

Northwestern University faculty oppose selection of US general to head global studies institute

Alexander Fangmann
23 March 2016

A group of 46 faculty at Northwestern University issued an open letter on February 9 calling for the rescinding of the appointment of former US lieutenant general Karl Eikenberry as executive director of the recently founded Buffett Institute of Global Studies at the university in Evanston, Illinois. The open letter took aim at Eikenberry's largely nonacademic credentials, the process by which he was inserted into the selection process by the search committee, and at his public statements that scholarship should be considered as an instrument of "soft power."

Eikenberry was involved for several years in the US occupation of Afghanistan and in his last official military post there was commander of Combined Forces Command from 2005 to 2007. After a short stint in Belgium as deputy chair of NATO's Military Committee, he was appointed by President Obama to be US ambassador to Afghanistan, a post which he held from 2009 to 2011, overseeing the puppet government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul. He held that post through the period that saw a "surge" of tens of thousands of troops and the expansion of the criminal war into neighboring Pakistan.

The most significant of the charges laid out against Eikenberry by the Northwestern faculty members is that he "advocates instrumentalizing the humanities and social sciences research to advance U.S. soft power," in other words, that he supports subordinating universities to the military aims of US imperialism.

This refers to a speech Eikenberry gave at the Chicago Humanities Festival in 2014 in which he laid out his perspective that the humanities could be a "soft power" which can "attract and co-opt, as opposed to coerce." Reading between the lines, it is clear that what

Eikenberry means is that the humanities are most useful as propaganda tools.

The Northwestern faculty correctly perceive the danger to the independence of the university and of scholarship in general, writing, "We believe that it would be irresponsible to remain silent while the university's core mission of independent research and teaching becomes identified with U.S. military and foreign policy."

Another of the chief complaints of the Northwestern faculty is that despite the job description indicating a preference for a candidate with a strong research background, Eikenberry lacks relevant credentials or experience. While he holds two master's degrees, one in East Asian Studies from Harvard and another in political science from Stanford, Eikenberry does not possess a PhD, and has not published in academic journals.

Eikenberry's entry into academia occurred in 2011, when he was given a position at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, largely on the basis of his experiences in the highest echelons of the state. He was not, however, appointed to a faculty position, and does not appear to have taught any regular courses at the school.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Eikenberry's selection to head the Buffett Institute of Global Studies is the manner in which he was selected. While faculty from the Buffett Institute had sent a letter to the Northwestern search committee requesting that the search be expanded, Eikenberry was placed directly on the list of finalists by Northwestern President Emeritus Henry Bienen and was then interviewed confidentially on campus without Bienen or other university

administrators informing the search committee.

Bienen himself is a long-standing operator within the highest ranks of the US military-intelligence apparatus. As a student he was a National Defense Fellow in Russian Studies at the University of Chicago. A professor of political science specializing in the effects of ethnic conflict and military violence on foreign development, he would later go on to be dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Foreign Policy at Princeton University, and of its Center for International Studies.

Through the entire period in which he was formally employed as an academic, Bienen consulted for the US State Department, National Security Council, Agency for International Development, the CIA and the World Bank. In an interview with *Chicago Magazine*, he spoke of his CIA ties, saying, “Bob Gates brought me there under a Republican administration [H.W. Bush]. I never did anything on the covert side. I was always on the analytic side. So I wasn’t sitting there spying on anybody.”

While president of Northwestern from 1995 to 2009, Bienen played a large role in expanding corporate influence at the school. Since leaving the position of president at Northwestern, Bienen served on the board of directors at Bear Stearns from 2004 until its collapse in 2008 during the financial crisis. At the request of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a social contact of his, Bienen was named to the board of Chicago Public Schools from 2011 to 2015. There he helped coordinate attacks on teachers and public education over the whole period. In exchange, Emanuel offered to secure Bienen an ambassadorship, but the only available posts, either to an African country, or to an organization, were not to his liking.

For Bienen and the current administration of Northwestern, who desire closer contact and involvement with the government and the military, Eikenberry’s lack of an academic career is a plus, not a minus. In a response to the faculty open letter, current president Morton Schapiro and provost Daniel Linzer wrote that Eikenberry would provide “access to a broad array of scholars, government officials, and world leaders.” Linzer expanded on this at a faculty senate meeting in early March, saying that Eikenberry’s appointment would allow the institute to have a “global impact,” and to “expand what we do, not replicate.”

Already, Northwestern has been the site of several speeches by Obama and other administration officials. The most notable of these was in March of 2012, when Attorney General Eric Holder laid out a pseudo-legal justification for the presidential assassination of US citizens. Later in 2014, Obama spoke to Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management to deliver a paean to capitalism in which he said, “I believe that capitalism is the greatest force for prosperity and opportunity the world has ever known. I believe that private enterprise—not government, but the innovators and risk-takers and makers and doers—should be the driving force of job creation.”

The appointment of Eikenberry to the Buffett Institute of Global Studies, recently created through a \$101 million donation by Roberta Buffett Elliott, the younger sister of billionaire Warren Buffett, is part of a process going on in the universities and colleges of the leading imperialist powers as they prepare to launch more criminal wars of aggression.

Some of the most significant moves in this direction have occurred in Germany, where figures such as Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler at Berlin’s Humboldt University have attempted to downplay the crimes of German imperialism in the 20th century and advocate for a return of German militarism.

In both cases, the financial aristocracy is attempting to install a pliant and willing layer of pseudo-intellectuals in order to bring the universities in line and train a future layer of students to be willing participants in war and dictatorship. While the Northwestern faculty members who wrote the open letter are correct to raise objections to the appointment of Eikenberry, the fight against the subordination of the universities to the aims of imperialism requires the construction of a mass socialist movement and a political struggle against the reactionary, nationalist aims of the bourgeoisie.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact