Taped address from Mumia Abu-Jamal at college commencement sparks right-wing protests

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Students at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington heard a 13-minute taped address from political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal at their commencement ceremony June 11, despite demands by right-wing politicians and police organizations that school officials cancel the speech.

Earlier this year students at the small liberal arts college petitioned the administration to include Abu-Jamal among the graduation speakers. Mumia, who was railroaded to prison for the 1981 murder of Philadelphia policeman Daniel Faulkner, has spent 17 years on Pennsylvania's death row. His fight for a new trial and opposition to the death penalty and racism has won widespread support in the US and throughout the world.

The day before the address House Majority Whip Tom Delay, the extreme right-wing Texas Republican, denounced the Evergreen State College officials as "twisted radicals in the ivory tower." He said, "America wonders why there are shootings in the schools. Well, irresponsible institutions making celebrities out of killers are part of the problem." Calling for the House of Representatives to give a moment of silence for the dead policeman, Delay said, "Today, while Evergreen celebrates a murderer, it is important for the rest of us to protest."

Pennsylvania Attorney General Mike Fisher also attempted to browbeat college officials. In a letter mailed to Evergreen President Jane Jervis, Fisher asked her to cancel Abu-Jamal's speech, saying it was an "affront to the memory of Officer Faulkner, his family and all victims of violent crime for your institution to glorify this cop killer."

The college president defended the decision in a statement Wednesday. Jervis said students had invited Abu-Jamal to be among the commencement speakers because he has used his free speech rights "to galvanize an international conversation about the death penalty, the disproportionate number of blacks on death row, and the relationship between poverty and the criminal justice system."

Last April Washington Governor Gary Locke, who had been invited as the keynote speaker for the graduation, cancelled his appearance. A former prosecutor and pro-death penalty Democrat who is up for reelection, Locke said he made the decision out of respect for the police.

Abu-Jamal's remarks were heard by 800 graduates and their families. He referred to outspoken and persecuted minority leaders of the past and how they represented a life lived with purpose. He declared that he was a revolutionary who wanted to raise consciousness about the repression of blacks and other minorities in America. He argued that "revolution, according to the Declaration of Independence, is a right" of all oppressed people.

During the ceremony only about a dozen students, including one policeman, left or turned their backs in protest. President Jervis was cheered and applauded when she declared that "creativity and tough-minded critical thinking can emerge" only through debate and argument.

Art Constantino, an Evergreen professor, spoke at a news conference prior to the commencement and defended Abu-Jamal's address, saying its basis is the belief that he did not get a fair trial and his plight is symbolic of the nation's death rows, where many black people have been unjustly condemned.

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Afterwards, student groups that campaigned for Mumia to address the commencement defended their decision. “He's a renowned journalist and an amazing author,” said Kassey Baker, a member of the Prison Action Committee. “They felt he'd make a good commencement speaker ... a different voice, something other than the generic graduation speech.”

A student, Malka Fenyvesi, said Abu-Jamal was not invited to cause pain for the policeman's widow or “to create a lot of bad feelings,” but rather to create a forum for a “marginalized segment of our society.”

Police organizations made a major effort to derail the speech. Maureen Faulkner, the dead policeman's widow, was flown to Washington from southern California and newspaper ads were purchased in Olympia, urging students and residents to protest the speech. “If you take another person's life,” Faulkner declared, “you give up the right to be heard.” At the commencement Faulkner was flanked by honor guards from the Pierce County Sheriff's Department and other policemen. Anti-Mumia protesters held styrofoam models of electric chairs and signs saying Mumia would be a “good role model” if he were put to death.

The Fraternal Order of Police has waged a nationwide lobby for Mumia's death, with one police fraternity, the Philadelphia Emerald Society, denouncing Mumia for being the “poster-child for those that oppose the death penalty and (sic) the overthrow of the government.” They have been joined by avowedly racist organizations, including one that maintains the Internet web site “whitepride.com.” This site features a photo of Mumia with two lethal injections forming an “X” across his face.

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