

The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism on American College Campuses

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Abstract Few American college campuses have witnessed the number and intensity of anti-Semitic incidents reported at San Francisco State University, Columbia University, and the University of California at Irvine (2000–2005), however, dozens of American campuses every year experience at least some manifestation of this ugly problem, which is now undoubtedly national in scope. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) documents nearly 100 anti-Semitic incidents on American college campuses in 2005 alone. Most incidents are probably not reported to the ADL. The United States Commission on Civil Rights monitors anti-Semitic incidents on college campuses and will continue to do so.

Keywords San Francisco State University · University of California Irvine · Columbia University · Zionism · Palestinian

The United States Commission on Civil Rights recently characterized the resurgence of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist incidents at American colleges and universities as a “serious problem” requiring further attention.¹ A review of recent, significant incidents may serve to illuminate the nature of the problem as it exists on some campuses.

¹See U.S. Comm’n on Civil Rights, Findings and Recommendations of the United States Commission on Civil Rights Regarding Campus Anti-Semitism 1 (2006), available at <http://www.usccr.gov>.

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Case Studies

San Francisco State University

On May 7, 2002, an ugly incident at San Francisco State University awakened public attention to this new emergence of an ancient prejudice. At that campus, which had already developed a reputation in some circles as an unwelcoming place for Jews, over “[f]our hundred Jewish students held a... ‘Sit-in for Peace in the Middle East,’ hoping to engage the pro-Palestinian students... in ‘dialogue.’”² As the rally concluded, “pro-Palestinian students surrounded the 30 remaining Jewish students,” shouting death threats.³ Professor Laurie Zoloff, a witness to the event, reported that, “[c]ounter demonstrators poured into the plaza, screaming at the Jews to ‘Get out or we will kill you’ and ‘Hitler did not finish the job.’”⁴ Others reported shouts of “F___ the Jews!” and “Die racist pigs!”⁵ Police allegedly refused to take any action other than to surround the Jewish students and community members, who were reportedly trapped while an angry mob chanted for their death.⁶ The San Francisco police then marched the Jewish group to the Hillel House and remained on guard.⁷ Some rally participants reported feeling “very threatened” and fearing that violence would ensue but for the police presence.⁸ The May 7 rally was hardly the only anti-Semitic episode at San Francisco State that year. “In April, a flyer advertising a pro-Palestinian rally... featured a picture of a dead baby, with the words, ‘Canned Palestinian Children Meat—Slaughtered According to Jewish Rites Under American License....’”⁹ This flyer explicitly revived the centuries-old “blood libel that Jews eat gentile children.”¹⁰

San Francisco State’s President, Robert A. Corrigan, responded firmly to these incidents.¹¹ Responding to the “blood libel” flyers, Corrigan wrote strong letters to the responsible student groups, insisting that the flyer “is no political statement,” that it is “hate speech in words and image,” and that its language “echoes a type of ugly myth that has been used through the centuries specifically to generate hatred.”¹² He further announced that “[t]he flier was much more than an offense to the Jewish community; it was an offense to the entire University community and all that we stand for—most especially our ability to see the humanity in those with whom we

² Sarah Stern, “Campus Anti-Semitism”, in U.S. Comm’n on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism: Briefing Report 72* (2006), available at <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/081506campusantibrief07.pdf> (“Campus Anti-Semitism”), at 22.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gary A. Tobin, Aryeh K. Weinberg & Jennfa Ferer, *The Uncivil University* (San Francisco: Institute for Jewish and Community Research 2005) at 172.

⁵ Stern, “Campus Anti-Semitism”, at 22.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism*, at 60–64.

¹² Ibid. at 61.

disagree.”¹³ Then, in a strongly worded letter to all members of the university community, he condemned the demonstrators who “behaved in a manner that completely violated the values of this institution and of most of you who are reading this message.”¹⁴

Columbia University

At Columbia University, a number of students have come forward claiming that they feel intimidated and fearful in courses in Columbia’s Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC) program. The documentary film *Columbia Unbecoming*, “produced by a group of Columbia students under the guidance of the David Project,” details a pattern of anti-Semitic activities at Columbia University.¹⁵ The most high-profile reports of bias recently involved MEALAC. In one famous incident described in the film, a Columbia student described an encounter that she had with Columbia University Professor George Saliba:

Towards the end of the semester, Professor Saliba showed what I felt was an anti-Israel film, showing the contemporary conflict between Palestinians and Israelis with a very one-sided view. The film and Saliba presented a view that Arabs have a prior claim to the land of Israel. And I felt very differently about that. And I was sure to express my opinion. For a few minutes, we discussed it inside the classroom and then George Saliba sort of drew me outside the classroom, and told me to walk with him this way out.... He said, “You have no voice in this debate.” So I said, “Of course, I’m allowed to express my opinion.” He came really close to me....[H]e said, “See, you have green eyes.” He said, “You’re not a Semite.” He said, “I’m a Semite. I have brown eyes. You have no claim to the land of Israel.”¹⁶

In another notorious allegation discussed in the film, Professor Joseph Massad “spent a class recounting the ‘massacre’ by the Israelis in Jenin. When a student raised her hand to ask [whether] Israel often gives warnings ahead of time before striking terrorist strongholds, Professor Massad [allegedly] screamed back at her, ‘I will not have you deny Israeli atrocities in my class!’”¹⁷ In a third incident, Professor Hamid Dabashi is said to have written, on September 23, 2004, that Israelis have “a vulgarity of character that is bone-deep and structural to the skeletal vertebrae of [their] culture.”¹⁸

A faculty committee commissioned to investigate the matter found that there were no anti-Semitic activities.¹⁹ The committee was, from the beginning, accused of bias, and Columbia’s President was charged with selecting committee members who

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. at 62.

¹⁵ Anti-Defamation League, *Statement to U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: Anti-Semitic Incidents on*

¹⁶ Stern, “Anti-Semitism,” at 24–25.

¹⁷ “ADL Statement,” at 18.

¹⁸ Stern, “Campus Anti-Semitism,” at 69. *But see* U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism* at 59 (relating Professor Dabashi’s partial denial of Stern’s claims).

¹⁹ The ADL, interestingly, has not used the term “anti-Semitism” against Columbia and has argued that this designation was a “red herring” and that “anti-Semitism had never been the core issue at hand.” “ADL Statement” at 18.

lacked objectivity.²⁰ Columbia acknowledges identifying “inconsistencies and weaknesses in the avenues available for students to raise concerns about faculty conduct,” and maintains that these problems were addressed by clarifying and strengthening the university’s “procedures for adjudicating grievances and establish[ing] additional [opportunities] for students” to communicate with university administrators.²¹ The committee report has been criticized as a “white-wash” (or at least “clumsy”²²), and critics argue that it yielded nothing more than “a very slight slap on the wrist” for one faculty member and recommendations for better grievance procedures.²³ Others argue that a “close reading of the report makes it clear that the committee was using [the one episode it criticized] to send a broader message,” namely: “Anything doesn’t go anymore.”²⁴

The University of California at Irvine

At the University of California (UC) at Irvine, numerous anti-Semitic allegations have been raised over the last few years.²⁵ In 2000, a Jewish student was told to, “Go back to Russia where you came from” and called a “F___ing Jew.”²⁶ In January 2004, a rock was thrown at a Jewish student wearing a tee shirt that said, “Everybody loves a Jewish boy,” barely missing him.²⁷ The rock was thrown from

²⁰ Ibid. at 4. According to the ADL, “two of the five members [of this committee] had signed Columbia’s divestment petition, one had been the thesis advisor of Joseph Massad and instrumental in [hiring him], and one had written a paper blaming Israel” for increasing global anti-Semitism. Ibid.

²¹ Transcript of U.S. Comm’n on Civil Rights, Meeting of Nov. 18, 2005, apps. at 1–2 (Letter From Alan Brinkley, Provost, Columbia Univ. to Kenneth L. Marcus, Staff Director, U.S. Comm’n on Civil Rights, (Nov. 15, 2005)), available at <http://www.uscrr.gov/calendar/transcript/1118uscrrwappx.pdf>. Columbia also emphasizes its efforts to create a welcoming environment for Jewish students. Ibid.; see also Lipstadt, *supra* note 38, at 5 (“[M]any pundits have spoken about the problems at Columbia University while ignoring, almost willfully, the fact that it is also home to one of the most multifaceted and vibrant Jewish student communities.”).

²² Deborah E. Lipstadt, “Strategic Responses to Anti-Israelism and Anti-Semitism,” in Deborah E. Lipstadt, Samuel G. Freedman, and Chaim Seidler-Feller, eds., *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times?* (New York: American Jewish Committee 2005), available at <http://72.14.209.104/search?q=cache:E24xm2MCY3IJ:www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%257B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%257D/AmericanJewryCollegeCampus2005.pdf+American+Jewry+and+the+College+Campus:+Best+of+Times+or+Worst+of+Times%3F&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us> at 15.

²³ ADL Statement, *supra* note 18. But see Lipstadt, at 15 (arguing that Columbia had “put MEALAC into academic receivership” even before the matter became public, “essentially stripping members of the department of any control over its internal affairs”).

²⁴ Samuel G. Freedman, *Keeping Things in Perspective*, in Lipstadt, et al., eds., *American Jewry and the College Campus* at 27, 28.

²⁵ See, e.g., Marc Ballon, *Jewish Students and Activists Call UC Irvine a Hotbed of Anti-Semitic Harassment*, Jewish J., Mar. 11, 2005, <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php>; Kimi Yoshino, *Fresh Muslim-Jewish Discord on Campus: Program Titles are Considered Anti-Semitic by Some at UC Irvine*, *Site of Civil Rights Probe*, Los Angeles Times, May 12, 2006, at B3.

²⁶ The Zionist Organization of America, Mem. in Supp. of Its Title VI Claims Against the University of California, Irvine (Case No. 09–05–2013) (Office for Civil Rights, San Francisco Office)[hereinafter *Zionist*] at 11. The dean allegedly told the student that there was nothing the administration could do unless a student was “specifically threatened physically.” Ibid.

²⁷ Susan B. Tuchman, *Statement Submitted to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Briefing on Campus Anti-Semitism*, in U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism*, at 13, 17.

the direction of a student group, which was using rocks as paper weights.²⁸ In February 2004, two students uttered an Arabic phrase which translates as “Slaughter the Jews” when they saw an Arabic-speaking Jewish student wearing a pin on his sweatshirt emblazoned with American and Israeli flags.²⁹ During the heated exchange which followed, the Jewish student was “surrounded and threatened” by other students.³⁰ In March 2004, this same student was called a “dirty Jew” and denigrated with “threatening language and hurtful ethnic slurs” by other students.³¹

In recent years, the campus has also experienced anti-Semitic vandalism, as well as anti-Semitic hate speech posted in campus signs, published in student newspapers, and presented at student-sponsored public lectures.³² For example, in 2002 a UC Irvine student publication argued “that Jews are genetically different... from non-Jews.”³³ That same year, signs were posted on campus showing the Star of David dripping with blood, and equating [that Jewish symbol] with the swastika.³⁴ “In 2003,... a Holocaust memorial on the UC” Irvine campus was either “destroyed” or “disturbed”—depending on conflicting accounts of the incident.³⁵ In early 2004, one student-sponsored speaker announced to a UC Irvine audience that “there are good Jews and bad Jews.”³⁶ Lecturing from behind a lectern bearing the UC Irvine emblem, the speaker explained that Jews exhibit an arrogance based on both white supremacy and the doctrine that Jews are the chosen people.³⁷ Numerous other university-sponsored public lectures have criticized Jews, Zionism and Israel. Students have posted signs equating Zionism with Nazism, signs with the Star of David dripping with blood, signs equating Israeli Prime Minister Sharon with Hitler, and signs of Prime Minister Sharon with a monkey face next to signs advertising the Jewish Sabbath dinners.³⁸ Another sign posted on campus read, “Israelis Love to Kill Innocent Children.”³⁹ At least two UC Irvine students have recently left that campus because they perceive that it has developed a “hostile environment for Jewish students.”⁴⁰

UC Irvine students have alleged, in unusual detail, the impact that this harassment has had on their educational opportunities at Irvine. According to the Zionist

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. at 14.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Compare *id.* (stating that memorial was destroyed) with U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism*, at 65–66 (providing a statement from Diane Fields Geocar, Counsel for the University of California at Irvine, that claimed the monument was disturbed).

³⁶ Tuchman, at 15.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Zionist Organization of America, at 9.

³⁹ Ibid. at 10.

⁴⁰ Tuchman, at 17.

Organization of America (ZOA), some students have feared for their physical safety, assert that anti-Semitic hostility has adversely affected their academic performance, fear identifying themselves as Jews, avoid clothing that identifies them as Jews or supporters of Israel, avoid affiliating with Jewish programs or activities on campus in which they would otherwise have participated, and have transferred to other universities to escape the anti-Semitism they allege at UC Irvine.⁴¹

The UC Irvine administration has been accused of being “silent and passive” in the face of these various incidents.⁴² For example, in 2002 one Jewish student expressed her fears to the Chancellor of UC Irvine and other campus administrators: “Not only do I feel scared to walk around proudly as a Jewish person on the UC Irvine campus, I am terrified for anyone to find out. Today I felt threatened that if students knew that I am Jewish and that I support a Jewish state, I would be attacked physically.”⁴³ “The Chancellor never responded to [the] student’s letter.”⁴⁴ One administrator who did respond recommended that the student seek professional counseling from the university’s Counseling Center.⁴⁵

Incidents at Other Universities

The incidents at San Francisco State, Columbia and Irvine have come to symbolize the status of campus anti-Semitism around the country, but there have been episodes at other campuses as well.⁴⁶ The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) documented nearly one hundred anti-Semitic incidents on American college campuses in 2005 alone. While this figure may overstate the problem in one respect, because many of the incidents may be minor, isolated events, it may also understate the problem in a more important respect, because most incidents are probably not reported to the ADL. Commentators disagree as to whether the phenomenon of campus anti-Semitism is “actually limited to a few well-publicized events,”⁴⁷ such as the incidents at San Francisco State, Columbia, and Irvine, or whether these incidents are merely some of the most egregious examples of a problem that is “systemic in higher education and can be found on campuses all over the United States.”⁴⁸ The author’s own experience as a civil rights official suggests that the truth lies in between: few American campuses have witnessed the number and intensity of anti-

⁴¹ Zionist Organization of America at 4.

⁴² *Ibid.* at 5–6.

⁴³ Tuchman, *supra* note 94, at 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* at 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Harold Shapiro & Steven Bayme, “Foreword,” to Lipstadt, *et al.*, eds., *American Jewry* at 2 (noting that the “more widespread and sustained narrative of the integration of Jews and Judaism into university culture [has been] dwarfed by the surfacing of anti-Israel invective or anti-Semitic hostility” and acknowledging “some level of exaggerated fears and sensitivities”).

⁴⁷ Chaim Seidler-Feller, *Advocacy and Education in at LIPSTADT*, *et al.*, *American Jewry*, at 33.

⁴⁸ Gary A. Tobin, “The Uncivil University: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israelism in Higher Education,” in U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Campus Anti-Semitism*, at 35.

Semitic incidents reported at those three campuses, but dozens of campuses every year experience at least some manifestation of this ugly problem, which is now undoubtedly national in scope.

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