

New York law students honor attorney framed on terrorism charges

Dean bans award at graduation ceremony

Peter Daniels
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Members of the graduating class of the City University of New York law school, in a petition signed by more than half of their number, have nominated Lynne F. Stewart to receive their annual award for public interest lawyer of the year.

Ms. Stewart is the outspoken attorney who was arrested a year ago and charged with providing material support to a terrorist organization. She has been representing Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind Muslim cleric from Egypt who is serving a life sentence in the US after his conviction in 1995 of conspiracy to carry out acts of terrorism.

In a high-profile press conference carried out at the time of Stewart's arrest, Attorney General John Ashcroft made little effort to hide the political motives behind this prosecution. The trumped-up case, which could lead to a 40-year prison sentence, is designed not only to punish Stewart for her radical political views and her willingness to defend those accused of terrorism. It is aimed at intimidating all lawyers, and is part of a host of related actions by the Justice Department that have gutted elementary constitutional protections.

The City University students' gesture of solidarity with Stewart represented a repudiation of the Bush administration's attacks on democratic rights.

At the same time, the action of the school officials is further evidence of what the students are fighting against. Not only is Lynne Stewart on trial for representing her client, but those who seek to offer her political and moral support are gagged.

The law school dean, Kristin Booth Glen, met with student representatives last week and informed them that she would not allow the award to Stewart to be

presented during the graduation ceremony. The school's criminal law society will present the honor to Stewart on its own behalf in a ceremony in the school's auditorium on May 1.

The banning of the official award ceremony was not made any less offensive by the hypocritical liberal posturing of the school dean. In an email message to the students she claimed she sympathized with their motives and values, but added, "Unfortunately, Lynne Stewart has become a symbol laden with implications beyond these values; try as we might to explain what is intended by the honor, we will not be able to escape the consequences that come from sources unwilling to listen or who might seize this opportunity to malign the law school, its graduates, or its mission."

The fear that bad publicity could lead to attacks on the school at a time when the city and state face record budget deficits is thus advanced as an argument for surrender. Civil liberties are to be fought for only if they don't stir up controversy. The school's reaction reflects precisely the climate of intimidation that is one of the main goals of the prosecution of Stewart in the first place.

Students were furious over the dean's action. "What message does this send to us?" said Kathryn Hudson, the student who organized the campaign to honor Stewart. "If you can't have free speech at a law school, where can you have it?" Some students were reportedly planning to put tape over their mouths at the graduation ceremony.

Stewart thanked the students for their action, saying: "I am obviously sincerely touched and very honored by the students' choosing me under the circumstances. The students seem to carry on a long tradition of

reminding institutions of their responsibilities. They are willing to take the risk, but Dean Glen apparently is not.”

What stands out in this incident is the widespread outrage over the government’s use of the September 11 attacks to dismantle civil liberties and move towards police-state methods of rule. The law students undoubtedly speak for millions who are seeking a way to fight against these sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

In a related matter, the Baseball Hall of Fame received an avalanche of 28,000 letters, email messages and phone calls protesting the action of its president, Dale Petroskey, in canceling a commemoration of the fifteenth anniversary of the film *Bull Durham* because Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, who appeared in the movie and were scheduled to appear at the ceremony, have been outspoken opponents of the war on Iraq. A screening of the film, to be attended by Robbins, Sarandon and the movie’s director, Ron Shelton, has now been scheduled for the Brooklyn Academy of Music on April 30.

These signs of anger and protest will not by themselves stop the Bush administration’s attacks, or deter Ashcroft and his bipartisan backers. They are indicative, however, of profound political changes taking place. The millions of people who demonstrated in the weeks leading up to the war have not disappeared and have not, as the editors of the *New York Times* and similar loyal liberal “critics” of Bush imply, concluded that they were wrong. The conditions are maturing for the emergence of a powerful political movement in opposition to the war against the working class at home and abroad.



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