

Beloit College students protest speech by Blackwater founder Erik Prince, prompting cancellation

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Erik Prince, 49, former Navy SEAL-turned-founder of mercenary firm Blackwater and brother of current US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, was invited by the local chapter of Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a reactionary anti-socialist student organization, to speak at Beloit College on Wednesday, March 27. The small private liberal arts school in southern Wisconsin on the border with Illinois has an enrollment of approximately 1,800 students.

However, at the time Prince's speech was slated to begin, 7:30 p.m., the lectern remained empty, while every seat in the lecture hall was occupied and throngs of students packed the hallways. Campus security, along with a small contingent of Beloit Police officers were present outside the hall. Students who were participating in a protest of Prince staged an orderly walkout promptly at 7:30 p.m., respectfully registering their disgust, while other students attended counter-protests and events.

After five minutes, neither Prince, nor any speaker from the YAF had taken to the podium as music and chants led by students asking "Erik Prince, where are you?" filled the hall. Following 30 minutes of intermittent clapping, singing and laughing, students began to stack chairs on the stage while others took to the front of the stage holding signs proclaiming "Erik Prince = War Criminal." By 8:15 p.m. the event was declared canceled by the interim dean of students for "safety reasons." Those in attendance dispersed peacefully and no arrests were made.

Following the event's official cancellation, Prince held a private meeting with a group of YAF members and supporters in which he denounced the president and administration at Beloit College for lacking, "the moral

courage to enforce free speech and to defend free speech."

The hypocrisy of Prince, a billionaire war criminal, caterwauling about "free speech" while whistleblower Chelsea Manning is imprisoned and Wikileaks publisher Julian Assange remains confined to the Ecuadorian Embassy in London unable to communicate with the outside world, is laughable.

Prince is routinely given space in the bourgeois press, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* to lobby for war and his company's participation in future imperialistic spoils. On front pages, cable news stations and in opinion sections Prince has repeatedly touted his plans to "privatize" the Afghanistan invasion and replace US troops with thousands of private mercenaries under his control.

President of Beloit College Scott Bierman released a statement the following morning. Bierman acknowledged that most of the protests were "completely consistent with our principles," however, "voices of dissent differ in fundamental ways from intentional disruption." Bierman continued, "I condemn excessive disruptions unequivocally, I do so because they are debilitating to the mission of this college, a mission I love." How, or what is considered an "excessive disruption," was not made clear by Bierman. As no one attempted to speak at the event it is hard to determine who exactly was disrupted.

In the weeks leading up to the scheduled appearance several students posted on social media and wrote into the student newspaper the *Round Table*, noting their disapproval at the YAF and the college administration for inviting the war profiteer, with an estimated net worth of \$2.4 billion, to the campus to lecture on

“national security challenges facing the U.S.”

Blackwater, the private military security firm founded by Prince, is notorious for war crimes committed overseas in the service of US imperialism, most infamous being the Nisour Square Massacre in 2007. In that instance Blackwater contractors guarding a US Embassy convoy fired on a crowd of Iraqi civilians killing 17 and wounding 20 others.

Former employees of Prince’s have sworn in court that he, “views himself as a Christian crusader tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe,” and that Prince’s companies “encouraged and rewarded the destruction of Iraqi life.”

Prince has since sold Blackwater USA, which now operates under the name Academi, to private investors, while Prince has founded a new private security outfit, Frontier Services Group, based out of Hong Kong, China. It specializes in exploiting African resources for Chinese business interests.

Following the murder of 50 people during the fascist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, perpetrated by white nationalist Brenton Tarrant, several students, including practicing Muslim students, posted in a private Beloit College Facebook group relaying how inappropriate, uncomfortable, and angry they were that the university would be hosting a speaker who is responsible for the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands of Muslims throughout the world.

Beloit College junior Nathaniel Acharya, took publicly to social media, beginning early in the morning on March 15, to register his opposition the YAF, specifically the student president of the organization, Andrew Collins, and its effort to bring Prince to campus. Acharya lamented that he was “sick and tired of Muslims being gunned down in their places of worship and bombed to oblivion in their homes by the cult of violent reactionary filth [that YAF] worships.” Acharya ended his first post with a call to action for the student body to protest Prince’s lecture, “lest we be complicit in it and all that it represents.”

Acharya’s follow-up posts on Facebook and Snapchat continued to denounce the YAF, fascists, and white supremacists. His final post, a Snapchat selfie with text underneath, expressed his dismay at message boards 4chan and 8pol where Nazi and fascist propaganda are posted and frequented by fascists such as Tarrant.

In the early afternoon on the March 15, less than 18 hours after his first Facebook post, Acharya was detained by three campus security officers and interviewed by Beloit College Director of Safety and Security Bruce Heine, with a City of Beloit police officer present. His social media posts had been reported for violating Code #6 of the student handbook which concerns “threatening social media posts.”

On Sunday, March 17, two days after his meeting with security, Acharya was hand-delivered a letter from the Beloit College Dean of Students Office, informing him that he was under investigation for acts of “serious misconduct.” He was informed that the process could last up to 20 days and that he was barred from campus until his hearing on March 19. In the meantime, the junior student was made temporarily homeless, forced to stay with friends and faculty.

During the hearing it was determined that Acharya had violated the policy and would be sentenced to academic probation for the remainder of the semester, however he would be allowed to return and continue his studies. Hundreds of students, along with professors and faculty members, supported Acharya throughout the investigatory process, which many deemed unfair. After he was allowed to return to campus he remained resolute in his opposition to the YAF’s invitation, telling the *Round Table*, “bringing Erik Prince to campus here in the immediate aftermath of the [Christchurch] attack was not only very cold, but inflammatory as well.”



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