

Protests force Condoleezza Rice to skip Rutgers University commencement speech

Philip Guelpa
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Last Saturday, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that she would not deliver the May 18 commencement speech to the Rutgers University graduating class of 2014. For months, students and faculty at Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, had mounted a protest campaign against Rice's invitation to be commencement speaker.

The selection of Rice by a committee of the university's Board of Governors, a body composed largely of corporate executives appointed by New Jersey's Republican governor, was made unanimously and without public debate. Once announced, it sparked a strong reaction in the university community due to her prominent role in the launching of the Iraq war and the torture policies implemented under the administration of President George W. Bush.

The protests against Rice had culminated the previous week with a sit-in by about 50 students at the university president's office demanding that her invitation be rescinded. Students held signs demanding "No honors for war criminals," "War criminals out" and "RU 4 Humanity?"

University faculty at the Rutgers main campus in New Brunswick as well as the Newark campus had voted to demand that the invitation to Rice be withdrawn, calling her a war criminal.

A faculty resolution against Rice stated, "Condoleezza Rice...played a prominent role in the administration's effort to mislead the American people about the presence of weapons of mass destruction." Furthermore, she "at the very least condoned the Bush administration's policy of 'enhanced interrogation techniques' such as waterboarding." It went on to state that, "An honorary doctor of laws degree should not honor someone who participated in a political effort to

circumvent the law."

A "teach in" to examine Rice's role in the Bush administration had also been scheduled.

Despite the growing opposition at the school, the university administration had refused to reverse its decision, defending it on the basis of "free speech" and as an opportunity to discuss controversial topics. In point of fact, the speech was far from "free"; Rice was to get an honorary doctorate and a \$35,000 honorarium for her appearance.

The university president, Robert Barchi, praised Rice as one of the "most influential intellectual and political figures of the last 50 years." Her selection as commencement speaker had also been promoted on the basis of identity politics, with supporters praising her supposed exemplary accomplishments as a black woman.

Following her withdrawal, the university announced that Rice would be replaced by Tom Kean, who is a trusted representative of the political establishment, having served as Republican governor of New Jersey from 1982 until 1990 and later as co-chair of the national commission that whitewashed the inquiry into the 9/11 attacks.

The ostensible purpose of the commencement speech at American universities is to provide inspiration to graduating students as they embark on their adult lives. The individual delivering it is presumably meant to serve as an example for young people to emulate.

Clearly for students, the selection of someone identified with launching a war of aggression based upon lies, the creation of CIA "black sites" and the torture of detainees—in short, a war criminal—was an outrage. That more than five years after her leaving office Rice still finds herself unable to make a major appearance is testimony to the immense depth of

popular anger over the crimes in which she participated. These sentiments are all the more important given that the policies with which Rice was identified—imperialist aggression, militarism, police state repression—have only been continued and deepened under the Democratic administration of Barack Obama.

The protests at Rutgers were not the only controversy dogging Rice. In recent weeks, a social media protest campaign has grown against last month's naming of the former secretary of state to the board of directors of Dropbox, the file-sharing company, as it prepares to launch its IPO.

In addition to her involvement in dragging the American people into a war based on lies in Iraq and her participation in the torture program, this protest focuses attention on her involvement in and defense of the NSA's illegal warrantless wiretapping program, which has been vastly expanded under the Obama administration.

Calling for a boycott of Dropbox and urging the use of similar alternative services, one protest site, Drop Dropbox, asked: "Given everything we now know about the US's warrantless surveillance program, and Rice's role in it, why on earth would we want someone like her involved with Dropbox, an organization we are trusting with our most important business and personal data?"



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