

Media, Democrats silent on police attack on University of Florida student

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Two days after Andrew Meyer, a 21-year-old journalism student at the University of Florida, was assaulted by campus police and given an electric shock for asking critical questions of Massachusetts senator and 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry at a public forum, the US media has largely dropped the story.

Hundreds of thousands of people in the US and around the world have accessed various videos of the incident that are posted on the Internet, but the establishment media has decided to downplay the violent attack on free speech at a major American university.

After being dragged from the floor microphone by six police officers, handcuffed and shocked with a Taser gun, Meyer was held overnight in jail. The arresting police have recommended that he be charged with violently resisting arrest, a felony with a maximum penalty of five years in prison, and disturbing the peace and interfering with school administrative functions, a misdemeanor that carries a maximum penalty of 60 days in jail. As of this writing, formal charges have not been laid against the student.

Meyer was released from jail Tuesday morning. His lawyer said he will plead not guilty on all charges, adding, "I think the videotape speaks for itself."

On Tuesday, some 300 students demonstrated at the Gainesville, Florida campus to denounce the police attack and demand that the officers involved be disciplined and the use of Tasers be banned.

At a press conference, University of Florida President Bernie Machen said he "regretted" the incident, but went on to suggest that the police action may have been justified. "We're absolutely committed to having a safe environment for our faculty and our students so that a free exchange of ideas can occur," he said. Later he told the press he thought it was "an open question as to whether or not the student impeded civil discourse."

Two of the officers have been placed on paid

administrative leave and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement said it would launch an investigation. Machen also announced the formation of a student-faculty commission to investigate the incident.

Scattered press report on Wednesday, generally confined to the inside pages, for the most part portrayed Meyer as a disruptive publicity hound. He was referred to variously as a "heckler," "agitator" and "prankster." Typical was a *Washington Post* article headlined "Aiming to Agitate, Florida Student Got a Shock"

"This was not Meyer's first escapade as a provocateur, but it may be his most physically punishing," the reporter quipped.

Meyer is, in fact, well known on campus as an opponent of the Bush administration and the Iraq war. He runs a web site that combines efforts at satire and humor with denunciations of the war and the role of the media in promoting it.

The videos of his attempts to question Kerry, who spoke at an event sponsored by the Student Government Monday night, and the actions of campus police in cutting him off and dragging him from the hall, suggest that he may have been targeted in advance. The videos show that as soon as Meyer walked to the floor microphone, and was given permission by Kerry to ask questions even though the organizers had announced that the question-and-answer period was over, two police officers were already standing directly and menacingly behind him.

In an interview given Tuesday, Kerry said, "His first words were, 'Senator Kerry, they're trying to arrest me.'"

Meyer proceeded to ask Kerry why he had not challenged the disputed results of the 2004 presidential election, why he refused to call for the impeachment of Bush, and whether he had been a member, along with Bush, of Yale University's secret Skull and Bones society.

At that point the microphone was cut off and the police immediately seized Meyer, who began shouting, “What did I do?” “Why am I being arrested?... Help!” After six officers had dragged the flailing and protesting student to the floor at the back of the hall and handcuffed him, they took out a Taser, prompting Meyer to plead, “Don’t Tase me!” This was followed by screams of pain from the electric shock.

The *World Socialist Web Site* on Wednesday spoke with Asia Johnson, an advertising major at the University of Florida, who witnessed the assault. Johnson, who said she was within five feet of the microphone when Meyer was attacked, told the WSWS, “Andrew was being handled by the police as he tried to get the mike. Kerry said he should be allowed to ask his question. As soon as the mike was turned off, the police pounced on him.

“They didn’t give him much of a chance to walk out. Three police dragged him up the aisle. He shouted, ‘Don’t Tase me,’ and I screamed, ‘Don’t Tase him!’ But they did. It was very scary.”

At no point did Kerry intervene to demand that the police halt their attack on Meyer. On Tuesday, he refused to denounce the police violence, telling the Associated Press, “Whatever happened, the police had a reason, had made their decision that there was something they needed to do. Then it’s a law enforcement issue, not mine.”

The web site of Taser International, Inc. boasts that “Taser weapons fire 50,000 volts up to 15 feet with more stopping power than a .357 Magnum.” According to *Wikipedia*, “Electroshock weapon technology uses a temporary high-voltage low-current electrical discharge to override the body’s muscle-triggering mechanisms. The recipient feels great pain, and can be momentarily paralyzed while an electric current is being applied... The resulting ‘shock’ is caused by muscles twitching uncontrollably, appearing as muscle spasms.”

This, plus a possible jail sentence, is the penalty for asking pointed questions at a public forum held on a university campus. And not a single prominent politician has issued a protest, least of all members of the Democratic Party.

This event says a great deal about the state of American democracy. It speaks to the immense nervousness and fear within the entire political establishment over the growth of popular opposition, especially among young people, to its policies of militarism and social reaction.

Both parties of big business are increasingly discredited, isolated and insulated from the broad mass of the people. Bush and Cheney speak only before military audiences or

those thoroughly vetted to weed out any hint of opposition. As for leading Democrats such as Kerry, they dare not venture onto college campuses without a hefty police guard prepared to silence all expressions of opposition.

The population, with the support of both establishment parties and the media, is being conditioned to accept the militarization of all aspects of public life.

If what transpired Monday night is the response to some questions raised by one person at a public forum, what is being prepared in the event of mass protests and social and political struggles? The obvious answer is mass repression and state violence.

The police assault on Meyer raises a series of questions. Since when have the police become the arbiters of what constitutes permissible speech? In the incident report released by the University of Florida police, Officer Nicole Mallo writes that Meyer began “badgering” Kerry and “yelling as loud as he could as to sensationalize his presence.”

Even were this description accurate, which the videotapes refute, since when does such behavior constitute a crime?

Under whose instructions were the police acting? What were the ostensible security issues that necessitated a heavy police presence and, in particular, the attempt to prevent Meyer from speaking from the minute he came to the microphone?

Have he and other known opponents of the war and the Bush administration been singled out by university authorities, and, if so, at whose urging?

Is there a connection between this outrageous attack on free speech and the vast network of data bases being assembled by government authorities, compiled by means of illegal spying and other police state measure instituted in the name of the “war on terror?”

These questions can be answered only by means of a genuinely independent investigation carried out by students and faculty. More fundamentally, the escalating assault on democratic rights can be countered only through a break with the two parties of war and social reaction and the development of an independent political movement of working people and youth.



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