

Iranian president speaks at Columbia University amidst media frenzy

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad spoke at New York's Columbia University on Monday amidst a massive campaign in the US political and media establishment to demonize the government of Iran—the likely next target for a US military attack.

The media frenzy began last week, when it was revealed that Ahmadinejad was planning to pay his respects to the victims of the September 11 attacks by visiting the former location of the World Trade Center buildings. The New York police decided to refuse his request after a public campaign from political figures from both the Democratic and Republican parties.

The growing crescendo of denunciations was accompanied by a repetition of the various pretexts being developed by the US government to justify any future military intervention. In a “60 Minutes” interview broadcast on Sunday, correspondent Scott Pelley insisted that Ahmadinejad’s visit to the World Trade Center would be “insulting to many, many Americans.”

Pelley also declared, “the American people believe that your country is a terrorist nation” and that “it is an established fact now that Iranian bombs and Iranian know-how are killing Americans in Iraq. You have American blood on your hands. Why?” On several occasions, Ahmadinejad felt compelled to ask whether Pelley was functioning as a journalist or as a representative of the American government.

On Monday, the New York tabloids vied with each other for the most provocative and lurid headlines. The *New York Daily News* declared, “The Evil has Landed,” while the *New York Post* countered, “Madman Iran Prez Catches Flak as Guest of Dishonor.”

The right-wing media in the US directed fire also at Columbia University for inviting Ahmadinejad to speak. An editorial appearing Monday in the *Wall Street Journal* targeted Columbia University President Lee Bollinger in particular, denouncing him for not canceling the event while refusing to allow the military’s ROTC program access to Columbia students.

This media campaign was the backdrop to the ugly spectacle at the event itself. Columbia University came under intense pressure last year when a similar invitation was extended to Ahmadinejad. It was later canceled on the grounds that adequate security preparations could not be put in place in time.

This time around, Columbia did not cancel the event, but Bollinger bent over backward to demonstrate his own support for the campaign of aggression directed at Iran. His comments made a mockery of the attempt by the university to present itself as a proponent of “free speech” by extending the invitation in the first place.

Bollinger said those arguing that the event should never have taken place were “reasonable.” He insisted, however, that the event had nothing to do with the “rights of the speaker”—who he termed “a petty and cruel dictator”—but was rather motivated by the maxim that “one should know thine enemies” and should “have the intellectual and emotional courage to confront the mind of evil.”

Bollinger then listed a number of the reactionary aspects of the Iranian regime, including its crackdown on student activists and Ahmadinejad’s penchant for questioning the Holocaust.

These statements were conflated with a repetition of the justifications being developed by the US government for a war against Iran. He denounced what he called Iran’s “proxy war against the United States troops in Iraq.” Many Columbia students and alumni are in the military, he said, and “they rightly see your government as the enemy.” He then asked, referring to Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program, “Why does your country continue to refuse to adhere to international standards?”

Bollinger concluded by denouncing Ahmadinejad’s “fanatical mindset,” saying that the “modern civilized world [is] yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for.”

It is not necessary to support the Iranian government—a right-wing bourgeois nationalist regime that is constantly on the lookout for a deal with American imperialism—to recognize the utter cowardice and hypocrisy in Bollinger’s statements.

It can be said without a doubt that such an introduction would never be given to the leader of a US ally—the representative of the government of Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, for example—no matter how dictatorial that government might be. And of course if President Bush were to speak at Columbia, one would hear no mention from Bollinger of the attack on democratic rights in the US, or the enormous atrocities committed by the US military in the Middle East.

The American government—the “modern civilized world” for

which Bollinger speaks—has become associated in the minds of the world's population with the bloody occupation of Iraq, the torture at Abu Ghraib, the prisons of Guantánamo Bay, a complete contempt for international law, and a relentless campaign of military aggression.

As for Ahmadinejad, his remarks combined statements about the hypocrisy of the American government with a repetition of certain reactionary foundations of the Iranian regime.

The Iranian president denounced Bollinger's comments as an "insult to information and the knowledge of the audience" attending the event. Referring to the American government without naming it, he said there were certain states that "tap telephone calls and try to control their people. [They] create an insecure psychological atmosphere in order to justify their war-mongering acts against the world." He noted that it was certain "Western powers" that were continuing to build nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Ahmadinejad insisted on the right of Iran to pursue a nuclear energy program as part of its membership in the International Atomic Energy Agency. He also denounced the US for supporting Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, and US support for groups that have carried out terrorist attacks in Iran. He was referring here to the People's Mujahideen of Iran (MEK), now based in Iraq.

Pressed on the question of the Holocaust, Ahmadinejad insisted that all he wanted was to encourage "scientific research that can approach the Holocaust from different perspectives." Last year, the Iranian government organized a Holocaust conference that included the likes of David Duke, former "Imperial Wizard" of the Ku Klux Klan.

The nationalist regime in Iran has sought to bolster its declining support within Iran by cultivating anti-Semitism and posturing as an arch-opponent of Israel. In response to a question on reports of executions of homosexuals in Iran, Ahmadinejad made the laughable statement, "There are no homosexuals in Iran."

Perhaps more significant than what Ahmadinejad said was what he did not say. He was notably muted on the growing preparations for war against Iran. He was speaking for an Iranian bourgeoisie that would still like a deal with American or European imperialism as it moves to repress social discontent within Iran. Ahmadinejad voiced hope for "peace and stability." In his interview with "60 Minutes," he insisted, "It's wrong to think that Iran and the US are walking towards war.... There is no war in the offing."

In fact, US military preparations for war are well under way, though the American media has done its best to keep this fact from the American people. An article in this week's British *Sunday Times* reported that the US Air Force "has set up a highly confidential strategic planning group tasked with 'fighting the next war' as tensions rise with Iran." The group, responsible for planning the first war against Iraq in 1990-91, was reestablished in June.

Previous articles appearing in the British press reported that plans have been drawn up to bomb thousands of targets in Iran, while sections of the American government, particularly in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney, are supporting the use of "bunker-busting" nuclear weapons.

In the October 1 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, reporters Don Ephron and Mark Hosenball note that Cheney has been the most vocal supporter of military action. Citing "two knowledgeable sources," *Newsweek* reports that a few months before former Cheney Middle East adviser David Wurmser quit last month, he "told a small group of people that Cheney had been mulling the idea of pushing for a limited Israeli missile strike against the Iranian nuclear site at Natanz—and perhaps other sites—in order to provoke Tehran into lashing out. The Iranian reaction would then give Washington a pretext to launch strikes against military and nuclear targets in Iran."

Newsweek said that any decision on military action will be made by early 2008, and therefore would take place prior to the end of the Bush administration.

In recent days, US military officials have escalated their accusations that Iran is supplying weapons to insurgents in Iraq. These charges would likely be used as a further pretext for military intervention.

This is the context of Ahmadinejad's visit to Columbia University. The US ruling elite has already launched two brutal wars over the past six years. The Iraq war is estimated to have killed over 1 million people, turning over 4 million Iraqis into refugees, and devastating an entire advanced society.

The greatest danger to the world's population is not the Iranian government, but American imperialism. Having launched the Iraq war on the basis of lies, the political establishment and its media arm are now attempting the same time-tested methods to prepare for the next war.



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