and the pen are mentioned. These verses in fact introduce the Almighty as the teacher of human beings, the teacher who taught humans what they were ignorant of. And another part of the — (inaudible word) — on the mission on the holy prophet of Islam — it is mentioned that the Almighty appointed someone from amongst the common people as their

prophet in order to, quote, “Read for them the divine verses,” unquote; and, quote again, “and purify them from ideological and ethical contaminations,” unquote; and, quote again, “to teach them the divine book and wisdom,” unquote.

My dear friends, all the words and messages of the divine prophets, from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to David and Soliman and Moses to Jesus and Mohammed, delivered humans from ignorance, negligence, superstitions, unethical behavior and corrupted ways of thinking with respect to knowledge and a path to knowledge, light and rightful ethics.

In our culture, the word “science” has been defined as “illumination.” In fact, the “science” means “brightness” and the real science is a science which rescues the human being from ignorance to his own benefit. In one of the widely accepted definitions of science, it is stated that it is the light which sheds to the hearts of those who have been selected by the Almighty; therefore, according to this definition, science is a divine gift, and the heart is where it resides.

If we accept that “science” means “illumination,” then its scope supersedes the experimental sciences, and it includes every hidden and disclosed reality. One of the main harms inflicted against science is to limit it to experimental and physical sciences; this harm occurs even though it extends far beyond this scope.

Realities of the world are not limited to physical realities. And the material is just a shadow of supreme realities, and physical creation is just one of the stories of the creation of the world. Human being is just an example of the creation that is a combination of the material and the spirit.

And another important point is the relationship of science and purity of spirit, life, behavior and ethics of the human being. In the teachings of the divine prophet, one reality shall always be attached to science. The reality of purity of spirit and good behavior, knowledge and wisdom is pure and clear reality. It is — science is a light. It is a discovery of reality, and only a pure scholar and researcher, free from wrong ideologies, superstitions, selfishness and material trappings, can discover the reality.

My dear friends and scholars, distinguished participants, science and wisdom can also be misused, a misuse caused by selfishness, corruption, material desires and material interests, as well as individual and group interests. Material desires place humans against the realities of the world. Corrupted independent human beings resist acceptance of reality and even if they do accept it, they do not obey it.

There are many scholars who are aware of the realities but do not accept them. Their selfishness does not allow them to accept those realities. Did those who in the course of human history wage wars not understand the reality that lives, properties, dignity, territories and the rights of all human beings should be respected? Or did they understand it but neither have faith in nor abide by it?

My dear friends, as long as the human heart is not free from hatred, envy and selfishness, it does not abide by the truth, by the illumination of science and science itself. Science is the light and scientists must be pure and pious. If humanity achieves the highest level of physical and spiritual knowledge, but its scholars and scientists are not pure, then this knowledge cannot serve the interest of humanity, and several events can ensue.

First, the wrongdoers reveal only a part of the reality which is to their own benefit and conceal the rest, as we have witnessed with respect to the scholars of the divine religions in the past too. Unfortunately today we see that certain researchers and scientists are still hiding the truth from the people.

Second, scientists and scholars are misused for personal, group or party interests. So in today's world, ruling powers are misusing many scholars and scientists in different fields, with the purpose of stripping nations of their wealth.

And they use all opportunities only for their own benefit.

For example, they deceive people by using scientific methods and tools. They, in fact, wish to justify their own wrongdoings, though, by creating nonexistent enemies, for example, and have insecure atmosphere. They try to control all in the name of combatting insecurity and terrorism. They even violate individual and social freedoms in their own nations under that pretext. They do not respect the privacy of their own people. They tap telephone calls and try to control their people. They create an insecure psychological atmosphere in order to justify their warmongering acts in different parts of the world.

As another example, by using precise scientific methods and planning, they begin their onslaught on the domestic cultures of nations, the cultures which are the result of thousands of years of interaction, creativity and artistic activities. They try to eliminate these cultures in order to separate the people from their identity and cut their bonds with their own history and values. They prepare the ground for stripping people from their spiritual and material wealth by instilling in them feelings of intimidation, desire for imitation and mere consumption, submission to oppressive powers, and disability.

Making nuclear, chemical and biological bombs and weapons of mass destruction is yet another result of the misuse of science and research by the big powers. Without cooperation of certain scientists and scholars, we would not have witnessed production of different nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Are these weapons to protect global security? What can a perpetual nuclear umbrella threat achieve for the sake of humanity? If nuclear war wages between nuclear powers, what human catastrophe will take place? Today we can see the nuclear effects in even new generations of Nagasaki and Hiroshima residents which might be witness in even the next generations to come. Presently, effects of the depleted uranium used in weapons since the beginning of the war in Iraq can be examined and investigated accordingly. These catastrophes take place only when scientists and scholars are misused by oppressors.

Another point of sorrow, some big powers create a monopoly over science and prevent other nations in achieving scientific development as well.

This, too, is one of the surprises of our time. Some big powers do not want to see the progress of other societies and nations. They turn to thousands of reasons, make allegations, place economic sanctions to prevent other nations from developing and advancing, all resulting from their distance from human values, moral values and the teachings of the divine prophet. Regretfully, they have not been trained to serve mankind.

Dear academics, dear faculty and scholars, students, I believe that the biggest God-given gift to man is science and knowledge. Man's search for knowledge and the truth through science is what it guarantees to do in getting close to God, but science has to combine with

the purity of the spirit and of the purity of man's spirit so that scholars can unveil the truth and then use that truth for advancing humanity's cause.

These scholars would be not only people who would guide humanity, but also guide humanity towards the future, better future. And it is necessary that big powers should not allow mankind to engage in monopolistic activities and to prevent other nations from achieving that science. Science is a divine gift by God to everyone, and therefore it must remain pure. God is aware of all reality. All researchers and scholars are loved by God.

So I hope there will be a day where these scholars and scientists will rule the world and God himself will arrive with Moses and Christ and Mohammed to rule the world and to take us towards justice.

I'd like to thank you now, but refer to two points made in the introduction given about me, and then I will be open for any questions.

Last year, I would say two years ago, I raised two questions. You know that my main job is a university instructor. Right now as president of Iran I still continue teaching graduate and Ph.D.-level courses on a weekly basis. My students are working with me in scientific fields. I believe that I am an academic myself, so I speak with you from an academic point of view.

And I raised two questions. But instead of a response, I got a wave of insults and allegations against me, and regretfully, they came mostly from groups who claimed most to believe in the freedom of speech and the freedom of information. You know quite well that Palestine is an old wound, as old as 60 years.

For 60 years, these people are displaced; for 60 years, these people are being killed; for 60 years, on a daily basis, there's conflict and terror; for 60 years, innocent women and children are destroyed and killed by helicopters and airplanes that break the house over their heads; for 60 years, children in kindergartens in schools, in high schools are in prison being tortured; for 60 years, security in the Middle East has been in danger; for 60 years, the slogan of expansionism from the Nile to the Euphrates has been chanted by certain groups in that part of the world.

And as an academic, I ask two questions, the same two questions that I will ask here again. And you judge for yourselves whether the response to these questions should be the insults, the allegations and all the words and the negative propaganda, or should we really try and face these two questions and respond to them? Like you, like any academic, I, too, will keep — not get — become silent until I get the answers, so I am awaiting logical answers instead of insults.

My first question was, if, given that the Holocaust is a present reality of our time, a history that occurred, why is there not sufficient research that can approach the topic from different perspectives? Our friends refer to 1930 as the point of the departure for this development; however, I believe the Holocaust, from what we read, happened during World War II after 1930 in the 1940s. So, you know, we have to really be able to trace the event.

My question was simple. There are researchers who want to push the topic from a different perspective. Why are they put into prison? Right now there are a number of European academics who have been sent to prison because they attempted to write about the Holocaust, so researchers from a different perspective, questioning certain aspects of it —

my question is, why isn't it open to all forms of research? I have been told that there's been enough research on the topic. And I ask, well, when it comes to topics such as freedom, topics such as democracy, concepts and norms such as God, religion, physics even or chemistry, there's been a lot of research, but we still continue more research on those topics. We encourage it. But then why don't we encourage more research on a historical event that has become the root, the cause of many heavy catastrophes in the region in this time and age? Why shouldn't there be more research about the root causes? That was my first question.

And my second question — well, given this historical event, if it is a reality, we need to still question whether the Palestinian people should be paying for it or not. After all, it happened in Europe. The Palestinian people had no role to play in it. So why is it that the Palestinian people are paying the price of an event they had nothing to do with?

The Palestinian people didn't commit any crime. They had no role to play in World War II. They were living with the Jewish communities and the Christian communities in peace at the time. They didn't have any problems. And today, too, Jews, Christians and Muslims live in brotherhood all over the world, in many parts of the world. They don't have any serious problems.

But why is it that the Palestinians should pay a price, innocent Palestinians? For 5 million people to remain displaced or refugees of war for 60 years are — is this not a crime? Is asking about these crimes a crime by itself? Why should an academic, myself, face insults when asking questions like this? Is this what you call freedom and upholding the freedom of thought?

And as for the second topic, Iran's nuclear issue — I know there's time limits, but I need time. I mean, a lot of time was taken from me.

We are a country. We are a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. For over 33 years we were a member state of the agency. The bylaw of the agency explicitly states that all member states have the right to the peaceful nuclear fuel technology. This is an explicit statement made in the bylaw. And the bylaw says that there is no pretext or excuse, even the inspections carried by the IAEA itself — that can prevent member states' right to have that right.

Of course, the IAEA is responsible to carry out inspections. We are one of the countries that's carried out the most amount of — level of cooperation with the IAEA. They've had hours and weeks and days of inspections in our country. And over and over again, the agency's reports indicate that Iran's activities are peaceful, that they have not detected a deviation, and that Iran has — they've received positive cooperation from Iran. But regrettably, two or three monopolistic powers, selfish powers, want to force their word on the Iranian people and deny them their right. They keep saying — one minute. (Laughter, applause.)

They tell us you don't let them — they won't let them inspect. Why not? Of course we do. How come is it anyway that you have that right and we can't have it? We want to have the right to peaceful nuclear energy. They tell us, "Don't make it yourself. We'll give it to you."

Well, in the past, I tell you, we had contracts with the U.S. government, with the British government, the French government, the German government and the Canadian

government on nuclear development for peaceful purposes. But unilaterally, each and every one of them canceled their contracts with us, as a result of which the Iranian people had to pay the heavy cost in billions of dollars.

Why do we need the fuel from you? You've not even given us spare aircraft parts that we need for civilian aircraft for 28 years, under the name of the embargo and sanctions, because we are against, for example, human rights or freedom? Under that pretext you deny us that technology?

We want to have the right to self-determination towards our future. We want to be independent. Don't interfere in us. If you don't give us spare parts for civilian aircraft, what is the expectation that you'd give us fuel for nuclear development for peaceful purposes?

For 30 years we've faced these problems; for over \$5 billion to the Germans and then to the Russians, but we haven't gotten anything, and the worst have not been completed. It is our right, we want our right, and we don't want anything beyond the law, nothing less than what international law. We are a peaceful-loving nation. We love all nations. (Applause, cheers, booing.)

MR. COATSWORTH: Mr. President, your statements here today and in the past have provoked many questions which I would like to pose to you on behalf of the students and faculty who have submitted them to me.

Let me begin with the question to which you just —

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: (In English.) It is one by one, one by one.

MR. COATSWORTH: One by one, it is, yes. (Applause.)

The first question is: Do you or your government seek the destruction of the state of Israel as a Jewish state?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: We love all nations. We are friends with the Jewish people. There are many Jews in Iran living peacefully with security. You must understand that in our constitution, in our laws, in the parliamentary elections, for every 150,000 people we get one representative in the parliament. For the Jewish community, one-fifth of this number they still get one independent representative in the parliament. So our proposal to the Palestinian plight is a humanitarian and democratic proposal.

What we say is that to solve the 60-year problem we must allow the Palestinian people to decide about its future for itself. This is compatible with the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations and the fundamental principles enshrined in it. We must allow Jewish Palestinians, Muslim Palestinians and Christian Palestinians to determine their own fate themselves through a free referendum. Whatever they choose as a nation everybody should accept and respect. Nobody should interfere in the affairs of the Palestinian nation. Nobody should sow the seeds of discord. Nobody should spend tens of billions of dollars equipping and arming one group there.

We say allow the Palestinian nation to decide its own future, to have the right to self-determination for itself. This is what we are saying as the Iranian nation. (Applause.)

MR. COATSWORTH: Mr. President, I think many members of our audience would be — would

like to hear a clearer answer to that question, that is — (interrupted by cheers, applause).

The question is: Do you or your government seek the destruction of the state of Israel as a Jewish state? And I think you could answer that question with a single word, either yes or no. (Cheers, applause.)

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: And then you want the answer the way you want to hear it. Well, this isn't really a free flow of information. I'm just telling you where I — what my position is. (Applause.)

I'm asking you, is the Palestinian issue not an international issue of prominence or not? Please tell me, yes or no. (Laughter, applause.)

There's a plight of a people.

MR. COATSWORTH: The answer to your question is yes. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Well, thank you for your cooperation.

It is — we recognize there is a problem there that's been going on for 60 years. Everybody provides a solution, and our solution is a free referendum. Let this referendum happen, and then you'll see what the results are. Let the people of Palestine freely choose what they want for their future. And then what you want in your mind to happen, it will happen and will be realized. (Applause.)

MR. COATSWORTH: Which was posed by President Bollinger earlier and comes from a number of other students. Why is your government providing aid to terrorists? Will you stop doing so and permit international monitoring to certify that you have stopped?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Well, I want to pose a question here to you. If someone comes and explodes bombs around you, threatens your president, members of the administration, kills the members of the Senate or Congress, how would you treat them? Would you award them or would you name them a terrorist group? Well, it's clear. You would call them a terrorist.

My dear friends, the Iranian nation is a victim of terrorism. For — 26 years ago, where I work, close to where I work, in a terrorist operation, the elected president of the Iranian nation and the elected prime minister of Iran lost their lives in a bomb explosion. They turned into ashes.

A month later, in another terrorist operation, 72 members of our parliament and highest ranking officials, including four ministers and eight deputy ministers, bodies were shattered into pieces as a result of terrorist attacks. Within six months, over 4,000 Iranians lost their lives, assassinated by terrorist groups, all this carried out by the hand of one single terrorist group. Regretfully that same terrorist group, now, today, in your country, is being — operating under the support of the U.S. administration, working freely, distributing declarations freely. And their camps in Iraq are supported by the U.S. government. They're secured by the U.S. government.

Our nation has been harmed by terrorist activities. We were the first nation that objected to terrorism and the first to uphold the need to fight terrorism. (Applause.)

MR. COATSWORTH: A number of questioners, sorry, a number of people have asked.

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: We need to address the root causes of terrorism and eradicate those root causes.

We live in the Middle East. For us, it's quite clear which powers sort of incite terrorists, support them, fund them. We know that. Our nation, the Iranian nation, through history has always extended a hand of friendship to other nations. We're a cultured nation. We don't need to resort to terrorism.

We've been victims of terrorism ourselves, and it's regrettable that people who argue they're fighting terrorism, instead of supporting the Iranian people and nation, instead of fighting the terrorists that are attacking them, they're supporting the terrorists and then turn the fingers to us. This is most regrettable.

MR. COATSWORTH: A further set of questions challenge your view of the Holocaust. Since the evidence that this occurred in Europe in the 1940s as a result of the actions of the German Nazi government, since that — those facts are well-documented, why are you calling for additional research? There seems to be no purpose in doing so, other than to question whether the Holocaust actually occurred as an historical fact. Can you explain why you believe more research is needed into the facts of what are — what is incontrovertible?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Thank you very much for your question. I am an academic, and you are as well. Can you argue that researching a phenomenon is finished forever, done? Can we close the books for good on a historical event? There are different perspectives that come to light after every research is done. Why should we stop research at all? Why should we stop the progress of science and knowledge? You shouldn't ask me why I'm asking questions. You should ask yourselves why you think that it's questionable.

Why do you want to stop the progress of science and research? Do you ever take what's known as absolute in physics? We had principles in mathematics that were granted to be absolute in mathematics for over 800 years, but new science has gotten rid of those absolutism, gotten — forward other different logics of looking at mathematics, and sort of turned the way we look at it as a science altogether after 800 years. So we must allow researchers, scholars to investigate into everything, every phenomenon — God, universe, human beings, history, and civilization. Why should we stop that?

I'm not saying that it didn't happen at all. This is not (the ?) judgment that I'm passing here. I said in my second question, granted this happened, what does it have to do with the Palestinian people? This is a serious question. They're two dimension. In the first question, I —

MR. COATSWORTH: Let me just — let me pursue this a bit further. It is difficult to have a scientific discussion if there isn't at least some basis — some empirical basis, some agreement about what the facts are. So, calling for research into the facts when the facts are so well-established represents for many a challenging of the facts themselves and a denial that something terrible occurred in Europe in those years. (Applause.)

Let me move on to — (pause).

Mr. President, another student asks, Iranian women are now denied basic human rights, and your government has imposed draconian punishments, including execution on Iranian

citizens who are homosexuals. Why are you doing those things?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Those in Iran are genuine true freedoms. The Iranian people are free. Women in Iran enjoy the highest levels of freedoms. We have two deputy vice — well, two vice presidents that are female at the highest levels of speciality; specialized (roles ?) in our parliament and our government and our universities, they are present in our biotechnological fields and our technological fields. There are hundreds of women scientists that are active in the political realm as well.

It's not — it's wrong for some governments, when they disagree with another government, to sort of — try to spread lies that distort the full truth. Our nation is free. It has the highest level of participation in elections. In Iran, 80 percent — 90 percent of the people turn out for votes during the elections, half of which — over half of which are women, so how can we say that women are not free? Is that the entire truth?

But as for the executions, I'd like to raise two questions. If someone comes and establishes a network for illicit drug trafficking that affects the (use ?) in Iran, Turkey, Europe, the United States by introducing these illicit drugs and destroys them, would you ever reward them? People who lead the lives — cause the deterioration of the lives of hundreds of millions of youth around the world, including in Iran, can we have any sympathy to them? Don't you have capital punishment in the United States? You do, too. (Applause.)

In Iran, too, there's capital punishment for illicit drug traffickers, for people who violate the rights of people.

If somebody takes up a gun, goes into a house, kills a group of people there, and then tries to take ransom, how would you confront them in Iran with — in the United States? Would you reward them? Can a physician allow microbes, symbolically speaking, to spread across a nation? We have laws. People who violate the public rights of the people by using guns, killing people, creating insecurity, sell drugs, distribute drugs at a high level are sentenced to execution in Iran, and some of these punishments — very few are carried in the public eye, before the public eye. It's a law based on democratic principles. You use injections and microbes to kill these people, and they are executed or they're hung, but the end result is killing.

MR. COATSWORTH: (Off mike) — and drug smugglers. The question was about sexual preference and women. (Applause.)

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. (Laughter.) We don't have that in our country. (Booing.) In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who's told you that we have it. (Laughter.)

But as for women, maybe you think that being a woman is a crime. It's not a crime to be a woman. Women are the best creatures created by God. They represent the kindness, the beauty that God instills in them. Women are respected in Iran. In Iran, every family who's given a girl is given — in every Iranian family who has a girl, they're 10 times happier than having a son. Women are respected more than men are. They are exempt from many responsibilities. Many of the legal responsibilities rest on the shoulders of men in our society because of the respect culturally given to women, to the future mothers. In Iranian culture, men and sons and girls constantly kiss the hands of their mothers as a sign of respect, a respect for women, and we are proud of this culture.

MR. COATSWORTH: (Off mike) — one is, what did you hope to accomplish by speaking at Columbia today?

And the second is, what would you have said if you were permitted to visit the site of the September 11th tragedy?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Well, here I'm your guest. I've been invited by Columbia, an official invitation given for me to come here, but I do want to say something here.

In Iran, when you invite a guest you respect them. This is our tradition required by our culture, and I know that American people have that culture as well.

Last year, I wanted to go to the site of the September 11th tragedy to show respect to the victims of the tragedy, show my sympathy with their families, but our plans got overextended. We were involved in negotiations and meetings `till midnight, and they said it would be very difficult to go visit the site at that late hour of the night. So I told my friends then that we need to plan this for the following year, so that I can go and visit the site and to show my respects. Regretfully, some groups had very strong reactions, very bad reactions. It's bad for someone — to prevent someone to show sympathy to the families of the victims of the September 11 event — tragic event.

This is a respect from my side. Somebody told me this is an insult. I said: What are you saying? This is my way of showing my respect. Why would you think that? Thinking like that, how do you expect to manage the world and world affairs? Don't you think that a lot of problems in the world come from the way you look at issues because of this kind of way of thinking, because of this sort of pessimistic approach towards a lot of people because of certain level of selfishness, self-absorption that needs to be put aside so that we can show respect to everyone, to allow an environment for friendship to grow, to allow all nations to talk with one another and move towards peace?

I wanted to speak with the press. There is 11 September — September 11 tragic event was a huge event. It led to a lot of many other events afterwards. After 9/11, Afghanistan was occupied and then Iraq was occupied, and for six years in our region there is insecurity, terror and fear. If the root causes of 9/11 are examined properly — why it happened, what caused it, what were the conditions that led to it, who truly was involved, who was really involved — and put it all together to understand how to prevent the crisis in Iraq, fix the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

MR. COATSWORTH: A number of questions have asked about your nuclear program. Why is your government seeking to acquire enriched uranium suitable for nuclear weapons? Will you stop doing so?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: Our nuclear program, first and foremost, operates within the framework of law, and second, under the inspections of the IAEA, and thirdly, they are completely peaceful. The technology we have is for enrichment below the level of 5 percent level, and any level below 5 percent is solely for providing fuel to power plants. Repeated reports by the IAEA explicitly say that there is no indication that Iran has deviated from the peaceful path of its nuclear program. We're all well aware that Iran's nuclear issue is a political issue; it's not a legal issue.

The International Atomic Energy Organization — Agency has verified that our activities are

for peaceful purposes. But there are two or three powers that think that they have the right to monopolize all science and knowledge. And they expect the Iranian people, the Iranian nation, to turn to others to get fuel, to get science, to get knowledge that's indigenous to itself — to humble itself. And then they would of course refrain from giving it to us too.

So we're quite clear on what we need. If you have created the fifth generation of atomic bombs and are testing them already, what position are you in to question the peaceful purposes of other people who want nuclear power? (Applause.) We do not believe in nuclear weapons, period. It goes against the whole grain of humanity.

So let me just tell a joke here. I think the politicians who are after atomic bombs or are testing them, making them — politically they are backward, retarded. (Applause.)

MR. COATSWORTH: I know your time is short and that you need to move on.

Is Iran prepared to open broad discussions with the government of the United States? What would Iran hope to achieve in such discussions? How do you see, in the future, a resolution of the points of conflict between the government of the United States and the government of Iran?

PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD: From the start, we announced that we are ready to negotiate with all countries. Since 28 years ago, when our revolution succeeded and we established — we took freedom and democracy that was held at bay by a pro-Western dictatorship, we announced our readiness that besides two countries, we are ready to have friendly relations and talks with all countries of the world. One of those two was the apartheid regime of South Africa, which has been eliminated, and the second is the Zionist regime. For everybody else around the world, we announced that we want to have friendly, brotherly ties.

The Iranian nation is a cultured nation. It is a civilized nature. It seeks, it wants, new talks and negotiations. It's for it. We believe that in negotiations and talks, everything can be resolved very easily. We don't need threats; we don't need to point bombs or guns; we don't need to get into conflict if we talk. We have a clear logical about that.

We question the way the world is being run and managed today. We believe that it will not lead to viable peace and security for the world, the way it's run today. We have solutions based on humane values and for relations among states. With the U.S. government, too, we will negotiate. We don't have any issues about that, under fair, just circumstances with mutual respect on both sides.

You saw that in order to help the security of Iraq, we had three rounds of talks with the United States. And last year, before coming to New York, I announced that I am ready, in the United Nations, to engage in a debate with Mr. Bush, the president of the United States, about critical international issues. So that shows that we want to talk, having a debate before the world public — before all the audience, so that truth is revealed, so that misunderstandings and misperceptions are removed, so that we can find a clear path for brotherly and friendly relations. I think that if the U.S. administration — if the U.S. government puts aside some of its old behaviors, it can actually be a good friend for the Iranian people, for the Iranian nation.

For 28 years they've consistently threatened us, insulted us, prevented our scientific development, every day under one pretext or another. You all know Saddam the dictator

was supported by the government of the United States and some European countries in attacking Iran. And in — he carried out an eight-year war, a criminal war. Over 200,000 Iranians were — lost their lives. Over 600,000 Iranians were hurt as a result of a war. He used chemical weapons; thousands of Iranians were victims of chemical weapons that he used against us. Today, Mr. Nohal Vinh (ph), who is a reporter, an official reporter, international reporter, who was covering U.N. reports in U.N. for many years, he is one of the victims of the chemical weapons used by Iraq against us.

And since then, we've been under different propaganda sort of embargoes, economic sanctions, political sanctions. Why? Because we got rid of a dictator? Because we wanted the freedom and democracy that we got for ourselves? But we can't always tell. We think that if the U.S. government recognizes the rights of the Iranian people, respects all nations, and extends a hand of friendship with all Iranians, they too will see that Iranians will be one of its best friends.

Will you allow me to thank the audience a moment?

I — well, there are many things that I would have liked to cover, but I don't want to take your time any further. I was asked, would I allow the faculty and Columbia students here to come to Iran? From this platform, I invite Columbia faculty members and students to come and visit Iran, to speak with our university students. You are officially invited. (Applause).

University faculty and the students that the university decides are the student association's chosen select are welcome to come. You're welcome to visit any university that you choose inside Iran. We'll provide you with a list of the universities. There are over 400 universities in our country, and you can choose whichever you want to go and visit.

We'll give you the true platform. You can — we'll respect you 100 percent. We will have our students sit there and listen to you, speak with you, hear what you have to say.

Right now in our universities on a daily basis, there are hundreds of meetings like this. They hear, they talk, they ask questions, they welcome it.

In the end, I'd like to thank Columbia University. I had heard that many politicians in the United States are trained in Columbia University, and there are many people here who believe in the freedom of speech, in clear, frank conversations; I do like to extend my gratitude to the managers here in the United States — at Columbia University — I apologize — the people who so well-organized this meeting today. I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to the faculty members and the dear students here. I ask Almighty God to assist all of us to move hand in hand to establish peace and future filled with friendship and justice and brotherhood. Best of luck to all of you. (Applause.)

MR. BOLLINGER: I'm sorry that President Ahmadinejad's schedule makes it necessary for him to leave before he's been able to answer many of the questions that we have or even answer some of the ones that we posed to him. (Laughter, applause.) But I think we can all be pleased that his appearance here demonstrates Columbia's deep commitment to free expression and debate. I want to thank you all for coming to participate. (Applause.)

Thank you.

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