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“Have You No Sense of Decency?” Congressional Hearings of University Presidents on Student Uprisings

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The recent Congressional hearings leading to a bloodbath of university presidents brings back memories from my teen-age years in the 1950s when everyone’s eyes were glued to the TV broadcast of the McCarthy hearings.

And the student revolts incited by vicious college presidents trying to stifle academic freedom when it opposes foreign unjust wars awakens memories of the 1960s protests against the Vietnam War and the campus clampdowns confronting police violence. I was the junior member of the “Columbia three” alongside Seymour Melman and my mentor Terence McCarthy (both of whom taught at Columbia’s Seeley Mudd School of Industrial Engineering; my job was mainly to handle publicity and publication). At the end of that decade, students occupied my office and all others at the New School’s graduate faculty in New York City – very peacefully, without disturbing any of my books and papers.

Only the epithets have changed. The invective “Communist” has been replaced by “anti-Semite,” and the renewal of police violence on campus has not yet led to a Kent State-style rifle barrage against protesters.

But the common denominators are all here once again. A concerted effort has been organized to condemn and even to punish today’s nationwide student uprisings against the genocide occurring in Gaza and the West Bank. Just as the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) aimed to end the careers of progressive actors, directors, professors and State Department officials unsympathetic to Chiang Kai-Shek or sympathetic to the Soviet Union from 1947 to 1975, today’s version aims at ending what remains of academic

freedom in the United States.

The epithet of "communism" from 75 years ago has been updated to "anti-Semitism." **Senator Joe McCarthy** of Wisconsin has been replaced by **Elise Stefanik**, House Republican from upstate New York, and **Senator "Scoop" Jackson** upgraded to **President Joe Biden**. Harvard University President Claudine Gay (now forced to resign), former University of Pennsylvania President Elizabeth Magill (also given the boot), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Sally Kornbluth were called upon to abase themselves by promising to accuse peace advocates critical of U.S. foreign policy of anti-Semitism.

Image: Nemat 'Minouche' Shafik (Licensed under CC BY 2.0)

The most recent victim was Columbia's president **Nemat "Minouche" Shafik,** a cosmopolitan opportunist with trilateral citizenship who enforced neoliberal economic policy as a high-ranking official at the IMF (where she was no stranger to the violence of "IMF riots") and the World Bank, and who brought her lawyers along to help her acquiesce in the Congressional Committee's demands.

She did that and more, all on her own. Despite being told not to by the faculty and student affairs committees, she called in the police to arrest peaceful demonstrators. This radical trespass of police violence against peaceful demonstrators (the police themselves attested to their peacefulness) triggered sympathetic revolts throughout the United States, met with even more violent police responses at Emory College in Atlanta and California State Polytechnic, where cell phone videos were quickly posted on various media platforms.

Just as intellectual freedom and free speech were attacked by HUAC 75 years ago, academic freedom is now under attack at these universities. The police have trespassed onto school grounds to accuse students themselves of trespassing, with violence reminiscent of the demonstrations that peaked in May 1970 when the Ohio National Guard shot Kent State students singing and speaking out against America's war in Vietnam.

Today's demonstrations are in opposition to the Biden-Netanyahu genocide in Gaza and the West Bank. The more underlying crisis can be boiled down to the insistence by **Benjamin**

Netanyahu that to criticize Israel is anti-Semitic. That is the "enabling slur" of today's assault on academic freedom.

By "Israel," Biden and Netanyahu mean specifically the right-wing Likud Party and its theocratic supporters aiming to create "a land without a [non-Jewish] people." They assert that Jews owe their loyalty not to their current nationality (or humanity) but to Israel and its policy of driving the Gaza Strip's millions of Palestinians into the sea by bombing them out of their homes, hospitals and refugee camps.

The implication is that to support the International Court of Justice's accusations that Israel is plausibly committing genocide is an anti-Semitic act. Supporting the UN resolutions vetoed by the United States is anti-Semitic.

The claim is that Israel is defending itself and that protesting the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank frightens Jewish students. But research by students at Columbia's School of Journalism found that the complaints cited by the *New York Times* and other pro-Israeli media were made by non-students trying to spread the story that Israel's violence was in self-defense.

The student violence has been by Israeli nationals. Columbia has a student-exchange program with Israel for students who finish their compulsory training with the Israeli Defense Forces. It was some of these exchange students who attacked pro-Gaza demonstrators, spraying them with Skunk, a foul-smelling indelible Israeli army chemical weapon that marks demonstrators for subsequent arrest, torture or assassination. The only students endangered were the victims of this attack. Columbia under Shafik did nothing to protect or help the victims.

The hearings to which she submitted speak for themselves. Columbia's president Shafik was able to avoid the first attack on universities not sufficiently pro-Likud by having meetings outside of the country. Yet she showed herself willing to submit to the same brow-beating that had led her two fellow presidents to be fired, hoping that her lawyers had prompted her to submit in a way that would be acceptable to the committee.

I found the most demagogic attack to be that of Republican **Congressman Rick Allen** from Georgia, asking Dr. Shafik whether she was familiar with the passage in Genesis 12.3. As he explained

> "It was a covenant that God made with Abraham. And that covenant was real clear. … 'If you bless Israel, I will bless you. If you curse Israel, I will curse you.' … Do you consider that to be a serious issue? I mean, do you want Columbia University to be cursed by God of the Bible?"[1]

Shafik smiled and was friendly all the way through this bible thumping, and replied meekly, "Definitely not."

She might have warded off this browbeating question by saying, "Your question is bizarre. This is 2024, and America is not a theocracy. And the Israel of the early 1st century BC was not Netanyahu's Israel of today." She accepted all the accusations that Allen and his fellow Congressional inquisitors threw at her.

Her main nemesis was **Elise Stefanik,** Chair of the House Republican Conference, who is on the House Armed Services Committee, and the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

> Congresswoman Stefanik: You were asked were there any anti-Jewish protests and you said 'No'.
>
> President Shafik: So the protest was not labeled as an anti-Jewish protest. It was labeled as an anti-Israeli government. But antisemitic incidents happened or antisemitic things were said. So I just wanted to finish.
>
> Congresswoman Stefanik: And you are aware that in that bill, that got 377 Members out of 435 Members of Congress, condemns 'from the river to the sea' as antisemitic?
>
> Dr. Shafik: Yes, I am aware of that.
>
> Congresswoman Stefanik: But you don't believe 'from the river to the sea' is antisemitic?
>
> Dr. Shafik: We have already issued a statement to our community saying that language is hurtful and we would prefer not to hear it on our campus.[2]

What an appropriate response to Stefanik's browbeating might have been?

Shafik could have said,

> "The reason why students are protesting is against the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, as the International Court of Justice has ruled, and most of the United Nations agree. I'm proud of them for taking a moral stand that most of the world supports but is under attack here in this room."

Instead, Shafik seemed more willing than the leaders of Harvard or Penn to condemn and potentially discipline students and faculty for using the term "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." She could have said that it is absurd to say that this is a call to eliminate Israel's Jewish population, but is a call to give Palestinians freedom instead of being treated as *Untermenschen*.

Asked explicitly whether calls for genocide violate Columbia's code of conduct, Dr. Shafik answered in the affirmative — "Yes, it does." So did the other Columbia leaders who accompanied her at the hearing. They did not say that this is not at all what the protests are about. Neither Shafik nor any other of the university officials say,

> "Our university is proud of our students taking an active political and social role in protesting the idea of ethnic cleansing and outright murder of families simply to grab the land that they live on. Standing up for that moral principle is what education is all about, and what civilization's all about."

The one highlight that I remember from the McCarthy hearings was the reply by **Joseph Welch**, the U.S. Army's Special Council, on June 9, 1954 to Republican Senator Joe McCarthy's charge that one of Welch's attorneys had ties to a Communist front organization.

> "Until this moment, senator," Welsh replied, "I think I never gauged your cruelty or your

> recklessness. … Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

The audience broke into wild applause. Welch's put-down has echoed for the past 70 years in the minds of those who were watching television then (as I was, at age 15). A similar answer by any of the three other college presidents would have shown Stefanik to be the vulgarian that she is. But none ventured to stand up against the abasement.

The Congressional attack accusing opponents of genocide in Gaza as anti-Semites supporting genocide against the Jews is bipartisan. Already in December, **Rep. Suzanne Bonamici** (D-Ore.) helped cause Harvard and Penn's presidents to be fired for their stumbling over her red-baiting. She repeated her question to Shafik on April 17: "Does calling for the genocide of Jews violate Columbia's code of conduct?" Bonamici asked the four new Columbia witnesses. All responded: "Yes."

That was the moment when they should have said that the students were not calling for genocide *of* the Jews, but seeking to mobilize opposition to genocide being committed *by* the Likud government against the Palestinians with President Biden's full support.

During a break in the proceedings Rep. Stefanik told the press that "the witnesses were overheard discussing how well they thought their testimony was going for Columbia." This arrogance is eerily reminiscent to the previous three university presidents who believed when walking out of the hearing that their testimony was acceptable.

> "Columbia is in for a reckoning of accountability. If it takes a member of Congress to force a university president to fire a pro-terrorist, antisemitic faculty chair, then Columbia University leadership is failing Jewish students and its academic mission," added Stefanik. "No amount of overlawyered, overprepped, and over-consulted testimony is going to cover up for failure to act."[3]

Shafik could have pointedly corrected the implications by the House inquisitors that it was Jewish students who needed protection. The reality was just the opposite: The danger was from the Israeli IDF students who attacked the demonstrators with military Skunk, with no punishment by Columbia.

Despite being told not to by the faculty and student groups (which Shafik was officially bound to consult), she called in the police, who arrested 107 students, tied their hands behind their backs and kept them that way for many hours as punishment while charging them for trespassing on Columbia's property. Shafik then suspended them from classes.

The Clash Between Two Kinds of Judaism: Zionist vs. Assimilationist

A good number of these protestors being criticized were Jewish. Netanyahu and AIPAC have claimed – correctly, it seems – that the greatest danger to their current genocidal policies comes from the traditionally liberal Jewish middle-class population. Progressive Jewish groups have joined the uprisings at Columbia and other universities.

Early Zionism arose in late 19th-century Europe as a response to the violent pogroms killing Jews in Ukrainian cities such as Odessa and other Central European cities that were the center of anti-Semitism. Zionism promised to create a safe refuge. It made sense at a time when Jews were fleeing their countries to save their lives in countries that accepted them.

They were the “Gazans” of their day.

After World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust anti-Semitism became passé. Most Jews in the United States and other countries were being assimilated and becoming prosperous, most successfully in the United States. The past century has seen this success enable them to assimilate, while retaining the moral standard that ethnic and religious discrimination such as that which their forbears had suffered is wrong in principle. Jewish activists were in the forefront of fighting for civil liberties, most visibly against anti-Black prejudice and violence in the 1960s and ‘70s, and against the Vietnam War. Many of my Jewish school friends in the 1950s bought Israel bonds, but thought of Israel as a socialist country and thought of volunteering to work on a kibbutz in the summer. There was no thought of antagonism, and I heard no mention of the Palestinian population when the phrase “a people without a land in a land without a people” was spoken.

But Zionism’s leaders have remained obsessed with the old antagonisms in the wake of Nazism’s murders of so many Jews. In many ways they have turned Nazism inside out, fearing a renewed attack from non-Jews. Driving the Arabs out of Israel and making it an apartheid state was just the opposite of what assimilationist Jews aimed at.

The moral stance of progressive Jews, and the ideal that Jews, blacks and members of all other religions and races should be treated equally, is the opposite of Israeli Zionism. In the hands of Netanyahu’s Likud Party and the influx of right-wing supporters, Zionism asserts a claim to set Jewish people apart from the rest of their national population, and even from the rest of the world, as we are seeing today.

Claiming to speak for all Jews, living and dead, Netanyahu asserts that to criticize his genocide and the Palestinian holocaust, the *nakba*, is anti-Semitic. This is the position of Stefanik and her fellow committee members. It is an assertion that Jews owe their first allegiance to Israel, and hence to its ethnic cleansing and mass murder since last October. President Biden also has labeled the student demonstrations “antisemitic protests.”

This claim in the circumstances of Israel’s ongoing genocide is causing more anti-Semitism than anyone since Hitler. If people throughout the world come to adopt Netanyahu’s and his cabinet’s definition of anti-Semitism, how many, being repulsed by Israel’s actions, will say, “If that is the case, then indeed I guess I’m anti-Semitic.”

Netanyahu’s Slander Against Judaism and What Civilization Should Stand For

Image: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a message on Israel’s war with Hamas, January 10, 2024. (Video screenshot)

Netanyahu characterized the U.S. protests in an extremist speech on April 24 attacking American academic freedom.

> What's happening in America's college campuses is horrific. Antisemitic mobs have taken over leading universities. They call for the annihilation of Israel, they attack Jewish students, they attack Jewish faculty. This is reminiscent of what happened in German universities in the 1930s. We see this exponential rise of antisemitism throughout America and throughout Western societies as Israel tries to defend itself against genocidal terrorists, genocidal terrorists who hide behind civilians.
>
> It's unconscionable, it has to be stopped, it has to be condemned and condemned unequivocally. But that's not what happened. The response of several university presidents was shameful. Now, fortunately, state, local, federal officials, many of them have responded differently but there has to be more. More has to be done.[4]

This is a call to make American universities into arms of a police state, imposing policies dictated by Israel's settler state. That call is being funded by a circular flow: Congress gives enormous subsidies to Israel, which recycles some of this money back into the election campaigns of politicians willing to serve their donors. It is the same policy that Ukraine uses when it employs U.S. "aid" by setting up well-funded lobbying organizations to back client politicians.

What kind of student and academic protest expressions could oppose the Gaza and West Bank genocide without explicitly threatening Jewish students? How about "Palestinians are human being too!" That is not aggressive. To make it more ecumenical, one could add "And so are the Russians, despite what Ukrainian neo-Nazis say."

I can understand why Israelis feel threatened by Palestinians. They know how many they have killed and brutalized to grab their land, killing just to "free" the land for themselves. They must think "If the Palestinians are like us, they must want to kill us, because of what we have done to them and there can never be a two-state solution and we can never live together, because this land was given to us by God."

Netanyahu fanned the flames after his April 24 speech by raising today's conflict to the level of a fight for civilization:

> "What is important now is for all of us, all of us who are interested and cherish our values and our civilization, to stand up together and to say enough is enough."

Is what Israel is doing, and what the United Nations, the International Court of Justice and most of the Global Majority oppose, really "our civilization"? Ethnic cleansing, genocide and treating the Palestinian population as conquered and to be expelled as subhumans is an assault on the most basic principles of civilization.

Peaceful students defending that universal concept of civilization are called terrorists and anti-Semites – by the terrorist Israeli Prime Minister. He is following the tactics of **Joseph Goebbels**: The way to mobilize a population to fight the enemy is to depict yourself as under attack. That was the Nazi public relations strategy, and it is the PR strategy of Israel today – and of many in the American Congress, in AIPAC and many related institutions that proclaim a morally offensive idea of civilization as the ethnic supremacy of a group sanctioned by God.

The real focus of the protests is the U.S. policy that is backing Israel's ethnic cleansing and genocide supported by last week's foreign "aid." It is also a protest against the corruption of Congressional politicians raising money from lobbyists representing foreign interests over those of the United States. Last week's "aid" bill also backed Ukraine, that other country presently engaged in ethnic cleansing, with House members waved Ukrainian flags, not those of the United States. Shortly before that, one Congressman wore his Israeli army uniform into Congress to advertise his priorities.

Zionism has gone far beyond Judaism. I've read that there are nine Christian Zionists for every Jewish Zionists. It is as if both groups are calling for the End Time to arrive, while insisting that support for the United Nations and the International Court of Justice condemning Israel for genocide is anti-Semitic.

What Can the Students at Columbia Ask For

Students at Columbia and other universities have called for universities to disinvest in Israeli stocks, and also those of U.S. arms makers exporting to Israel. Given the fact that universities have become business organizations, I don't think that this is the most practical demand at present. Most important, it doesn't go to the heart of the principles at work.

What really is the big public relations issue is the unconditional U.S. backing for Israel come what may, with "anti-Semitism" the current propaganda epithet to characterize those who oppose genocide and brutal land grabbing.

They should insist on a public announcement by Columbia (and also Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, who were equally obsequious to Rep. Stefanik) that they recognize that it is *not* anti-Semitic to condemn genocide, support the United Nations and denounce the U.S. veto.

They should insist that Columbia and the other universities making a sacrosanct promise not to call police onto academic grounds over issues of free speech.

They should insist that the president be fired for her one-sided support of Israeli violence against her students. In that demand they are in agreement with Rep. Stefanik's principle of protecting students, and that Dr. Shafik must go.

But there is one class of major offenders that should be held up for contempt: the donors who try to attack academic freedom by using their money to influence university policy and turn universities away from the role in supporting academic freedom and free speech. The students should insist that university administrators – the unpleasant opportunists standing above the faculty and students – must not only refuse such pressure but should join in publicly expressing shock over such covert political influence.

The problem is that American universities have become like Congress in basing their policy on attracting contributions from their donors. That is the academic equivalent of the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling. Numerous Zionist funders have threatened to withdraw their contributions to Harvard, Columbia and other schools not following Netanyahu's demands to clamp down on opponents of genocide and defenders of the United Nations. These funders are the enemies of the students at such universities, and both students and faculty should insist on their removal. Just as Dr. Shafik's International Monetary Fund fell subject to its economists' protest that there must be "No more

Argentinas," perhaps the Columbia students could chant "No More Shafiks."

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Notes

[1] https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=syPELLKpABI

[2] https://stefanik.house.gov/2024/4/icymi-stefanik-secures-columbia-university-president-s-commitment-to-remove-antisemitic-professor-from-leadership-role

[3] Nicholas Fandos, Stephanie Saul and Sharon Otterman, "Columbia's President Tells Congress That Action Is Needed Against Antisemitism," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2024., and "Columbia President Grilled During Congressional Hearing on Campus Antisemitism," *Jewish Journal*, April 18, 2024. https://jewishjournal.com/news/united-states/370521/columbia-president-grilled-during-congressional-hearing-on-campus-antisemitism/#:~:text=Columbia%20President%20Grilled%20During%20Congressional%20Hearing%20on%20Campus%20Antisemitism

[4] Miranda Nazzaro. "Netanyahu condemns 'antisemitic mobs' on US college campuses," *The Hill*, April 24, 2024.

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