

A chilling case of political censorship

Anti-Bush protesters ejected from Ohio State commencement

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Graduates at the June 14 commencement ceremony held by Ohio State University (OSU) were threatened with arrest if they made any protest against the keynote speaker, George W. Bush.

In opening remarks at the university's football stadium in Columbus, Ohio, OSU Associate Vice President for Student Affairs Richard Hollingsworth warned, "Disruption, including obstructing the view or hearing of others, will not be tolerated." The graduates and their guests, numbering about 60,000, were informed that anyone protesting or heckling the speakers could be subject to arrest and expulsion from the stadium. They were told that staff members, police and Secret Service officers would be watching the stands for any signs of protest.

As Bush walked to the podium, about 10 people, including four graduates, stood up and turned their backs to the president. An undetermined number of them were escorted out of the stadium by police officers. None currently face charges.

One protester gave the following account of what happened in comments posted on the Internet web site turnyourbackonbush.com:

"Before he [Bush] even got to the stage, we did our about-face. I looked over my shoulder to see how many graduates were doing the same. However, everybody was standing at that point, and in pure black robes, it was impossible to see who was facing what direction. Furthermore, over that same shoulder, I saw one of Columbus' Finest heading our way. We never got to see how many students participated. We were being led out of Ohio Stadium.

"To the officer's credit, he realized there was a three-year-old in my arms and was not at all hostile. I asked

him if I was under arrest, and he did not answer me. When we reached the exit, I asked the SS [Secret Service] man why we had been ejected, and he told me we were being charged with disturbing the peace. If we chose to leave, the charges would be dropped immediately. With our daughter in mind, we chose not to fight it...

"On this day, June 14, 2002, I came to the realization that we no longer live in a free society. This is rapidly heading the same way Nazi Germany headed. Questioning our leaders is no longer the most outrageous crime you can be charged with. Not paying attention to them is."

Protesters outside the stadium also faced harassment. About 100 students, faculty and others demonstrated at the gates to the venue, carrying signs and chanting slogans against the Bush administration's war in Afghanistan and its support for Israeli terror in the occupied territories. The demonstrators were threatened with arrest if they did not disperse, and were moved to a location away from the stadium.

Security was extremely tight at the event. Graduates and their guests were instructed to arrive at the stadium as early as 6 a.m., where they stood in long lines before passing through metal detectors and having their personal effects searched.

Ohio State administrators were bent on providing Bush with an unopposed platform for his policies, introducing him as a "tireless worker in the field of education" and "a man who unified this country after the terrible events of 9/11."

The suppression of protests and the expulsion of those who peacefully exercised their free speech rights reflect the real character of the Bush administration,

which since September 11 has launched an unprecedented attack on basic democratic rights, against both the immigrant population and US citizens. The actions of the OSU authorities are, moreover, indicative of the shameless acquiescence of the academic establishment to the government's policies of militarism and repression.

The government and university administrators were particularly concerned about preventing any embarrassment for Bush at Ohio State, where top Clinton administration officials were politically exposed and humiliated four years earlier. On February 18, 1998, an "International Town Meeting" organized at OSU turned into a political debacle for the government.

The White House, in conjunction with the cable news channel CNN, staged the event as a publicity stunt to demonstrate popular support for an impending air war against Iraq. Even though the authorities had screened the audience to weed out opposition, the administration's three spokespersons—Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and National Security Advisor Samuel Berger—faced open dissent and pointed questioning about US military policy. Clinton's top aides were unable to answer questions exposing the glaring contradictions in the government's war propaganda, and could do little more than repeat canned phrases and pre-packaged denunciations of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Television footage from the town meeting was so damaging to Clinton, excerpts of the event were broadcast on Iraqi television.

Bush's handlers and the OSU administration were intent on preventing a similar political debacle for the current occupant of the White House. Repression began at the university the week before, on June 9, at another graduation ceremony. Outgoing university President William Kirwan is pressing charges against four guests of a graduating Masters student who were arrested for "persistent disorderly conduct" and "obstruction of official business" because they turned their backs on commencement speaker J.C. Watts, a Republican congressman from Oklahoma. The four acted to show support for a protest by the Afrikan Student Union against the speaker.

The man and three women were arrested without

warning, handcuffed and taken to the OSU police facility. Four hours later they were taken to the County Correctional Facility, where they were charged. They were not released until late that evening.

Ohio State student organizations and faculty have spoken out against the arrests and expulsions and Bush's appearance at the university. Joseph Levine, a philosophy professor and faculty advisor on the OSU Committee for Justice in Palestine, told the WSWS, "The president is pushing an agenda, one that is antithetical to the goals of higher education. His agenda includes a redistribution of resources toward the wealthy, while the function of public higher education is in large part to level the playing field and enable redistribution in a more egalitarian direction.

"His so-called 'security' policies aim to restrict free speech and independent thinking, whereas the goal of the university is to enhance them as much as possible. His aggressive posture toward the world is a danger to world peace, whereas the university is a place to learn how to live in peace with others. In every way this president stands for everything the university should be against, so it seems especially inappropriate that he should have been chosen as the commencement speaker."

Yoshie Furuhashi, a lecturer in the English department, commented: "The Ohio State University administration, by issuing threats of arrests and expulsions at the rehearsal and on the day of the commencement, gave a lie to the idea of the university as a place of free inquiry. The corporatization of higher education has made OSU, as well as other institutions, follow the example of businesses that put profit before people and the US government that puts law and order above liberty and democracy."



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