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PERSPECTIVE

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By Julie L. Kessler

More — not less — speech is needed

This past January I wrote in this column about the upcoming republication of "Mein Kampf" in Germany following the expiration next year of its copyright. "Mein Kampf" of course was Adolf Hitler's delusional and bigoted rant and one of the most offensive books ever penned. As I said then, although the ever-present rise of Neo-Nazism (including, it appears, the murderous shooting over the weekend in Kansas at a Jewish community center) and the revisionist histories they engender feeds into fears that propagate the desire to quash "Mein Kampf's" reprinting, quash we absolutely must not. The importance of free speech and the rights it guarantees us are central to our most basic tenets of democracy.

Cultural Commentary

In February I wrote in this column about Penguin Books India, a division of New York publishing giant Penguin Random House, which agreed, as part of a legal settlement, to recall and destroy all copies of "The Hindus: An Alternative History," by University of Chicago religious historian Wendy Doniger. Doniger, a feminist historian of Hinduism, had interpreted some Hindu texts as sexual in nature and described others as partially fictional. This ban was alarming, I argued then, as it was not a question of secular modernism versus religious faith; it was more a question of whether those whose ideas are on the fringe, were becoming mainstream in the world's second most populous country.

Whether the ideas that offend some individuals or a whole slew of them are written down in a book format, or spoken and delivered at a dais should of course not matter one iota vis-à-vis the free speech rights we enjoy on American soil (and so often take for granted). This is perhaps why I was stunned beyond measure when I learned that Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Muslim, turned

atheist, feminist and former Dutch Parliament member, who is now a Belfer fellow at Harvard University, was invited to be the commencement speaker at Brandeis University, and then following some student protests, was summarily disinvented by the school's administration.

To put this in proper context, one must appreciate the historical roots of Brandeis University. Brandeis was founded in 1948 as a nonsectarian Jewish community-sponsored, co-educational institution on the grounds of the former Middlesex University campus in Waltham, Mass. Middlesex was one of the few medical schools in the country at the time that did not have a Jewish quota; however, it was not accredited and this was believed at the time to be a direct result of institutionalized anti-Semitism of the American Medical Association. The trustees of the school had originally offered to name the school after Albert Einstein, who was initially closely associated with it, but after various fits and starts and some quite strong personality clashes, the school was ultimately named for Louis Brandeis (1856-1941), the first Jewish justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In short, one of the very reasons that Brandeis University was initially established was to educate those who, because of institutional and/or academic racism and bigotry, were denied entry into other ivory towers in this country. This is perhaps what makes the disinvention of Ali to speak at its commencement now so utterly startling and so very dangerous a precedent for an American university.

To be sure, some may find parts of Ali's message offensive. She has said that "Violence is inherent in Islam — it's a destructive, nihilistic cult of death.... It legitimizes murder [and] is the new fascism." But when the actual text of her proposed commencement speech was made public, it was far more subdued, though doubtless some would still find it controversial:

"I stand before you as someone who is fighting for women's and girls' basic rights globally. And I stand before you as someone who is not afraid to ask difficult questions about the role of religion in that fight.... The connection between violence, particularly violence against women, and Islam is too clear to be ignored. We do no favors to students,

faculty, nonbelievers and people of faith when we shut our eyes to this link, when we excuse rather than reflect....

"One of the best places to do that is in our institutions of higher learning. We need to make our universities temples not of dogmatic orthodoxy, but of truly critical thinking, where all ideas are welcome and where civil debate is encouraged. I'm used to being shouted down on campuses, so I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. I do not expect all of you to agree with me, but I very much appreciate your willingness to listen."

It is of course the very ability to participate in the public discourse of ideas, concepts and theories, no matter how offensive to some, which make our universities the best possible place to learn about and engage in notions of free speech and critical thinking. If not there, where? If not then, when? This is another reason why disinventing Ms. Ali was so terribly, terribly wrong.

I well remember the public outcry of many colleagues and friends in N.Y. and elsewhere, Jewish and Gentile, when former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was invited to speak in September 2007 at Columbia University, an ivy which counts Jews as comprising approximately 25 percent of its undergraduate student body. However, the Columbia administration's handling of Ahmadinejad was exactly right and precisely in keeping with America's notions of democracy and free speech: Columbia President

Lee Bollinger first spoke and clearly outlined each and every one of Ahmadinejad's odious and hateful positions, such as the destruction of the state of Israel, revisionist Holocaust history, and his treatment of women. Then Bollinger gave the floor over to Ahmadinejad where, as expected, he spewed his usual vitriol and brought home to the attendees why free speech is so crucially important. Bollinger was very brave indeed not to cave to public pressure to disinvent Ahmadinejad, and in so doing, he single-handedly hammered a single yet highly important nail into the coffin of suppression.

The upside to Ali's disinvention to speak at Brandeis has taken a page from the "no publicity is bad publicity" doctrine so that now many more Americans know who Ali is, will hear her remarkable and often sad story may read one of her many books, and may listen to one of her speeches in a more democratic venue. The downside of her disinvention of course is that we are reminded that collective memories, both institutional and individual, can sadly be quite precariously short-lived. A completely unacceptable position for a university with the history that Brandeis possesses, and whose very namesake may be rolling over in his grave over this institutional and intellectual lapse of democratic judgment.

During the height of England's civil war in the 17th century, John Milton posited in perhaps the most important free speech manifesto of all time, "Areopagitica," "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience above all liberties." Hence, in Milton's opinion, and mine, bad books and ideas, may ultimately have good results — and even those that don't simply must be available to us so that we may judge their value ourselves. This is so even for perhaps the most offensive books and ideas. As any decent student of history will tell you, suppressing those may ultimately have even far more offensive consequences than the writer or speaker originally intended.



Associated Press

Ayaan Hirsi Ali makes her way in New York in 2007.

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