

## **A new battleground on campuses**

By Elizabeth Wrigley-Field

The increasingly polarized political climate on U.S. campuses was driven home to me in the last few weeks of the semester at my school, New York University (NYU) – which saw an outpouring of activity at both ends of the political spectrum. The remarkably diverse array of progressive activism included a serious anti-racism campaign; a protest that resulted in the cancellation of a CIA recruiting event; a campaign to kick Coca-Cola off campus for its complicity in the murder of union activists in Colombia; a teaching assistants' union campaign; and protests against right-wing speakers, including a protest against Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia that received national attention when a law student asked Scalia (who supports anti-sodomy laws against homosexual sex), “Do you sodomize your wife?” At the same time, right-wing student groups and individuals tried to advance their agenda, targeting affirmative action, gay rights, and individual left-wing students, in a series of attacks I relay below. As classes wound down, the campus began to feel electrified by the political organizing on both sides. A similar dynamic is taking place on campuses across the country, with grassroots activism in resurgence – sharpened by the fact that conservatives are organizing as well.

The climate on campuses is affected by the political context of the rest of the country. Claiming the election as a “mandate” for the worst of his policies, Bush has gone on a rampage on a whole range of issues – most recently, putting forward a horrifying slate of right-wing judicial nominees who will receive lifetime federal appointments, now that the Democrats have promised not to filibuster the vote. Politicians across the board have embraced the “war on terror” as justification for attacking civil liberties wholesale, demonizing Arabs and Muslims in the process.

Taking their lead from this conservative offensive at the top of society is what seems like an escalating movement of grassroots right-wing forces across the country – epitomized most clearly, and chillingly, by the Minutemen, a group of racist, anti-immigrant vigilantes organizing armed “border patrols” along Arizona’s border with Mexico. But it isn’t only the right-wing fringe that is taking a lead from the Bush administration. On campuses, College Republicans and larger conservative organizations have also begun to seize what they see as an opportunity to reshape the atmosphere.

### **Right-wing effort to retake campuses**

The right wing seems determined to stake their ground on campuses – not, as conservatives often claim, because campuses are hotbeds of radicalism (if only!), but rather because campuses are one of the few places in our society where oppositional ideas are publicly discussed. Certainly, no one is finding such ideas in the mainstream media, or in the ‘debates’ between two corporate political parties that look increasingly indistinguishable. But campuses remain realms in which progressive ideas still have currency, partly as a legacy of the mass radicalization and social movements of the 1960s

and 1970s, and in some cases, are still publicly associated with student movements of the past. This is a tradition the Right is determined to erase, to solidify the lack of radical ideas anywhere.

Hence the focus on campuses. Here, the Right has two complementary goals: one, to chill the expression of dissent against U.S. policies, particularly criticisms of the War on Terror; and two, to rehabilitate the intellectual credibility of colonialism, racism, and sexual inequality.

As to the first goal, of narrowing the space for dissent, conservative pundits off-campus and student groups on campus have stepped up an assault on academic freedom, as well as on left-wing student activism. Targets include individual professors who refuse to kowtow to U.S.-Israeli policy, such as Columbia's Joseph Massad, as well as attacks on academic freedom more broadly, as in Florida's "Academic Bill of Rights," designed to "protect" college students from supposed liberal bias in their classrooms. All of these initiatives have been couched in terms of "balance" and "tolerance," as conservatives and Zionists try to claim *they* are the ones being silenced.

Yet the true goal of the new McCarthyism is to eradicate any outspoken dissent from U.S. policies. As Joseph Massad argues,

Israel's apologists and right-wing witch-hunters aim to establish this popular and media "knowledge", which echo the official positions of the State of Israel and its US lobby, as "scholarly" and dismiss academic scholarship as ideology. It is in this context that many of the organisations and individuals attacking me are under the false impression that what I teach in my classes is a "Palestinian" perspective or narrative. In fact, at the risk of engaging my fanatical critics, whose outrageous claims and inventions should not be given any legitimacy, I do no such thing. In my class on the topic, I teach academic scholarship on Palestine and Israel, which is precisely why the witch- hunters want Columbia to fire me.<sup>1</sup>

The attacks on Massad and other professors are designed to delegitimize and silence free scholarship, and with it the presentation of ideas that counter the official U.S. story.

In pursuing their agenda, conservative activists have not shied away from individual intimidation. At the same time that Massad has been receiving death threats and targeted for organized disruption of his classes, 10 professors at Santa Rosa Junior College in California recently found red stars – along with a copy of the state's Education Code prohibiting the teaching of "communism" – on their office doors, courtesy of the College Republicans' president.

Targets of intimidation include not only professors, but students as well. The College Republicans at Holyoke Community College (HCC) waged a months-long harassment campaign against Student Senate president Angela Greany. Greany earned their ire when, partly in reaction to the suicide earlier this year of an HCC student after he returned from serving as a Marine in Iraq<sup>2</sup>, she led a successful effort in the student senate to pass a resolution calling on the HCC administration to ban military recruiting on campus. Failing to succeed in opposing this politically (they were trounced in a debate with the

HCC Antiwar Coalition), the College Republicans began to follow around, physically intimidate, and sexually harass Angela Greany. The national Campus Antiwar Network received an email from a College Republican bragging because he (mistakenly) believed that their sexist intimidation campaign had cowed Greany into resigning as student senate president.<sup>3</sup>

Although the incidents at my school have been far less extreme, they show that conservative students here, too, are taking confidence from the conservative political climate, and have been perfectly willing to target individuals to try to shut us up. I personally had the recent experience of a male student intentionally slamming his body into mine while I was tabling on campus. At other tablings groups of students brazenly stole and tore up antiwar and anti-Bush posters. When the extreme Zionist Daniel Pipes, who founded the neo-McCarthyite monitoring group Campus Watch, spoke to a packed room on campus, students – perhaps emboldened by Pipes’s call to intern Muslims in the U.S. – extensively photographed and wrote down physical descriptions of a member of Students for Justice in Palestine who dared to ask a critical question during the Q-and-A.

Beyond these attempts to silence us, the Right is also making moves to assert its own agenda on campus, rewriting the rules of acceptable discourse and behavior. So at NYU – a school many choose to attend because it is widely perceived to be one of the most GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender)-friendly campuses in the country – College Republicans used the end of the semester to openly proclaim their bigotry. During a debate with the College Democrats, the Republicans’ officers labeled homosexuality a “mental illness” and same-sex marriage “selfish and greedy.”<sup>4</sup> There is no question that conservative students are emboldened in the current political climate.

### **Anti-racism at NYU: The potential for a real movement on campuses**

Given that the right-wingers’ strategy is to shift the terrain of campus debate onto their turf, I think our goals should be corresponding: We need to organize to create a climate more favorable to progressive ideas, and increase the confidence of people on *our* side to act on their conclusions. Much of the best organizing this past semester arose in response to specific right-wing initiatives, on-campus and off. This includes the protests against Bush’s inauguration, continuing through campus defense campaigns for the Middle Eastern Studies department at Columbia and Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado, and most recently, a 300-strong anti-Nazi protest in Boston in May, and a 500-person protest that drove out an anti-immigration demonstration in L.A. the following week. Students have taken the lead in all of these actions.

An anti-racism campaign that sprung up at NYU at the end of the semester is a great example of the potential for organizing exciting grassroots initiatives against particular injustices. On April 7, College Republicans at NYU staged an “affirmative action bake sale” – a demonstration used by College Republicans around the country, in which women and students of color are charged lower prices for their baked goods, with the ludicrous claim that this is analogous to affirmative action programs that seek to

ameliorate the effects of systematic racism and sexism. To add insult to injury, the proceeds were to go to an anti-choice organization!

But the Republicans, who numbered ten at most, did not go unopposed. One Latina NYU student saw the bake sale and decided to protest. She quickly made posters telling her own life story as an argument for affirmative action and brought extra poster board for others. Before long, she was joined in front of the Republicans' table by dozens of other students, most of them also women of color, in what became a lively spontaneous protest. In between intermittent chants, about 45 protesters argued heatedly at the Republicans – not only about the bake sale, but about other racist incidents at NYU, the lack of diversity at the school, and inadequate financial aid.

This protest was very invigorating, but because it had begun spontaneously and hadn't ended with any plan for further action, I expected that showing up the Republicans' display would be the end of it. I was wrong. Two weeks later, an email was sent out by a few students calling a follow-up protest the next day. On 24 hours notice, over 100 students showed up to what began as a rally and wound up as a chanting march around NYU's campus, stopping for more speeches along the way. Officially, the protest was confined to the bake sale's violation of NYU's non-discrimination codes (by charging different prices based on race and gender), but many of the protesters raised broader issues: defending affirmative action itself, NYU's ludicrously high tuition, and an administrative initiative that many students believe threatens the hard-won Latino Studies department.

Most people who came to the protest wanted to do more. An idea was put forward that the protesters should demand that College Democrats debate College Republicans on affirmative action (something the Democrats had earlier refused to do). When one woman pointed out that, "We are often disenfranchised by Republicans and Democrats, and we should represent ourselves," someone offered the back of his poster as a makeshift sign-up sheet to organize a debate between the protesters and the Republicans. 84 people signed up. When it was announced that the College Republicans' president would be at a student council meeting in just a few hours to "explain the bake sale," 40 angry students showed up to face him – only to find he had backed out of coming.

What this example shows, I think, is that many people can make the decision to take part in progressive activism right now-- when they feel they can make a difference.

### **Counter-recruitment: A movement in progress**

Beyond my own school, the potential for activism is being shown by the movement against military recruitment, particularly on campuses. By the middle of the semester it seemed as if nearly every week the Campus Antiwar Network's national listserv was receiving another excited report from students who had just kicked recruiters off their campuses. City College of New York did this on two separate occasions at the beginning of the fall; and the counter-recruitment movement received national attention after 300

Seattle Central Community College students walked out of classes, surrounded their campus's Army recruiter, pelted him with his own literature, and drove him off campus to chants of "Don't come back!"—all on the same day George W. Bush was being inaugurated to his second term in Washington.

Soon many campuses were following Seattle's lead. One of the more exciting examples toward the end of the semester was UC-Santa Cruz, where Students Against War led 300 students in kicking Army, Navy, and Marine recruiters out of the campus's career fair. 86 students surrounded their tables inside while the remaining 200 rallied outside, blocking the entrances to the event. After the recruiters received a police escort out – with cowardly Army and Navy recruiters hiding from students behind stage curtains until they could leave – students set up a makeshift counter-recruitment booth in their place.

High school students, who are routinely denied basic free speech rights, also won important victories this semester for their right to present anti-recruitment views, at schools like Minneapolis's Kennedy High School and Tacoma's Foss High School. Most recently, the Parent Teacher Student Association at Seattle's Garfield High School took a symbolic vote against allowing recruiters at their school.

Counter-recruitment has taken off, I think, in part because it represents a concrete way to fight the war. Getting recruiters out of our schools – or even just preventing them from recruiting successfully – has a visible impact on our immediate environment. It is also helping to take a toll on the military's efforts to garner the forces needed to continue occupying Iraq, leaving the military scrambling to find recruits – and then taking desperate measures which, when publicized, can further turn people against the war.

So on May 20, the Army had to take the unprecedented step of conducting a national "values stand-down": halting all recruitment for the day, supposedly to "re-train" recruiters in ethics and the law, in reaction to well-publicized abuses such as a Houston recruiter threatening a young man with arrest if he didn't show up to his local recruiting station that day. While the stand-down was a public relations move on the Army's part, activists saw it as an opportunity; the Campus Antiwar Network, Code Pink, American Friends Service Committee and other organizations called it as a national day of action and staged counter-recruitment protests across the country.

The counter-recruitment movement, then, has been able to grow because it taps into widespread hatred of the war, and produces tangible results.

Yet while the counter-recruitment movement has taken off quickly, drawing in students across the U.S., it is still a very young movement, with activists often isolated from one another in the absence of a more visible national antiwar movement. And it doesn't seem that it can continue to grow unchallenged, since the military, and school administrations that may themselves be under enormous pressure from the government, are determined to crack down and destroy its momentum. In so doing, they are happy to run roughshod over student free speech rights, as when Thomas Keenan, a 19-year-old student at

William Patterson University in New Jersey, was arrested simply for handing out counter-recruitment fliers on his own campus.

While university administrations are determined to send a message that anti-recruitment activism will not be tolerated, a campaign at City College of New York (CCNY) shows that it is possible to defend our movement. On March 9, three CCNY students and one staff member involved in a peaceful counter-recruitment protest were arrested and then suspended from school without a hearing. Two of the students were also beaten by campus security guards. After a defense campaign led by student groups and the faculty union gained substantial support, the school and the District Attorney were both forced to drop all charges against the students, who were escorted back onto campus by 100 cheering CCNY students, and applauded when they returned to their classes. The staff member, Carol Lang, still faces disciplinary charges from school, and the defense campaign is mobilizing to defend her and demand that she receive back pay – particularly considering that the District Attorney has had to concede that the charges against her had no merit. The CCNY defense campaign has so far succeeded in defending the right to protest recruiters on campuses.

But the threat of administrative crackdown remains very much an issue for students who want to challenge recruiters on their campus. A case that began the same day as CCNY's on the other side of the country remains up in the air, with student free speech hanging in the balance. At San Francisco State University (SFSU), 200 students rallied against recruitment on campus in protest of the war and the discriminatory Don't Ask, Don't Tell, ultimately driving recruiters out of the campus career fair with their peaceful chanting and placards. The SFSU administration then decided to single out two student groups (among the six sponsors) and three students for disciplinary action. The groups, Students Against War (a CAN chapter) and the International Socialist Organization, have both had their student club funding eliminated. Meanwhile, the students face undetermined penalties at closed disciplinary hearings they have been ordered to attend. Students have organized a defense campaign that has garnered support from national figures including Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Peter Camejo and Lynn Stewart, but the SFSU administration remains determined to punish them if it can.

The SFSU case is doubtless being watched by the military and by university administrations across the country. Since the counter-recruitment movement first began they have sought ways to halt it with administrative retaliation: Seattle Central Community College, the school where counter-recruitment first got national publicity, originally told Students Against War that they must apologize to the recruiters or be decertified by the school. When students refused, however, the administration quickly backed down. The CCNY case was likewise a huge victory for the counter-recruitment movement, and if the students win at SFSU, it will serve as a model for other students around the country. Yet as long as schools remain major hubs of recruitment, we will run up against administrators eager to disable the movement that threatens their relationship to the military. Ultimately our movement will continue to grow only as long as it can mobilize the strength to protect itself from repression.

The experience of the past semester shows that anti-war and social justice activism can grow – and even win significant victories. Thousands of progressive students across the country have shown that we are unwilling to quietly surrender to the right-wing onslaught. But we face many challenges. Among these is that conservative activists are pushing very hard to bring the political climate on campuses into line with that of the media and the political establishment. But the successes of this semester show that there is a growing willingness among students to push back – to fight the right and protest the military’s effort to recruit for their war machine. When we organize we can make a difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Massad, “Targeting the University,” *Al-Ahram*, June 2, 2005.  
<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/745/op2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> For a moving report from the Marine Jeffrey Lucey’s memorial service at HCC, see Mark Clinton and Tony Udell, “A Casualty of Bush’s War,” *Socialist Worker*, October 1, 2004.  
[http://www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/514/514\\_02\\_VetSuicide.shtml](http://www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/514/514_02_VetSuicide.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> Details of the HCC harassment, including College Republican Kevin Orzechowski’s email and Angela Greany’s response, are available at  
<http://campusantiwar.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=79&Itemid=2>

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Tan, “College Dems, Repubs Spar at Kimmel,” *Washington Square News*, April 25, 2005.  
<http://www.nyunews.com/news/campus/9533.html>

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