

Divestment Event Talk
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I was not involved in the South Africa divestment campaign. I wasn't against it; I marched in its favor once or twice; but I didn't have much to do with it. And like a lot of the critics of this divestment initiative, I'm suspicious of national parallels. I don't believe you should never make them- that would hardly be possible- but I think you have to make them very, very carefully. So that said, let me say as clearly as possible: for me, the desire to see Columbia divest from companies contributing equipment to Israel's military does not depend on the example of the South Africa divestment campaign or on anything about the parallel with South Africa. We should divest because of the atrocities the Israeli army is committing, and helping the settlers commit. If there had never been a South Africa, if apartheid had never existed, what the Israeli army is doing right now would be enough, and more than enough, to justify taking the strongest possible action against it.

Speaking for myself, speaking as a Jew, speaking as someone who believes Israel has the right to exist, I am nauseated by the news that arrives day by day from the Occupied Territories. You heard some of it tonight: land confiscations, house demolitions, targeted assassinations, harassing curfews, beatings of people trying to pick olives, and so on and so forth. It's nothing you don't already know. The time has come to pressure the Israelis by whatever means we have in our power to begin acting in a civilized manner. This is what we must try to do.

President Bollinger's statement on divestment says, "The petition alleges human rights abuses and compares Israel to South Africa at the time of apartheid, an analogy I believe is both grotesque and offensive." Let's admit there may be some problems with the analogy. Some would prefer to address the fact that Palestinians are second-class citizens via the fact that Israel has signed, and is clearly violating, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965). President Bollinger never says anything more about those "human rights abuses" other than that they are "alleged." As if that somehow disposed of them. To call these abuses "alleged" and stop there, after all the reports that have come out documenting them in detail, many of these reports prepared by Israeli human rights groups- well, if you want to say that something is "grotesque and offensive," that statement has my vote.

The two best arguments against divestment I've heard are 1) why single Israel out? And 2) why ask the university to do this? In effect, why single the university out? Together, these two arguments would go something like this. Sure, the Israeli army is committing atrocities almost every day,

killing a two-year-old having dinner outside his house (that was yesterday) and so on. Granted. But the same things are being done around the world all the time. Given that the university is properly a place of free thought and free speech, given that we critics of aggressive Zionism are likely to need the protection the university offers us much more than our opponents do, we would need a very, very special reason to single Israel out for divestment.

My answer in brief is that divestment from companies selling military hardware to Israel is simply good housekeeping. It in no way impedes or affects the free circulation of ideas that is the university's reason for being. It's not about ideas, it's about what the university does with its money- money that has effects in the world that, alas, are much more direct than our ideas. One analogy that has not been much discussed here but that makes a lot of sense to me is the analogy with anti-sweatshop campaigns, campaigns to ensure that T-shirts and sweatshirts and other paraphernalia bearing the university logo are not produced by women working under cruel and inhuman conditions and earning pitifully insufficient wages. This is a question of how the university does its institutional business. So is the divestment campaign.

Of course you could say, as Gap and Disney and Wal-Mart have said in effect: "why target us? Everybody does it. Do you think there's such a thing as clean clothes, or clean money?" They have a point. Kathie Lee Gifford's line of Wal-Mart clothing is not totally different in this respect from the clothing that appears under many other brand names. But that simply isn't a good enough argument for giving Kathie Lee Gifford a break. What she was doing was despicable. It was filthy. And we don't know for sure about all the others, but we do know for sure about her, because Charles Kernaghan got into her factory with a hidden camera and interviewed her workers and testified about it in Congress. And to the extent that I have a choice, I will make it. I won't put clothes produced like that on my back.

That's the way I feel about the Israeli Occupation and the Israeli military. We know that what they are doing is obscene, that it's filthy, and that it's on our backs. It's on our backs as Americans, their atrocities are our atrocities, because the US taxpayer is paying for them directly. If the US were paying for suicide bombers, things would still not be symmetrical-- there can be no symmetry between the terror of individuals who have been denied a state and the terror that is deliberately chosen by a state. But the US is not paying for Palestinian terror. The US is paying for Israeli terror-- paying so massively that the Israeli government could not keep up its extremist provocation for very long without that US aid. So Israeli terror is on our backs as Americans. For those of us who are Jews, it's also on our backs, since these atrocities are being committed in the name of Jews everywhere. And it's on our backs here at Columbia to the extent that we invest in the companies that make the bulldozers and the helicopters.

What's most disgusting is that all this is being committed in the name of the unspeakable suffering of the Jewish people a half century ago. This is much, much worse than anything that can be said against the South Africa analogy, an analogy that some people find so troubling. The Israeli government has no right to the sufferings of the Holocaust. It can't ever be right to make the Palestinians suffer as the Israelis are doing-- that's the important point. But let's not forget the less important point either: the Holocaust does not belong to Ariel Sharon and his soldiers. It's not their suffering. When we worry about seizing one people's historical experience for the benefit of another, maybe that's the one we should be worrying about.