

AN OPEN LETTER ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND UNIVERSITY RESPONSIBILITY

By Abraham H. Foxman

The Brooklyn College controversy involving the appearance on campus of two speakers who advocate boycotts and sanctions against the State of Israel has aroused strong emotions on all sides. Too often, in these kinds of matters, there is more heat than light shed on issues of academic freedom, university responsibility and the role of government.

Nothing illustrates this more than New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's comments the other day. On the role of the city, he said: "If you want to go to a university where the government decides what kinds of subjects are fit for discussion, I suggest you apply to a school in North Korea." But he went further, arguing that a university should be free to sponsor a forum on any topic, "including ideas that people find repugnant."

To me, the mayor has bundled together different ideas which lead to confusion. Part of the misunderstandings stem from confusion over the meaning of academic freedom and what the BDS movement is about.

Let me sharpen the argument by presenting a hypothetical.

Suppose Brooklyn College had brought to campus two members of the Ku Klux Klan who were going to talk about why America must remain a white-dominated country and how non-white people were ruining the country. There would be appropriate outrage about the presence of such speakers at a diverse campus like Brooklyn's but a recognition that even hate-filled voices have a right to be heard.

If, however, the sociology department would have sponsored these speakers, the reaction, at least among some, would have been very different.

I bring this hypothetical because few people would say that the KKK merely represents a different point of view on race in America. While their right to speech is constitutionally protected, their message is clearly one of hate. The Anti-Defamation League will defend freedom of speech, even if its hateful; but there is a huge difference between defending one's right to give a speech in the public square as opposed to using university dollars to sponsor a hate-fest.

In the case of the BDS speakers at Brooklyn College, there are those who would characterize their words as criticisms of Israel but do not see their views as hateful. In fact, the BDS movement is not merely advocating boycotts of Israel, which in our mind is hateful on its own, but in its support for the "right of return" of refugees, they are advocating something even more hateful, the destruction of the Jewish state through demography. Anyone who is serious about the

survival of Israel knows what this is about.

So we are talking here about hate, not mere criticism. The BDS movement at its very core is anti-Semitic.

This distinction has impact, not on constitutional freedoms, which are not at issue here, but with regard to the role of the university in sponsoring the appearance of such speakers. Let's be clear: students on campus have the right to invite speakers who are extremely critical of Israel or of minorities to address their fellow students. The campus, after all, is a "marketplace of ideas."

We do, however, object to the sponsorship of anti-Israel or racist events by a university or university departments because it inherently creates the perception that the views expressed at the event endorsed by the sponsor. When a university department sponsors a blatantly anti-Israel program, or any discriminatory or hateful program, the event is afforded an added degree of legitimacy and credibility that is unwarranted.

In such cases, ADL regularly urges the university and or department to rescind its sponsorship. ADL often calls on the university president to distance the university from the messages being promoted by the event in question.

In sum, the role of the university is not merely to avoid interfering with free speech. It must as well avoid conflating the right of even the most hate-filled to voice his or her opinions with the avoidance of the need to make clear where the university stands on the message of the speaker. And the main manifestation of legitimizing the message, no matter denials, is official sponsorship.

That is what the outrage about the Brooklyn College event is about. It is not about freedom of speech. It is not about government telling Brooklyn College what is acceptable speech. It is about a college leaving at best an ambiguous understanding about the legitimacy of hate.

I would suggest, going forward, three standards to be drawn from this incident. First, students have a right to invite whom they want. Second, officials of the university, however, should not lend the good name of the university to such hate by sponsoring or giving its seal of approval to such appearances.

And third, when students invite hateful speakers—which they have the right to do—university presidents would do well to use their bully pulpits to reject those messages of hate and anti-Semitism.