

United States: University of Michigan President Ono & the Pepper-Spray Gang

Sunday 26 May 2024, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2024).

IN A DEED worthy of the Theater of the Absurd, the University of Michigan (U-M) administration inaugurated its much-vaunted 2024-25 “Year of Democracy and Civil Engagement” program by pepper-spraying its most politically committed students in the face. This gratuitous act was part of a violent raid by Michigan state and U-M campus police orchestrated by the U-M Regents and President Santa Ono at 6am on May 21.

Photo: On the morning of May 21, police violently raided a peaceful encampment at the University of Michigan.

The target was an unambiguously non-violent encampment of unarmed students sleeping in tents in front of the undergraduate library. They were there to protest U-M complicity with the U.S.-backed genocidal war against the Palestinian people in Gaza and on the West Bank. A very visible component targeted were Jewish students at U-M (the undergraduate population is about 25% Jewish) who believe that the most effective way to fight antisemitism is in alliance with opponents of racism, Islamophobia, colonialism and class oppression.

According to videos available on Instagram, first-hand reports on X, a May 21 letter of protest signed by over 400 faculty, a May 22 “Democracy Now” interview with student Salma Hamamy, and other news sources, the attackers in riot gear doused the young people in pepper spray as if shooting from fire hoses, flipped chairs and tables at them, hit them with batons, threw them to the ground, and arrested four while sending others to the hospital.

On a previously prepared statement issued around the same time, U-M President Ono declared in his best Homer Simpson imitation:

“Times like these are exactly why freedom of expression is so important and must be honored at public institutions like the University of Michigan.”

What followed in his letter was a distorted history of the campus protest movement, charging a pattern of behavior that rendered the U-M campus hazardous due to alleged unruly behavior in previous pro-Palestine protests as well as unsafe practices at the [encampment](#). The faculty letter in response pointed out that instances of the former were dwarfed by past conduct at political protests at U-M, and those surrounding sports events, which did not elicit a similar response. The main claim for the latter (a “fire hazard”) was a devious fabrication.

In other words, President Ono’s letter to the U-M community was a master class in political alchemy by which the repression of legitimate dissent was reframed and inverted into a rhetorical affirmation of democratic virtues to be fervidly championed while pepper-spray gushed on the faces those carrying out these principles in practice. Political courage may be rare, but in the instance of the encampment and the accompanying political demands, there was already a clear alternative of

dialogue and compromise exemplified by the administrations of Brown University, Rutgers University, Wesleyan University, Northwestern University, University of Oregon, and many others.

Yet the U-M chose to forego the path of reason, continuing their long-term policy of caring more about stifling and clamping down on idealistic students than taking action to stop the ongoing massacre of civilians in Gaza.

U-M Regents and administrators may not all be of the same mind politically, but what binds this motley coalition together is shared opposition to transparency, open and regular communication with students and faculty, and a willingness to risk student safety by claiming to be protecting U-M safety in theory. They have now squandered their credibility egregiously through brazen contortions of language, elastic definitions of “safety” and “disruption,” and a woefully dimwitted, self-perpetuated mythology of having to destroy legitimate protest in order to save it.

Reality, nonetheless, has a way of creeping back in, and I am reminded of what *Jewish Currents* editor Peter Beinart tweeted on “X” last February 9 in defense of similar protestors who were arrested:

“One day, when supporting apartheid in Israel-Palestine is as inconceivable as supporting it in South Africa, American Jews will remember these young activists the way we remember the Jewish Freedom Riders of the early 60s. Reviled now, they will be one day recognized as heroes.”

Alan Wald

P.S.

• Against the Current, 25 May 2024:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/university-of-michigan-president-ono-the-pepper-spray-gang/>

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