George Mason University president dodges and distorts at student town hall after crackdown on anti-genocide protesters

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George Mason University (GMU) president Gregory Washington offered up a concoction of lies, half-truths and authoritarian arguments justifying the campus's crackdown on the student population's democratic rights at a town hall meeting on Thursday.

The event was the first public meeting the administration held with the student body since it was publicly revealed that two members of the GMU chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) had their home raided by police and agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in November.

The school had justified the raid on the grounds that two members of the SJP had engaged in a minor act of vandalism on campus associated with their opposition to the United States-backed genocide of the Palestinian population of Gaza. Subsequently, both students were banned from campus for four years, effectively expelling them. This course was taken despite law enforcement making no arrests and filing no charges against them.

A number of students demanded answers about the university's lack of justification for banning the SJP and the two students after the police raid failed to turn up evidence of any crime.

Washington didn't even bother to offer serious justifications to one student's question asking why GMU police were "allowed to go outside of their jurisdiction and target a family home? What's stopping them from doing this to other students, alumni or faculty?" The president alleged that police had "metadata" linking the video to the students and "the home that police went into, and that's why the search warrant was issued."

He concluded by cynically declaring, "That's what's supposed to happen in order to keep a campus that is both safe and supportive for all students. … What I will tell you is the students will be afforded due process."

In fact, the supposed existence of incriminating "metadata" justifies nothing that has occurred. Rather than being given their right to "due process," the students' entire family was forced to endure a no-knock police raid on their home. They faced the confiscation of their personal devices and the disruption, if not the complete ruining, of their academic lives due to these actions.

Furthermore, the existence of metadata connecting two students to the scene does not explain the crackdown on the SJP, an established student organization with many dozens of members. Washington also sidestepped the student's question asking if there was anything "stopping [police] from doing this to other students, alumni or faculty," suggesting such actions could happen without justification in the future.

Despite the heavy-handed response to student protesters, Washington extolled the virtues of "tolerance" and free speech when asked about the campus's lax approach to Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) presence on campus.

"The reality is companies like [military contractor] General Dynamics, even ICE, they come on campus to interview students … Our rationale has always been that … [if] we get into a process where we allow one group of students to control another group of students' aspirations. It's only a matter of time before those other students control your aspirations," he said.

Washington ignored the obvious fact that his administration has indeed allowed military contractors

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and other groups to control the “aspirations” of students on campus. Likewise, GMU is literally awash in the money of right-wing big business donors who are given the ability to interfere in the school’s hiring process and curriculum. According to former GMU president Ángel Cabrera, the multi-million-dollar donations from the Koch Foundation and other groups “fall short of the standards of academic independence.”

Throughout the meeting, Washington expressed barely disguised contempt for the students in attendance as he was questioned again and again about his perceived indifference to their well-being and democratic rights.

At one point, a student halted her contribution to state:

“You’re disrespectful and fully biased when it comes to the plight of Palestinians and those in the impacted diaspora who attend GMU due to your extensive work and research with US military contractors. You consistently use students and their backgrounds, their diverse backgrounds, to promote our university to incoming students. My face is plastered all over the social media for George Mason University. My face is plastered right now at the Costello business school. You can go up and I’m there, and yet you don’t listen.”

To this, Washington, seated among the nation’s top 1 percent of income earners with a hefty salary of $772,209 in 2024, appealed to his identity as an African American to cast himself as one of the oppressed. “The reality is your enemies, the people who don’t want you here, the people who are actually putting mechanisms and roadblocks in place against you, are the very same people who are against me. There is no difference in their mind,” he said to the incredulous students.

GMU under Washington revealed its real attitude toward free speech in its decision last year to endorse the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) definition of “antisemitism.” The alliance lumps legitimate political criticism of Israel and its actions into the catchall definition of “antisemitism” alongside actual racism and discrimination. Studies have shown the chilling impact that IHRA’s repressive definition has had on free speech at colleges.

Washington’s performance last week further demonstrates the students’ need to turn outward to the working class, including federal workers currently facing the Trump administration’s crackdown and unjust firings, as the key constituency to defend democratic rights for all.

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