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Columbia, Michigan, Yale



Columbia: tent protest

Daniel Lazare reports on the explosion of pro-Palestine campus protests sweeping America and how the authorities are once again resorting to the anti-Semitism big lie

Decades after students took over Columbia University at the height of the Vietnam War, the campus is emerging as a new battleground over Israel's war of destruction against Gaza.

The action began last week, when an anti-Zionist tent city sprouted on Columbia's South Field - a grassy expanse between the university library and the main administrative offices. Students chanted and chatted peacefully amid banners labelling the field a "liberated zone" and "Gaza solidarity encampment".

Simultaneously, Columbia president Nemat ‘Minouche’ Shafik was testifying at a congressional hearing in Washington. The former Bank of England deputy governor twisted nervously in her seat, as a succession of rightwing Republicans denounced a volcano of anti-Semitism that is supposedly erupting on college campuses and demanded to know what she was going to do about it. A cross-examination by Lisa McClain, an arch-conservative from the rural fringes of northern Detroit, was typical:

“What is your definition of anti-Semitism?” McClain began.

“For me, personally, any discrimination against people for their Jewish faith is anti-Semitism,” Shafik replied.

Pointing out that Shafik had established a university task force to investigate anti-Semitism, McClain asked if members agreed.

“I-I-I’m pretty sure they would share that same definition,” she said, looking more and more uneasy. The Michigan Republican then zeroed in for the kill:

McClain: Are mobs shouting, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” or “Long live the intifada?” Are those anti-Semitic comments?

Shafik: When I hear those terms, I find them very upsetting ...

McClain: That’s a great answer to a question I didn’t ask, so let me repeat ... Are those anti-Semitic statements, yes or no? It’s not how you feel, it’s ...

Shafik: I hear them as such, some people don’t ...

McClain: Was that yes? Was that yes?

Shafik: We have sent a clear message to our community ...

McClain: I’m not asking about the message. [Does] that fall under definition of anti-Semitic behaviour, yes or no? Why is it so tough?

Shafik: Because it’s a - it’s a - it’s a difficult issue, because some people define it as anti-Semitic, other people do not.

After more hemming and hawing, Shafik finally gave in. Such slogans, she conceded, were indeed beyond the pale. “So yes,” McClain said, “you do agree that those are anti-Semitic behaviour and there should be some consequences to that anti-Semitic behaviour. We’re in agreement, yes?” “Yes,” Shafik replied.¹

Shafik had gotten her marching orders. Returning to New York, she called the police less than 24 hours later and requested them to clear the field. More than 100 students were arrested on trespassing charges and hit with academic suspensions. Joe Biden, among others, issued a statement in support:

The ancient story of persecution against Jews in the Haggadah [Passover] also reminds us that we must speak out against the alarming surge of anti-Semitism - in our schools, communities and online. Silence is complicity. Even in recent days, we've seen harassment and calls for violence against Jews. This blatant anti-Semitism is reprehensible and dangerous - and it has absolutely no place on college campuses, or anywhere in our country.²

Biden's false equivalence between pro-Palestinian protests and anti-Semitism was a sign of more repression to come.

Continuation

But a funny thing happened on the way to a police state. Within hours of the April 18 arrests, new tents began springing back up. By the morning of Monday April 22, the encampment was bigger than ever, as perhaps 300 or 400 students milled about or cheered and clapped at a spirited rally a few dozen yards away.

"Minouche Shafik, what do you say? How many boots did you lick today?" one chant declared. Said another: "Minouche Shafik, open your eyes, we charge you with genocide."

So chalk up 'one for defiance' in the face of a government crackdown. At least temporarily, the protestors had succeeded in calling Shafik's - and hence Congress's - bluff. They posted no threatening signs, engaged in nothing by way of racial or religious incitement, made no effort to interfere with university operations, and even posted a no-littering notice at the campground entrance. It was a far cry from 1968, when students occupied buildings and a photo of a moustachioed student radical smoking a cigar behind the university president's desk quickly acquired iconic status.³ Indeed, it was more like the mid-1980s, when activists erected a symbolic shantytown in solidarity with anti-apartheid protests in South Africa - not only at Columbia, but in numerous other schools as well.

So the tent dwellers were no more disruptive than previous protestors and probably a good deal less. On Monday evening, the first night of Passover, they even held a Seder complete with matzo and prayer books. So what possible reason could Shafik have to call the cops a second time around other than the fact that protestors were occupying a patch of grass that on a fine spring day is usually filled with young people reading, tossing frisbees, or just plain hanging out?

The answer, of course, is Palestine. For all its conservatism, Washington by the mid-1980s had adopted a policy of "constructive engagement" with regard to the gathering anti-apartheid forces in South Africa. With Mikhail Gorbachev calling for "national reconciliation" in Angola and Soviet power rapidly fading, Washington sensed that events in Africa were going its way. Campus shantytowns were not only permissible, consequently, but

even encouraged. More anti-communist than racist, Ronald Reagan made it abundantly clear that he did not care what kind of government took over as long as it was pro-US, pro-free market, and properly respectful of bourgeois privilege - which is exactly what the post-apartheid South African government turned out to be.⁴

But Palestine is different. Instead of bracing itself for Zionism's downfall, the Biden administration is backing Israel to the hilt, providing it with billions of dollars in the form of bunker-buster bombs and other types of military aid. With control of Persian Gulf energy resources a top priority since the 1980s, Washington is determined to stand by a military ally it regards as nothing less than irreplaceable. Biden's statement on April 21 therefore included a plank no less threatening than anything uttered by Republicans. In addition to denouncing an "alarming surge of anti-Semitism" - a surge for which there is so far little empirical evidence - it vowed to "aggressively implement the first-ever National Strategy to Counter Anti-Semitism, putting the full force of the federal government behind protecting the Jewish community".

What is wrong with countering anti-Semitism? Nothing, of course, except that Biden's national strategy adopts a highly-distorted concept devised by a Berlin-based, Israeli-backed group known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which, among other things, defines anti-Semitism as "denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination: eg, by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour".⁵

This means that any argument to the effect that Zionism is predicated on racial, ethnic or religious discrimination against the native non-Jewish population is forbidden. Truth is no defence. It does not matter that Zionism has been saturated with anti-Arabism throughout its history. Anyone who dares say so is *ipso facto* an anti-Semite.

At the same time, equivalent statements by Zionists are A-OK. Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant is free to refer to Palestinians as "human animals", while Ariel Kallner, a Knesset member of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, can openly declare that the military operation in Gaza has "one goal: nakba! A nakba that will overshadow the nakba of 1948."⁶ While anti-Zionists are condemned for calling for a liberated Palestine "from the river to the sea", no-one objects when Likud says that "between the sea and the Jordan there will be only Israeli sovereignty" (to quote its 1977 founding platform). The same goes for Netanyahu. When he reiterated in January that "Israel needs security control over all territory west of the Jordan river", no-one in Washington raised the slightest objection.⁷ It is a case of one law for me, another for thee.

The Columbia tent protest is therefore in keeping with a classic tradition of civil disobedience that dares those in power to enforce policies that are obviously not just illogical, but unjust.

Not problem-free

This is not to say that the Columbia protests have been problem-free. On the contrary, protests over the weekend were marred by a small number of anti-Semitic or pro-Hamas outbursts - protestors shouting at Jewish students, “Go back to Poland”, for instance, others calling on Hamas to “burn Tel Aviv to the ground” or a couple of young men, faces obscured by keffiyehs, shouting that October 7 “will happen not one more time, not five more times, not ten more times, not 100 more times, not 1,000 more times, but 10,000 times!”⁸

But such expressions seemed to be isolated and rare, while the latest round of protests have been scrupulously anti-racist. Pro-Hamas statements are absent. Instead, visitors to the encampment are greeted with a banner declaring, “Welcome to the people’s university for Palestine”. Meanwhile, “Resistance is not terrorism,” said a sign hoisted by members of the Party for Socialism and Liberation at a sidewalk rally outside the locked campus gates. Members of a Trotskyist organisation known as the Internationalist Group held up another sign declaring, “CUNY [City University of New York] students say release the arrested protestors, drop all charges!”

Civil war

By Monday, according to no less an authority than the rightwing Anti-Defamation League, the movement was spreading rapidly, with encampments springing up at MIT, the University of Michigan, Stanford, and nine or 10 other schools across the US.⁹ Police arrested 45 students at Yale for trespassing and more than 150 at New York University - a 30-minute subway ride to Columbia’s south. The revolt was also spreading inside Columbia, as the faculty senate prepared to censure Shafik for violating “the fundamental requirements of academic freedom” and launching an “unprecedented assault on student rights”. Fifty law professors signed a letter of protest and various affiliated institutions issued condemnations, while the American Association of University Professors, the faculty union, did as well.

Faculty members were particularly appalled that Shafik had disclosed information about investigations during her testimony that are usually confidential. One faculty member under investigation for supposedly making anti-Semitic comments is an adjunct professor of political science named Albert Bininachvili, who told *The New York Times* that the allegations were “completely unfounded, preposterous, absurd, ridiculous”. He added:

I'm a devoted Jew, and I come from a practising Jewish family, and I have six members of my family who perished in the holocaust. Even today, when we're talking, several members of my extended family are living in Israel and serving in the IDF.¹⁰

Thanks to growing outrage, Shafik seemed to be skating on thinner and thinner ice.

But, while the protest wave is gathering steam, the counter-offensive is too. Robert Kraft, a Columbia graduate who owns the New England Patriots football team, announced that he would not donate to his alma mater until the protests ended. With elite US universities heavily dependent on billionaire contributions, such threats are enough to bring them to their knees.

After obtaining resignations by presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania last winter, congressional Republicans began hunting for another scalp as well. Led by Elise Stefanik, a Republican from upstate New York who is said to be on Trump's short list of possible vice-presidential running mates, they sent Shafik a letter asserting that "anarchy" was engulfing the Columbia campus. "As the leader of this institution," it said, "one of your chief objectives, morally and under law, is to ensure students have a safe learning environment. By every measure, you have failed this obligation."

Shafik is thus the latest university president whose head is on the chopping block. The civil war in America grows hotter by the day.

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