

Fear and loathing in New York

A hundred beats

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Six days after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, my university held a faculty each-in on 'Iraq, the United States, and the world'. Speakers from the political science department, the law school and the Middle East studies department, among others, came to speak on the war, civil liberties at home, the Bush doctrine of pre-emption and the role of the media. The teach-in lasted a good four hours and was attended by hundreds of Columbia University students. At the time, Columbia was the centre of the anti-war movement in New York. Students held teach-ins, demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, and die-ins (where you lay in a body bag and enacted the funereal future of Iraq's civilians to protest the war). I was active on campus and attended all these protests and more, though I drew the line at the die-in people's request to smear me with ketchup, which was as close to blood as they could get. The campus was charged and inspired.

Somewhere around hour two of the March teach-in, a young anthropology professor named Nicholas De Genova took to the podium and radicalized the tone of the evening. American imperialism, he said, would only be halted by 'a million Mogadishus'. The reference to the 1993 incident where 18 American soldiers were killed and humiliated in Somalia caused a tangible stir in the audience. This was the only way the lunacy of invading a free Iraq would hit home, continued De Genova, the American military must be violently defeated.

In the ensuing weeks after the teach-in, De Genova was the subject of many a right wing assault on television and print, the university received repeated demands for his resignation from powerful alumni, and De Genova, having been besieged by death threats, could not walk the campus without a police escort. But he was not fired and he was not silenced. Columbia defended the intrinsic value of free speech, no matter how controversial, as a constitutional and academic right and safeguarded Nicholas De Genova.

Iranian President Ahmedinajad could have found no better forum to speak at than the Columbia University when he visited New York this past week. Refused from treading the sanctified soil of Ground Zero, rebuffed by New York's city council, and treated as a pariah at the United Nations he was invited to address Columbia University students. Some less than tolerant students picketed the auditorium where Ahmedinajad's talk was to be held for days, but to no avail.

The president of the university, Lee C. Bollinger (the same man who defended Nicholas De Genova's right to free speech), gave the opening remarks and essentially handed the evening to President Ahmedinajad on a silver platter. Bollinger, whom we called 'Prez Bo' during our time, lambasted President Ahmedinajad for the full duration of his speech. He called him a 'cruel and petty dictator' who was not only 'ridiculous' but also 'astonishingly uneducated'. He railed against Ahmedinajad's denial of the holocaust, insisted that Iran is a 'well documented' supporter of terrorism, and then gleefully wished out loud that this appearance would destroy the president's credibility as a world leader. I cannot picture another head of state sitting through such a

battering -- not Bush and certainly not Mush. It was an overbearingly aggressive opening. If this was a boxing match, Bollinger would be Mike Tyson and he would have bit the president's ear off.

Once the floor was his, President Ahmedinajad began by remarking that in Iran, 'where free speech is valued', you do not poison the audience against the guest speaker, you let him talk and leave the audience to reach their own conclusions. Strike one. He spoke to the outrage over his holocaust denial by saying that as scholars there is never a moment in academia where the books can be shut, where research is no longer necessary. What's next he bemused, should we stop discussing physics and social sciences too? Strike two. During the question and answer session he was asked if he still desired the elimination of the state of Israel. Ahmedinajad replied that Iran loves all nations of the world, but that the Palestinian issue was a serious one that bore serious reflection.

He waxed lyrical about the state of the Palestinian people for several minutes only to be rudely interrupted by the moderator: 'You didn't answer my question. Do you or do you not want Israel to be wiped off the map?' (Cue hostile staring). Ahmedinajad laughed and threw his arms up in the air 'You ask the questions but you want the answers the way you want to hear them. This is not a free flow of information'. Ouch. Strike three. Then came the nuclear issue. Ahmedinajad once again placated the testy moderator by musing that leaders who desired nuclear bombs were backwards, retarded even. Amen. 'The Iranian people,' he said, 'want to develop peaceful nuclear energy that is indigenous to us. Why must we beg and be humbled before the great powers who deny us our sovereign right?' Strike number four. However, the volley soon came to an end as Ahmedinajad floundered massively when pushed on his country's executions of homosexuals. He skirted the issue until being forced to admit that in Iran 'we don't have any homosexuals, not like you do in America'. Minus one. There is no country in the world that can gloat over a homogenously heterosexual population. The Columbia audience doubled over in fits of laughter and never fully recovered.

Whether or not we agree with Ahmedinajad or with the Columbia University president and the moderator, the process of opening up a dialogue has begun. The war on terror, this all-encompassing campaign of simultaneously promoting and attacking difference or 'otherness', must be re-imagined. The war on terror, which is becoming an assault on ideas, must be conducted by bridging the gulfs between people, not by isolating and antagonising what we take as political symbols of the people.

Finding Osama, killing Saddam, and booing Ahmedinajad is inconsequential to the people they represent or do not represent. You can destroy a man, but in destroying you do not cease to make him exist. You do not destroy the ground realities and you do not destroy the power of his politics. Removing Bush from office doesn't mean ridding American politics of an imperial neo-con agenda. Destroying the Twin Towers, a symbol of American capitalism and hegemony, did not destroy the American people. It did not unmake New Yorkers, but it opened up an ugly chasm and with it the ugly knowledge that there are people who hate so much that they would kill to assuage their otherwise implacable hatred. Fighting terror has become a game of destroying symbols, pantheons of men, and myths. We cannot ever win this war. It is too short-sighted and there are too many symbols of injustice. We must fight terror, and surely racism,

intolerance, and censorship are terrors, by engaging in more people-to-people contact, like the forum at Columbia University.

Upon leaving office, Bill Clinton -- the man, not the president -- warned his audience of the dangers of the fight before them. If we do not grasp the nuances of our clime, he said, a time will come when we all live in shallow boxes, enclosed in our airtight cocoons, afraid of the man living in the box next to ours who we do not dare understand.