



Keep Talking

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Colaboraciones n° 1980

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"I'm proud of my university today," Stina Reksten, a 28-year-old Columbia graduate student from Norway, told *The New York Times*. "I don't want to confuse the very dire human rights situation in Iran with the issue here, which is freedom of speech. This is about academic freedom."

Isn't it always? But enough about Iran, let's talk about me! The same university that shouted down an American anti-illegal-immigration activist and the same university culture that just deemed former Harvard honcho Larry Summers too misogynist to be permitted on a California campus is now congratulating itself over its commitment to "academic freedom." True, renowned Stanford psychology professor Philip Zimbardo is not happy. "They can have any fascist they

want there," said Professor Zimbardo, "but this seems egregious." But, hey, don't worry: he was protesting not Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presence at Columbia but Donald Rumsfeld's presence at the Hoover Institution.

At some point during this last week, it was decided that the relevant Ahmadinejad comparison was Khrushchev. The Soviet leader toured America in 1960, was taken to a turkey farm, paid a visit to Frank Sinatra and co on the set of *Can-Can* and pronounced the movie "decadent." And yet the republic survived. As one of my most distinguished fellow columnists, Peggy Noonan, put it in *The Wall Street Journal*, Khrushchev's visit reminded the world that "we are the confident nation." And, as several e-mailers observed, warning to Miss Noo-

nan's theme, back then hysterical right-wing ninnies didn't get their panties in a twist just because a man dedicated to the destruction of our way of life was in town for a couple of days.

Whether or not this was a more "confident" nation in 1960, it's certainly a more post-modern nation now. I don't know whether Stina Reksten, as a 28-year old Norwegian, can be held up as an exemplar of American youth, but she certainly seems to have mastered the lingo: We've invited the President of Iran to speak but let's not confuse "the very dire human rights situation" – or his nuclear program, or his Holocaust denial, or his role in the seizing of the embassy hostages, or his government's role in the deaths of American troops and Iraqi civilians – with the more important business of applauding ourselves for our celebration of "academic freedom."

So much of contemporary life is about opportunities for self-congratulation. Risk-free dissent is the default mode of our culture, and extremely seductive. If dissent means refusing to let the Bush Administration bully you into wearing a flag lapel pin, why then Katie Couric (bravely speaking out on this issue just last week) is the new Mandela! If Rumsfeld is a "fascist," then anyone can fight fascism. It's no longer about the secret police kicking your door down and clubbing you to a pulp. Well, okay, it is if you're a Buddhist monk in Burma. But they're a long way away, and it's all a bit complicated and foreign, and let's not "confuse the very dire

human rights situation" in Hoogiv-sastan with an opportunity to celebrate our courage in defending "academic freedom" in America. Ahmadinejad must occasionally have felt he was appearing in a matinee of "A Chance To Hear [Insert Name Of Enemy Head Of State Here]." Could have been Chavez, could have been Mullah Omar, could have been Herr Reichsfuhrer Hitler himself, as Columbia's Dean John Coatsworth proudly boasted on television.

Lots of Prime Ministers and diplomats accepted invitations to meet with Hitler, and generally the meetings went very well – except for one occasion when Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, was greeted by the little chap with the mustache, mistook him for the butler, and handed him his coat. But even that *faux pas* is a testament to how normal thugs can appear in social situations. Civilized nations like chit-chatting, having tea, holding debates, talking talking talking. Tyrannies like terrorizing people, torturing people, murdering people, doing doing doing. It's easier for the doers to pass themselves off as talkers than for the talkers to rouse themselves to do anything.

As witness this last week. Lee Bollinger, the President of Columbia, was evidently taken aback by the criticism he got for inviting Ahmadinejad and so found himself backed into what, for a conventional soft-leftie of academe, was a ferocious denunciation of his star guest, dwelling at length on Iran's persecution of minorities, murder of dissi-

dents, sponsorship of terrorism, nuclear ambitions, genocidal threats toward Israel, etc. For a warm-up act, Bollinger pretty much frosted up the joint. The Iranian leader sat through the intro with a plastic smile, and then said: "I shall not begin by being affected by this unfriendly treatment." He offered many illuminating insights: There are, he declared, no homosexuals in Iran. Not one. Where are they? On a weekend visit to Kandahar to see the new production of *Mame*? Alas, there was no time for follow-ups.

And afterwards Mr. Bollinger got raves even from the right for "speaking truth to power." But so what? It's like Noel Coward delivering a series of devastating put-downs to Hitler. The Fuhrer's mad as hell but at the end of the afternoon he goes back to killing and dear Noel goes back to singing "The Stately Homes Of England." Ahmadinejad goes back to doing – to persecuting, to murdering, to terrorizing, to nuclearizing – and Bollinger cuts out his press clippings and puts them on the fridge.

The other day *National Review*'s Jay Nordlinger was musing about our habit of referring to some benighted part of the world's "humanitarian needs," and wondered when we'd stopped using the term "human needs," which is, after all, what food, water and shelter are. And his readers wrote in to state the obvious: That "humanitarian" prioritizes not the distant Third World victim

but the generous western donor – the "humanitarian" relief effort, the "humanitarian" organizations, the NGOs, the western charities: it's about us, not them. Bill Clinton's new bestseller on charity is called *Giving* – because it's better to give than to receive, and that's certainly true if the giver is busying himself with some ineffectual feel-good "Save Darfur" fundraiser while the recipient is on the receiving end of the Janjaweed's machetes. The Sudanese government appreciates that, as long as we're allowed to feel good about ourselves and to participate in "humanitarian relief," the killing can go on until there's no one left to kill. Likewise, Ahmadinejad knows that, as long as we're allowed to do what we do best – talk and talk and talk, whether at Columbia or in EU negotiations – his regime can quietly get on with its nuclear program.

These men understand the self-absorption of advanced democracies. The difference between Winston Churchill and Ward Churchill, another famous beneficiary of "academic freedom" who called the 9/11 dead "little Eichmanns," is that for Sir Winston talking was a call to action while for poseurs like Professor Churchill it's a substitute for it. The pen is not mightier than the sword if your enemy is confident you will never use anything other than your pen. Sometimes it's not about "freedom of speech," but about freedom. Ask an Iranian homosexual. If you can find one.