

Harvard appoints former Pentagon general counsel and Northrop Grumman executive as vice president

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15 July 2024

Harvard Interim President Alan M. Garber announced on July 10 that Jennifer M. O'Connor will serve as the university's vice president and general counsel starting July 29.

O'Connor was the US Department of Defense general counsel in the final months of the Obama administration, from mid-2016 to January 2017. She had held legal and advisory roles in the Obama administration before serving as the Pentagon's top lawyer. In May 2017, O'Connor joined major defense contractor Northrop Grumman, serving as vice president of technology and information law and policy, a role she helped create in the company. Northrop Grumman has operations and interests worldwide, including in the Middle East, and is deeply implicated in the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Harvard Out of Occupied Palestine and the Palestine Solidarity Committee, two groups that helped organize the encampment at Harvard in May, condemned the selection of O'Connor, citing her role at Northrop Grumman and the Pentagon.

O'Connor's appointment is nothing short of a provocation and marks another step in an offensive against democratic rights on campus which has been organized by an alliance between right-wing billionaire donors, fascistic Republicans, the Biden White House, the Democratic Party and the military-intelligence apparatus. Its fundamental aim has been to directly subordinate higher education to the demands and interests of US imperialism and its war machine.

From the beginning of the protests against the Gaza genocide, Harvard, like other prestigious universities, including the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has been a central site of a McCarthyite witch-hunt by these forces.

In December 2023 UPenn President Liz Magill, along with Harvard University President Claudine Gay and MIT President Sally Kornbluth, was subjected to demagogic questioning spearheaded by antisemitic, far-right Republican Elise Stefanik over Gay's and Kornbluth's alleged failures to address the supposed wave of antisemitism sweeping across US college campuses, including their own.

Magill was forced to resign immediately following the

hearings, and Harvard's Claudine Gay was forced out January 2, 2024.

The forced resignation of Gay further emboldened the right-wing offensive at Harvard. The House Committee on Education and the Workforce, chaired by far-right Republican Virginia Foxx, has demanded Harvard hand over reams of information on "antisemitism" at the university, going back to 2021.

In April, amid ongoing political threats from Washington and subpoenas from Congress, Harvard Interim President Garber announced the creation of an "Institutional Voice Working Group" and an "Open Inquiry and Constructive Dialogue Working Group." The result was a statement that Harvard will "refrain from controversial statements about public policy issues," as reported in the *Harvard Crimson*. The "neutrality policy" is aimed at suppressing opposition among students to the Israeli genocide against the Palestinian people and demands that Harvard divest from Israel, which led to a 20-day encampment in Harvard Yard.

Garber wrote of O'Connor in a message, "Over the course of her career, she has gained extensive experience within large and complex organizations that are subject to close public scrutiny," stating that she will be the university's "chief legal strategist."

A *Boston Globe* article states, "Interim Harvard president Alan Garber said O'Connor's experience in government and the private sector positioned her well to contend with the types of pressure the university now faces." It notes that she has not previously worked in higher education.

O'Connor's credentials to serve as Harvard's "chief legal strategist" are a combination of her experience providing legal services for the Department of Defense and her apparent seamless transition to Northrop Grumman—a company guilty of war crimes against Palestinian civilians, the US militarization of the US-Mexico border and involvement in mass biometric surveillance. So much for neutrality!

Northrop Grumman is deeply complicit in Israel's ethnic cleansing and genocide in Gaza. An investigation carried out by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) found Northrop Grumman "manufactures multiple weapon systems

used by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians and was instrumental in developing ICE's [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] deportation machine."

The AFSC reports that as of 2022 Northrup Grumman had \$31.4 billion in annual revenue, "88% of which derives from its defense sector." In 2021 the US government accounted for 88 percent of the company's annual sales, and between 2008 and 2021 "the US Department of Defense (DoD) awarded Northrup Grumman contracts worth \$136.7 billion." The investigation also cites contracts with the Department of Homeland Security worth more than \$1 billion between 2008 and 2021.

O'Connor had served as vice president of technology and information law and policy at Northrup Grumman since May 2017. Given the complex geopolitical landscape of the region, her legal work would have been intimately connected with Israel.

Northrup "supplies the Israeli military with a wide variety of weapons, including various missile systems," according to the AFSC, which reports that "These weapons are often gifted to Israel through the U.S. government's Foreign Military Financing program" and have been repeatedly used against Palestinians, "resulting in numerous casualties as well as mass destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and water and electric systems."

The AFSC investigation cites two specific war crimes occurring during O'Connor's tenure at Northrup:

- "Operation Breaking Dawn" in 2022: Within three days of an unprovoked offensive, Israel killed at least 33 Palestinians, including 17 civilians. Evidence of war crimes was recorded by Amnesty International.
- "Operation Guardian of the Walls" in 2021: During this assault, Israel killed at least 261 Palestinians, including 67 children and 41 women. At least half of the fatalities were civilians, and more than 2,200 additional Palestinians were injured. Evidence of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity was published by Palestinian human rights organizations Al-Haqm Al Mezan and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights; Amnesty International; and Human Rights Watch. The International Criminal Court announced that it will examine these cases.

Reporting on the VP appointment, the *Globe* said, "O'Connor's appointment comes after an academic year that was upended by tensions over the Israel-Hamas war. ...

"Unlike some universities that made certain concessions to protesters' demands to divest from Israel and the defense industry, Harvard said it would not agree to any kind of boycott of Israel. Garber told protesters the endowment would not be used as a 'political tool,' a university spokesperson said."

The university administration has victimized students involved in protests against the Gaza genocide and Harvard's continuing ties with the state of Israel and the US war machine, including 13 students who were barred from graduating with their class this spring following a vote by the top governing

body, the Harvard Corporation.

The administration withheld degrees from the students despite an overwhelming vote by the Faculty Senate against the action and a petition signed by 500 faculty members and 1,500 students. More than 1,000 students walked out of the commencement ceremony in protest. More than 20 students have been subjected to various disciplinary actions for their involvement in the encampment.

As the fall semester approaches, the Israeli state continues its daily murder of Palestinians, which the peer-reviewed medical journal *The Lancet* concludes has killed 186,000 people in its nine-month genocide. As thousands of students continue to oppose the war, the lessons of last year's protests must be learned. Students cannot fight alone but must turn to the international working class in a fight to merge the struggle against genocide, imperialist war and the attack on democratic rights with the development of the class struggle.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have called on workers and youth to join our July 24 rally and meeting to denounce Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu's appearance before a Joint Session of Congress and to build a mass movement against genocide and war.

As the statement issued by SEP National Chairman David North explains:

[T]he purpose of the demonstration is not only to express outrage but to provide a strategic direction for the building of a mass movement to end the Gaza genocide, which is inextricably linked to the global eruption of imperialist militarism, the relentless escalation toward nuclear war against Russia and China, and the assault on the democratic and social rights of the working class. The same economic interests and political processes, rooted in the capitalist system, that resulted during the last century in two world wars, fascism, the Holocaust and the dropping of atomic bombs are at work today.



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