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Times Writers Group: President's speech had no purpose

By Barbara Banaian

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The president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was recently invited to speak at Columbia University in New York City, an event from which controversy continues to stir.

What would happen if St. Cloud State University or St. John's University had a chance to host a terrorist, someone with whom we are at war? What if we had the opportunity to have Ahmadinejad, Kim Jong Il or Robert Mugabe speak here?

Kathy Uradnik, a professor of political science at St. Cloud State, said, "The real issue is not whether there is or should be free speech as required by the First Amendment, but rather when a university should support and promote the underlying ideal (presented by John Stuart Mill and others) that more speech leads to truth and, it follows, to freedom."

Columbia Dean John Coatsworth appears to follow Mill's philosophy. On Fox News, Coatsworth argued that Adolf Hitler would have been invited to speak at the university "if he were willing to engage in a debate and a discussion, to be challenged by Columbia students and faculty."

Speech restrictions

Speech is not an unrestricted right. Speech is restricted in many places based on safety concerns. For example, there are free speech zones at St. Cloud State, places where you are allowed to speak freely. You need permission to speak elsewhere. St. Cloud State gets a "red light" for its speech code from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group that advocates for free speech on college and university campuses.

At St. John's and the College of St. Benedict, demonstrators need to give a three-day notice to campus security. Because they are private schools, they have an additional restriction to "limit speakers/groups that are inconsistent with the Catholic mission and character of the schools."

Who benefits?

Let's assume a speech by Ahmadinejad was consistent with Columbia's mission. They invite someone to a campus because presumably they provide a benefit to students consistent with their mission. For whose benefit would Columbia invite this man to campus? They didn't invite Ahmadinejad for his benefit, but for students and faculty.

What was the educational reason to bring Ahmadinejad to campus? Maybe it was to create some kind of rogues' display: "Hey, look at the terrorist!" But that hardly seems educational.

I would hope that they would be brought to engage in actual debate. Unfortunately, they did no such thing. The format of his talk provided no opportunity for real dialogue.

Columbia President Lee Bollinger made statements about Ahmadinejad's history and then departed the stage, leaving it to the audience to engage in dialogue. The only time Ahmadinejad was confronted was when he said there were no homosexuals in Iran. Nothing about terrorism or treatment of minorities or nuclear bombs. Nothing about his professed desire to annihilate Israel or his country's military presence in Iraq or southern Lebanon. They asked, he answered, they moved on, having no basis to challenge his words.

It would be convenient to blame the students, but because the university invited them, you have to ask how it thought its students were prepared to engage in a dialogue with Ahmadinejad. What does it take to prepare a student to talk to a dictator?

St. Cloud State does require its students to take a course in Democratic Citizenship. Certainly, an understanding of great literature — much of which involves stories of man's fallibility and cruelties — would further this end. Would they have done better? I would hope so. Nothing good came out of Columbia's "debate." It was a tale of a missed opportunity. If they didn't know they could have done it right, they should, perhaps, have not done it at all.

This is the opinion of Barbara Banaian, a professional pianist who lives in the St. Cloud area. Her column is published the first Friday of the month.

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