

LOS ANGELES  
**Daily Journal**  
www.dailyjournal.com

VOL. 127 NO. 107

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4, 2014

## The speech that never was



Associated Press

Clockwise from top left: Condoleezza Rice in Burlingame, March 15, 2014; Christine Lagarde in Berlin, May 13, 2014; Robert Birgeneau in Berkeley, Dec. 14, 2011; and Ayaan Hirsi Ali in The Hague, Jan. 18, 2005.

By Julie L. Kessler

After over two decades of practicing law, the writing of a book and countless articles, and having lived abroad twice and traveling to 60-plus countries, I have been called a number of things, not all of which can be reprinted. But the moniker I like the best is "free speech advocate." It is of course through the free speech we enjoy — and so often take for granted — that democracy, and all that it propounds and preserves, is best able to persevere and prevail, in the face of those who wish to curtail those freedoms.

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### Cultural Commentary

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I do not personally know anyone who has been invited to speak at a university or college commencement. Which is probably a good thing. Since had anyone interesting I know been invited to attend the party, he or she most certainly would have been summarily disinvented because, someone, somewhere, would have disagreed with him or her on something. Or perhaps virtually everything.

And those potential disinvitees would also have been in excellent, not to mention, supremely interesting, company. Most recently, former Dutch Parliament member, Islam critic and current Harvard Belfer Fellow Ayaan Hirsi Ali, International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde, Massachusetts Institute of Technology physics professor and former chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley, Robert Birgeneau, and former U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. These intellectual heavy hitters will *not* be speaking this commencement season at Brandeis, Smith, Haverford and Rutgers, respectively.

The reason is simple. There is a very vocal, though small group at each of these campuses, aided and abetted by ever present social media, who possess a frightening lack of tolerance. More to the point, they are just not interested in viewpoints that do not precisely mirror their own. That this is sad is an understatement of enormous proportions. Perhaps more worrisome though is how some very young adults, many of whom are still on their parents' payroll, have the audacity, by virtue of their elongated — and seemingly never-ending adolescence — to believe that they have the correct answers to questions, issues and problems that have somehow managed to escape those with vastly more education, life and work experience. And then of course, there is garden-variety censorship, the

sole goal of which is to silence those who, for whatever reason, whether personal or professional history or experience, possess a different perspective of the world around them and the problems it possesses or potential solutions.

So, to the graduates of 2014, and being as whole milk and white toast as humanly possible, since I have never, ever offended anyone, anywhere on planet earth, in case you are still seeking a speaker, here is my commencement address:

Your college experience was, in all likelihood, as expensive as a single-family home in many states in America. Wow.

Therefore, without a doubt, you are brilliant beyond measure, and shine far brighter than anyone who came before you. Ever. Period. And it is heartwarming to see that you know that already with the stealth conviction of the truly righteous. Bravo.

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As you have spent at least four years in an ivory tower, you certainly already fully understand everything you could possibly need to know. Kudos.

Knowing the above three things has made your class uniquely capable of navigating the world, safeguarding it for future generations and protecting the aged, the infirm, the impoverished and the disenfranchised. It has also fully prepared you to deal with the many ominous threats around the world, many of which result from irrational terrorist activities that result in the kidnapping, maiming and murder of innocent civilians. Because of this great knowledge you now possess, you will certainly, and in short order, become gainfully and meaningfully employed. And surely you will be able to survive on the wages paid by Starbucks.

On that note, you may wish to not protest, though social media or otherwise, to the barista, who may in fact be your boss, if you disagree with him or her. That might not be a good move, financially speaking. But as a political move, it might be necessary, just, and truly one which keeps your conscience squeaky clean and exhibits your own free speech rights, as guaranteed by the old and often-tattered Constitution, so hard fought for by our

forebears. But if you do express yourself fully to that barista, you might wish to make sure Mom and Dad will let you use your old room again should things not quite work out with your barista boss.

Instead of challenging your beliefs and your knowledge of the world around you, make certain and surround yourself only with like-minded individuals who think precisely as you do. Those people will probably be as interesting an experience as Xeroxing piles of paper the height of Kilimanjaro. But this way, you won't be required to be civil to, or respectful of, other people's opinions, and you will not need to engage in any kind of critical analysis or self-reflection, which of course is far more comfortable than say, stretching yourself to actually think about issues and problems from another person's vantage point.

To paraphrase Michael Moore in a completely different context, you absolutely do not want to leave any extra room in your head for your brain to grow, in case one day you find yourself exposed to something you could not know or did not understand. Surely you do not want to know what it means to grow up like Ms. Ali in Somalia, where female genital mutilation is routine and Sharia law is now imposed, to be born and raised a devout Muslim and then become a staunch atheist, or to learn Dutch as an immigrant — one of the hardest languages in the world to master — and then obtain a seat in your new host country's parliament and subsequently be accepted as a Belfer fellow at Harvard. Ali could not possibly be enlightening in any way; not in any one of the five other languages besides English that she speaks.

Likewise, it was very clever of you not to subject yourselves to the likes of Lagarde. Because had you, you might have learned what it is like to grow up in France, master English, become a highly respected anti-trust and labor lawyer and the first female chair of Baker & McKenzie, one of America's largest and most prestigious law firms. Then, after holding various important ministerial posts in the French govern-

ment, become the first woman to head the IMF.

It was a matter of true brilliance though that you did not put yourselves anywhere near Birgeneau, since after all, what could there possibly be to glean from a longtime and respected proponent of civil rights and nonviolent protest? And to boot, a man who is a known advocate for LGBT rights, faculty diversity, and access and affordability for the middle class as well as undocumented students. That could not have been instructive in any manner.

However, your best and brightest move was silencing former U.S. Secretary of State and Eastern European scholar Condoleezza Rice. Whatever your politics, and from whatever side of the aisle you identify with, there could not be a single insightful idea to be gained from the first African-American secretary of state — some of whose ancestors worked as sharecroppers for a time after emancipation — and the first woman national security advisor, who now teaches at Stanford and is a director of its Global Center for Business and the Economy. Not a darned thing.

All of those intriguing ideas, tenacious thoughts, enthralling experiences and little life lessons from Ali, Lagarde, Birgeneau and Rice, even if some of those resonated with you, would have been far too uncomfortable to listen to and to think about. It is so much more enlightening that you showed precisely how subjective free speech really is and how selectively those rights should be applied in a democracy. Perhaps most importantly, you showed that free speech really is not free at all, but very, very expensive indeed.

So, to the class of 2014, congratulations on all that enlightened intolerance. You did such a great job. Really. You and your parents must be very proud.

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