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## Self-Destructive College Presidents

Today on TAP: They are making a fraught situation worse by letting the far right define antisemitism and the necessary campus responses.



JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP PHOTO

Columbia University President Nemat Shafik testifies before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, on Capitol Hill in Washington, April 17, 2024.

Last December, the presidents of Penn and Harvard did not grovel sufficiently in trying to appease Republican inquisitors claiming that they were insufficiently sensitive to episodes of antisemitism. So with some crude prodding from large donors of the “Israel right or wrong” camp, Liz Magill and Claudine Gay were pushed out of their jobs by panicked trustees.

In the latest round of this self-abasement, other college presidents are hoping to out-grovel the earlier batch and outdo each other in sacrificing civil liberties. This never ends well.

At last week's hearing before the same House Education subcommittee that destroyed Magill and Gay, Columbia's beleaguered president, Nemat "Minouche" Shafik, who was born in Egypt, brought with her three senior Jewish colleagues for the grovel-fest. At one point, Rep. Rick Allen, a Republican from Georgia, asked Shafik whether she knew Genesis 12:3. She didn't.

Allen explained: "It was the covenant that God made with Abraham, and that covenant was real clear: 'If you bless Israel I will bless you, if you curse Israel I will curse you,'" he said. "Do you want Columbia University to be cursed by God?" Allen demanded.

Shafik meekly responded, "Definitely not." Seriously? The right answer was "Congressman, we can discuss the difficult balance between unpopular, even outrageous views and civil liberties. But I am not here to be interrogated by you about the Bible."

### **More from Robert Kuttner**

Somewhere there is a courageous college president, but she was not in that hearing room. All too predictably, on Sunday Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), who began the inquisitions of college presidents, called for Shafik's resignation, in favor of someone "who will protect Jewish students and enforce school policies." God save us from these friends of the Jews.

In Boston, students at MIT, Emerson, and Tufts have set up encampments in solidarity with students at Columbia. At Yale, where a Jewish student was injured by a protester, police have made arrests at a pro-Palestinian encampment. Instead of debating Israel-Palestine policy or the complex dynamics of antisemitism, the denial of civil liberties has become the issue.

Meanwhile, back at Columbia, where Shafik invited police onto campus last week to clear an encampment of pro-Palestinian demonstrators, the university suspended upwards of a hundred Columbia and Barnard students who supported the non-student demonstrators. And early Monday morning, trying to contain the damage, Shafik suspended all in-person classes in favor of virtual ones.

This will only escalate further and lead to more civil disobedience, more disgraceful denial of free speech, and more loss of confidence in Shafik by all sides. And count on opportunists to fish in troubled waters.

Rabbi Elie Buechler, a rabbi at Columbia, sent a message to 300 Jewish students suggesting they leave campus for their own safety and not come back. The Hillel organization for Columbia and Barnard rejected that advice in an X post.

And Rep. Jared Moskowitz (D-FL) announced Sunday that he would support Jewish students. "I will be coming to Columbia University to walk with the Jewish students. If the University

won't protect them, Congress will!" Moskowitz posted on X. He will be joined by Reps. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) and Dan Goldman (D-NY).

One brave exception was Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), who joined six Columbia professors at a virtual press conference Friday. "I'm very concerned with some of Columbia's actions," Bowman said. "They seem to be folding to pressure from a right wing Congress' weaponizing of the unfolding events in the Middle East as a means to suppress fundamental freedoms of expression." Bowman is doubly courageous because he is in a primary fight against AIPAC-backed Westchester County Executive George Latimer.

Granted, some incidents at Columbia and elsewhere have moved well beyond speech to explicit threats against Jewish students and even isolated instances of physical harm. It's hard in these circumstances to find the right balance between defending campus free speech and not tolerating intimidation. But Shafik's ultra hard line is not the right balance.

Meanwhile at USC, the university president, Carol Folt, has outdone even Columbia's Shafik, in sacrificing civil liberty to appeasement. Folt, whose salary is \$3.9 million, first canceled the customary commencement speech by the valedictorian Asna Tabassum following complaints by pro-Israel groups. The university cravenly cited "security concerns."

Then, Folt, in full panic mode, shut down other commencement events, including honorary-degree awards and speeches by film director Jon Chu, tennis great Billie Jean King, and others.

USC students and faculty should emulate the great African American contralto Marian Anderson, who gave a free concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after being barred from the racist DAR's Constitution Hall. They should hold their own counter-event off-site, inviting all of the disinvited speakers. The withdrawn invitations could be treated as badges of honor.

It doesn't take a crystal ball to discern that events on these campuses will soon escalate, that these gutless presidents will please no one, and that they will likely lose their jobs, leaving in their wake a festering election-year mess to be further stoked and exploited by the Republican right and Bibi Netanyahu.

A joyous Passover to all.

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