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United States: Columbia University is colluding with the far-right in its attack on students

Monday 22 April 2024, by [DONEGAN Moira](#)

In her willingness to unleash state violence against student protesters, Minouche Shafik proved herself to be a willing ally to extremists

The students sat on the ground and sang as police in riot gear approached them. Eventually, more than 100 of them would be arrested; their tents, protest signs and Palestinian flags were gathered into trash bags by the police and thrown away. One video showed officers and university maintenance workers destroying food that had been donated to the encampment, making sure it would be inedible. According to student journalists reporting from WKCR, Columbia University's student radio station, one student suffered a seizure after police refused to let her access her home, where her medication was. The arrested students were charged with "trespassing" on the campus that they are charged more than \$60,000 a year to attend.

The day before her administration asked the New York police department to storm their campus and arrest their students, Minouche Shafik, the Columbia University president, testified before Congress, saying that she wanted her university to be a safe and welcoming environment for everyone. But Shafik, who was called to testify after missing a hearing last year where the presidents of Penn and Harvard were each grilled on their insufficient hostility to pro-Palestinian students, appeared eager to please the Republican-controlled committee. The Penn and Harvard presidents who had testified each lost their jobs soon thereafter; Shafik clearly entered the hearing room determined to keep her own.

To that end, she made only tepid defenses of academic freedom, instead favoring wholehearted condemnations of the protesters, assents to bad-faith mischaracterizations of the students as antisemitic and genocidal, and public, apparently on-the-spot, personnel decisions that removed some pro-Palestinian faculty and staff from their positions. The hearing took on a fevered, impassioned tenor that at times verged into the outright weird. Rick Allen, a Georgia representative, asked her whether she wanted Columbia University to be "cursed by God". Shafik, evidently taking this prospect seriously, replied that she didn't.

The police raid against Columbia students that followed the next day can be seen as an extension of the policy of appeasement and pre-emptive compliance with the anti-Palestinian, anti-student Republican right that Shafik adopted in her testimony. In its war on education and ostentatious displays of grievance against "woke" universities, the far right has made itself hostile to academic freedom, peaceful protest and vast swaths of progressive speech. In her willingness to unleash state violence against student protesters, Shafik proved herself their willing ally. It is worth stating plainly what happened at Columbia: the raid was nothing less than the product of collusion between a university administration and rightwing politicians to suppress politically disfavored speech.

Not all of the congresspeople whom Shafik testified before on Wednesday were pleased with Columbia's approach. Ilhan Omar, of Minnesota, grilled Shafik extensively on her administration's approach to pro-Palestinian speech on campus, noting with alarm that several students had been suspended for their participation in peaceful demonstrations. "There has been a recent attack on the democratic rights of students across the country," Omar told Shafik. The next day, Omar's daughter, a student at Columbia's Barnard College, was suspended from the school.

The arrests at Columbia are in many ways the product of not just the generational shift in Americans' views on Palestine, but the bizarre situation of American universities in an era of a politically empowered far right and fervent cultural reaction. Conservative arbiters of the culture war have once again identified universities as objects of grievance; Republican members of the House, seated on committees with subpoena power, have every incentive to haul university presidents to Washington and berate them in hopes of garnering a viral news clip or issuing a clever barb that can be excerpted for their campaign ads.

Universities, meanwhile, have putative value commitments - to things like free inquiry, open expression, equality and dignity among their students and the pursuit of justice - that are in fact wildly out of step with their real institutional incentives. Sneering attention from conservatives, after all, is not merely a tedious waste of time, though it's certainly that; it is also a threat to universities' relationships with the people whose interests shape their academic policies with more and more bald transparency: their donors.

Shafik wanted to disperse the accusations by Republicans that her university was too deferential to a progressive cause. And so, she sicced the cops on a bunch of kids. In doing so, she betrayed not only her students, but the values of the university itself.

It is not the first time that the Columbia University administration has betrayed an unnerving eagerness to suppress pro-Palestinian speech. Columbia has been even more eager than other elite colleges to crack down on student organizing. Last year, it suspended two student groups, Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voices for Peace, over their expressions of opposition to Israel's actions in Gaza. In January, the college failed to protect peaceful pro-Palestinian protesters on their campus when a young man approached and sprayed them with an abrasive substance that protesters believe was skunk, a chemical weapon used for crowd-control by the IDF.

This hostility to students who feel they are protesting against an ongoing genocide was evidently not enough; this week, Columbia decided to escalate their attacks on student speech yet further.

The students that were zip-tied and carted off to jail by the NYPD at Columbia on Thursday were not violent. They were not even particularly rowdy. And though some fears of rising antisemitism in the wake of growing American opposition to Israel's actions in Gaza appear to be sincere, there is no reasonable assessment of the Columbia protesters' concerns that can depict them as motivated by anti-Jewish animus.

Such an assessment is not possible if you take seriously, as I think any reasonable observer must, the notion that young people might be sincerely outraged by the deaths of tens of thousands of people in Gaza. What the protesters did was not endanger their university; they embarrassed it. And for that, they were arrested. Perhaps they can take pride in the knowledge that the administrators were so eager to silence them precisely because they understood that their message was so powerful.

Maira Donegan

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 19 Apr 2024 12.00 CEST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/19/far-right-columbia-university-student-arrests>

This article was amended on 22 April 2024. In referring to a report from WKCR, an earlier version mistakenly said that the police refused to let one arrested student protester to go to their dorm to collect medication and as a result, they suffered a seizure. In fact, the student in question wasn't arrested.

- Moira Donegan is a Guardian US columnist.