

New School University students protest commencement speech by John McCain

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Dozens of students and faculty at the New School University commencement, held Friday at Madison Square Garden in New York City, protested the presence of keynote speaker Senator John McCain (Republican of Arizona).

One of the two student speakers, Jean Sara Rohe, discarded her prepared remarks in order to respond to the presence of the avidly pro-war senator. She said that McCain did not represent the ideals of the New School and highlighted the anti-democratic nature of his appearance by adding, “[T]his invitation was a top-down decision that did not take into account the desires and interests of the student body on an occasion that is supposed to honor us above all.”

She continued: “I consider this a time of crisis, and I feel obligated to speak... Pre-emptive war is dangerous and wrong.” She noted that “weapons of mass destruction have not been found” in Iraq, and objected to that fact that in the name of the American people the United States was wreaking havoc around the world.

Students cheered her remarks and booed McCain when he rose to speak. Many in the audience held up anti-McCain banners and signs, and shouts grew more energetic as his speech went on. A number of graduates walked out of the hall in protest.

Bob Kerrey, the former Democratic senator from Nebraska and president of the New School University, who had invited McCain to speak, was also booed when he spoke. One person in the audience shouted, “You’re a war criminal!” Kerrey has admitted to participating in a massacre of civilians when he was a Navy Seal officer during the Vietnam War.

Three days previously, students at Columbia College in New York protested McCain’s presence as Class Day keynote speaker. Many students wore orange buttons and held up orange umbrellas bearing the slogan, “John McCain Does Not Speak for Us.” Scores of students signed an online petition that noted McCain’s anti-democratic views on abortion and homosexual marriage.

Protest actions at the New School were even more widespread. On Wednesday, students and faculty

demonstrated at the Greenwich Village campus, and more than 1,300 students, faculty, and parents signed a petition asking that McCain’s invitation be withdrawn. The Student Senate voted to ask Kerrey to rescind the invitation. Kerrey refused.

Kerrey himself was installed as president of the New School in 2001 in the face of widespread dissent by faculty and students. At the university, he is widely despised as a war criminal for his role in a raid on the village of Thanh Phong in South Vietnam in 1969. By Kerrey’s own admission, the raid resulted in the deaths of at least 13 unarmed women and children.

His appointment as president marked a significant shift to the right in higher education, bound up with an effort by the American ruling elite to sanitize the intervention of American imperialism in Vietnam, which resulted in the deaths of over three million Vietnamese. Protests at the New School over Kerrey’s appointment were only quelled by the events of September 11, 2001. Kerrey today defends the occupation of Iraq.

McCain, who is all but officially campaigning for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, likewise defends the legacy of imperialism in Vietnam. His leading advisor and co-author of his books, Mark Salter, complained in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (CQPolitics.com) that during the 2000 Republican presidential primaries McCain’s opponents “painted him as some sort of crypto-commie when he had a record easily as conservative as Bush’s.”

The most substantive political message McCain delivered in his speeches at Columbia and the New School was to defend the American occupation of Iraq. “I believe the benefits of success will justify the costs and risks we have incurred,” he declared.

Since 2002, McCain and Kerrey have been members of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI). This organization was first set up by Bruce Jackson, a former director of the neo-conservative Project for a New American Century, to press for “regime change” in Iraq. Other members of the CLI have included Bush advisor Richard

Perle, former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former CIA Director James Woolsey, and the editor of the of the *Weekly Standard*, William Kristol.

Given such associations, it should hardly come as a surprise that McCain has defended Bush's efforts to privatize Social Security and has supported draconian restrictions on abortion rights in South Dakota and an anti-gay marriage amendment to the constitution of Arizona, his home state. Recently McCain dropped his opposition to tax cuts for the rich.

By speaking at liberal institutions such as Columbia and especially the New School, which traditionally has been a center of leftist and nonconformist thought since it was founded by philosopher John Dewey, economist Thorstein Veblen, historian Charles Beard and others in 1919, McCain is seeking to bolster his media image as a "maverick" who bridges the divide between conservatives and liberals.

McCain is, meanwhile, sparing no effort to placate the Christian fundamentalist right. Last September, the Republican senator held private discussions in his Washington office with Rev. Jerry Falwell and subsequently discussed a proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriages, which McCain indicated he would not oppose. According to *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, "He also has suggested that a Biblical view that the universe developed from 'intelligent design' should be discussed in the schools in addition to evolution ..."

Earlier this month, McCain addressed the graduating class at Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

New School President Kerrey is doing his part to promote McCain. The ex-war criminal and Democratic senator—who also served on the official panel that whitewashed the government role in the 9/11 attacks—unwittingly said more than he intended when, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he wrote that McCain "is clearly within the mainstream of American political thinking today."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several New School students protesting outside the Madison Square Garden site of the graduation ceremony.

Rachel, an undergraduate at Lang College of the New School, said, "I think it's ridiculous that McCain is using our graduation as a forum. We have a huge gay student body and he opposes gay marriage. I don't have much respect for the two-party system anyway. I'm not surprised that Kerrey has invited him.

"It is an indication of the direction that the New School itself is moving in. When we were distributing the petitions to have McCain's invitation revoked, many freshmen asked why. Some even supported the war, although the majority still opposes it. The New School gets publicity for this and it's part of Kerrey's effort to destroy the identity of the New

School.

"For McCain, this makes him seem like a moderate or a mediator between right and left. But McCain is radically conservative. He is no moderate. He supports the war in Iraq. I oppose the war. We have not made a single thing better by being there. It's a colonial venture. We have to free ourselves from conservative and capitalist forces."

Jeff, a graduate student in economics, said, "We're here because Kerrey is allowing McCain a political platform, in spite of the fact that the Student Senate asked that McCain's invitation be revoked.

"McCain wants to be the next president. If he's able to speak at a liberal university it helps him appear more mainstream. His views are actually far-right. He supports US imperialism in general and supports policies to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. There has been a push for a neo-liberal policy by both parties, and McCain will have no problem running over anyone that gets in the way of this.

"We have to reverse that trend. The recent success of the French students and workers to protect themselves from this was inspiring."

Jeremy, an undergraduate of Lang College, told the WSW: "I am opposed to John McCain's speaking here today because he does not represent the values of the New School. He is a threat to this country. He shouldn't be speaking here under the pretense of freedom of speech when he's really giving a presidential campaign speech. If you look at his views, he supports a neo-liberal economic policy and he supports the war in Iraq.

"Kerrey did this undemocratically. It's the students who should control the speaker invitations for their commencement."



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