

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEAR EDITOR:

As one who graduated college many years ago, participation in student affairs was not among my considerations in deciding to attend law school. The recent presentation on campus by Dr. Norman Finkelstein, sponsored by several student organizations, compelled me to write this letter.

I first heard Dr. Finkelstein speak in February of 1990 where he said that life goes on in the West Bank as it did in Nazi concentration camps, that Palestinians are no longer intimidated by Israeli ubermenschen, and that Elie Weisel is chairman of the board of Holocaust Incorporated, the fastest growing industry in the United States. Referring to the members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations as the Judenrat, Finkelstein said they are the scum of the earth and deserve to be killed, and that he himself would do it since he never claimed to be a saint.

I approached the student responsible for initiating Finkelstein's presentation and told him of my experience. He assured me that he knows Finkelstein well, has heard him speak several times, and cannot understand why anyone would accuse him of making comparisons between Jews and Nazis. This student brought my notes of Finkelstein's 1990 speech which I gave him to Finkelstein's attention, who denied having made those statements.

I was nonetheless not surprised by Finkelstein's presentation on campus where in reading from Nazi and Zionist literature he

claimed to demonstrate similarities between the two and concluded that if the thinking is similar so too is the action. According to Finkelstein, a Jewish state is by definition racist, Zionists were the first ethnic cleansers in the post World War II period, and the recent bombing attack killing twenty-one Israeli soldiers was justified under international law (videotape available in the library).

Almost everyone I spoke with who attended Finkelstein's presentation reacted negatively to what they heard. The student who brought Finkelstein however, told me that I am taking the whole matter too seriously.

Another noted exception was the president of the Black Law Students Association.* My suggestion that a letter of apology be circulated in light of Finkelstein's remarks was countered with First Amendment free speech arguments. My challenge to an open debate regarding the propriety of sponsoring such a speaker went unanswered.

A speaker comparing so fundamental an aspect of Jewish life to Nazism has the same impact on Jewish students as one speaking of genetic predisposition or the value of apartheid policies would have on black students. It would be unthinkable to respond to black students upset and offended by such a speaker that the First Amendment is an entitlement to ignore the sensitivities of others.

Claims by some of the organizers that they do not understand the significance of Finkelstein's remarks are difficult to accept. It strains the imagination, for example, that an

historical society with no connection to Mid-East or Jewish affairs would not regret or be embarrassed if a speaker they sponsored on the history of the Nazi period continually referred to Hitler as Mr. Hitler, as did Finkelstein.

It is similarly unthinkable for entering law students to hear at school orientation that since studying law requires discipline, and what better example of discipline than the Nazi party, let us therefore learn a lesson from the Nazis and be as disciplined as they. The conceptual logical symmetry of the analogy is subsumed by many surrounding factors, not the least of which is good taste. That Finkelstein maintains he is what the Nazis and Zionists consider a rootless cosmopolitan is an intellectual construct existing nowhere but in his own mind.

The issue here is not whether one is constitutionally entitled to the exercise of free speech, but whether doing so in a given situation is sensible, proper, and serves a purpose. Maturity provides a framework upon which a person can judge whether taking steps to publicize a radical position would unduly insult, offend, or infuriate his neighbor. Leadership is that which should compel a person to take responsibility for actions in the realm of public affairs. It is my opinion that some of the student leaders involved in bringing this hate-mongering speaker to campus displayed neither.

Sincerely,
Richard Horowitz □

*one of the event's organizers