

## The *New York Times* and Ahmadinejad's appearance at Columbia University

By Barry Grey

27 September 2007

The *New York Times* published on Tuesday an editorial on the appearance the previous day of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at New York City's Columbia University.

The university's decision to invite the head of the Islamist regime to address a campus audience sparked a hysterical wave of denunciations from both Republican and Democratic politicians. It was seized upon by the media as a pretext to intensify its demonization of the Iranian leader as a new Hitler, just as it had demonized Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq.

The context of this witch-hunting campaign is the advanced state of preparations by the Bush administration to expand its devastating war in Iraq by attacking its similarly oil-rich neighbor.

The *Times*' editorial exemplifies the hypocrisy and dishonesty that have become the hallmarks of this organ of American liberalism. While solidarizing the newspaper with the war-mongering of the Bush administration, it chides those who attacked Columbia University for allowing Ahmadinejad to speak and depicts his appearance as an apotheosis of American democracy in action.

To speak bluntly of Ahmadinejad and the government he represents: it is a reactionary bourgeois nationalist regime whose anti-imperialist pretensions are bogus.

Ahmadinejad is the representative of the Mullahs and bazaar merchants, who seek to exploit popular outrage over the crimes of American imperialism and its Israeli ally against the Arab and Muslim masses in order to advance their own national interests in the region and more effectively suppress social discontent within Iran. Among the more ugly aspects of the regime and its president are their appeals to anti-Semitism.

Notwithstanding its anti-American rhetoric, the Iranian regime would like nothing more than to secure an agreement with the United States, if it could obtain assurances for itself in return.

But the Iranian government is in no essential way different, or more repressive, than a whole number of bourgeois regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia with which the United States is allied—from Mubarak's Egypt, to Musharraf's military dictatorship in Pakistan, to the oil sheikhdoms in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

Iran has been singled out for diplomatic and, eventually, military attack not because of its repressive policies, its alleged nuclear ambitions or any assistance it may be giving to Iraqis fighting against the US occupation of their country, but rather because

Washington deems it to be an obstacle to the consolidation of American hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The *New York Times* ignores these inconvenient realities, beginning its editorial by proclaiming Ahmadinejad's policies to be "loathsome" and citing his denial of the Holocaust and his call to "wipe Israel off the map." Lending support to a major pretext for Washington's war-mongering, it adds the charge that Iran sponsors terrorism.

The editorial then proceeds to the nub of its sophistry. "Equally loathsome," it writes, "is Iran's denial of basic civil rights to its citizens, including the right of free speech." As an example of the Iranian regime's anti-democratic policies, it seizes on a particularly absurd and reactionary comment by Ahmadinejad at his Columbia University appearance. Asked about Iran's repression of homosexuals, he said, "We don't have homosexuals like in your country."

The *Times* is silent on the entirely justified points made by Ahmadinejad about the US' war-mongering policies and contempt for international law in its conduct of foreign policy, including its support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and its current support for groups based in Iraq that are carrying out terrorist attacks inside Iran. Nor does it respond to the Iranian president's reference to the US government's illegal spying on its own people.

Instead, it declares, "We can imagine no better way to give hope to opponents of Iran's repressive state than by showcasing America's democracy and commitment to free speech." It goes on to praise Columbia University President Lee Bollinger as a paragon of democratic values, writing that he "defended the event as in the best tradition of America's free speech, then freely told Mr. Ahmadinejad: 'You exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator.'"

Bollinger's performance was a disgraceful and cowardly exhibition of groveling before the open opponents of free speech within the American political and media establishment. He reacted to the pressure from the right with a despicable demonstration of his own fidelity to US imperialism and its aggressive military designs against Iran.

In his effort to curry favor with the right wing, he said the howlings from those who denounced him were "reasonable," adding that he was motivated by the maxim that "one should know thine enemies" and "have the intellectual and emotional courage to confront the mind of evil."

He then reiterated the justifications concocted by

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the Bush administration for war against Iran, accusing it of waging a “proxy war against the United States troops in Iraq” and defying “international standards” in the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Concluding with a flourish, he declared that the “modern civilized world [is] yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for.”

Having hailed this “showcase” of American free speech, the *Times* editorial declares: “Unlike Iran’s citizens, Americans have the right to laugh at leaders...”

To this, one can only ask: What country are you living in, gentlemen and gentlewomen of the *New York Times*? Are we to believe that Mr. Bollinger would have dared to raise the truly monstrous crimes of the Bush administration had he been introducing George W?

Would he have pointed to the illegal invasion and social devastation of Iraq, the horror of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the systematic use of torture and kidnappings as instruments of foreign policy, the use of lies to justify an unprovoked war, domestic spying on a vast scale, the attack on habeas corpus, the erection of the infrastructure for a police state? Would he have raised any hint of criticism?

To ask the question is to answer it.

The real state of America’s commitment to free speech can be gauged by events of the past several weeks.

\* Spectators at a congressional hearing on the war in Iraq ejected and arrested for wearing tee-shirts with anti-war slogans

\* A student at the University of Florida gang-tackled by campus police, dragged from the meeting hall, given a 50,000-volt shock with a Taser gun and put in jail for

asking pointed questions of Democratic Senator John Kerry at a public forum

\* Long-time CBS News reporter and anchor Dan Rather filing a \$70 million lawsuit against CBS News and its corporate owner charging that he was forced out in retaliation for narrating an investigative report aired shortly before the 2004 presidential election documenting George W. Bush’s use of family connections to evade military service in Vietnam

\* The passage by the US Senate of a resolution condemning the Democratic pressure group MoveOn.org for publishing an ad in the *New York Times* criticizing Gen. David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq.

\* The publication just last Sunday of a column by the *New York Times’* public editor repudiating the MoveOn.org ad.

Constitutionally protected rights of free speech, political action and political expression are under unprecedented attack. The eruption of American militarism abroad is increasingly accompanied by the militarization of public life at home, to the point where criticism of the US military is virtually criminalized.

Such is the eviscerated and perilous state of democratic rights in the United States, and such, as the *Times* editorial underscores, is the “commitment” to the defense of these rights of the *New York Times* and the liberal Democratic Party establishment for which it speaks.

The *Times’* celebration of the politically sordid event at Columbia University as a triumph of American democracy is a demonstration of its commitment not to free speech, but to the aggressive designs of US imperialism around the world.

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