



Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-3222

September 16, 2024

Interim President Michael Kotlikoff,  
Cornell University  
300 Day Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14853

Dear President Kotlikoff:

I am writing to you with profound disappointment in your early tenure as Interim President and the decision to reinstate Professor Russell Rickford. While I sincerely appreciate your administration's recent announcement regarding new consequences for vandalism and unregistered protests, I am still deeply concerned and disgusted with the ongoing anti-Israel and anti-Semitic protests taking place at Cornell University and the continued employment of Mr. Rickford. I demand to know what your administration is doing to help protect Jewish students during the upcoming semester and why your administration would continue to employ Mr. Rickford.

As you know, after all the turmoil of last semester, on the first day of the new semester, anti-Israel protestors vandalized Day Hall with graffiti and broke glass from the building's door. Clearly, the same problems from last semester are continuing to persist. While I was pleased to see former President Martha Pollack resign, as she clearly lacked the courage to lead during these difficult times, I am disappointed at the lack of response from your administration. I have yet to see any action by your administration that will prevent a repeat of last semester's persistent anti-Israel and anti-Semitic demonstrations, many of which directly threatened Jewish Cornell students.

Additionally, I am deeply disgusted by Cornell's decision to continue employing Mr. Rickford after his horrific statements that celebrated the murder of innocent people and incited violence. As former President Martha Pollack stated, Professor Rickford's comments "demonstrate no regard whatsoever for humanity." As you know, while speaking at a pro-Palestine protest on Cornell's campus, Mr. Rickford referred to the ongoing attack on Israel by the terrorist group Hamas as "energizing" and "exhilarating." Regardless of one's views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the loss of human life, especially the lives of women, children, and the elderly, including Holocaust survivors, should never be referred to as "energizing" or "exhilarating." Mr. Rickford received support from the crowd of Cornell students and faculty. His support for terrorism and dehumanizing statements are not appropriate for a college campus, especially one supported by American taxpayer dollars.

Anti-Semitism should not be tolerated in academia or any other part of a civilized society. Professor Rickford holds a position within the university that allows him to mold and influence young minds. This position demands a higher standard of behavior, one that is free from anti-Semitic rhetoric and vocal support of terrorism. By perpetuating these abhorrent views, Professor Rickford has not only violated his ethical responsibility as an educator, but has also jeopardized the safety of the Jewish community and tarnished Cornell University's reputation. I sincerely hope that, as the President of Cornell, you will take this matter seriously and understand the severity of these faculty statements.


During Israel's war against Hamas, thousands of innocent Israelis and dozens of Americans have been killed and taken hostage. Israel, which has been fighting for its own survival for 75 years, is a liberal parliamentary democracy with established civil rights protections and the rule of law. In that light, it is despicable that violent anti-Israeli attitudes have permeated countless American universities, including Cornell, which are supposed to uphold the ideals of our First Amendment principles. Additionally, it is incredibly disappointing that this rhetoric has been tolerated and allowed to prosper at Cornell University. Support for freedom of expression and academic discourse does not include fostering support and approval of terrorist violence.

In light of the gravity of this situation, I respectfully demand answers to the following questions:

1. What additional resources or guidance is your administration providing to Jewish Cornell students to prevent a repeat of last year? Why should Jewish students have faith in Cornell's efforts to keep them safe this semester?
2. What additional measures is your administration taking to crackdown on hate speech and anti-Semitism? Please share any details regarding your administration's efforts to investigate and identify students responsible for these actions.
3. What is the status of the investigation into the vandalism from the first day of classes?
4. Why does Cornell University choose to continue employing Mr. Rickford? If Mr. Rickford made a similar comment under your administration, would that be grounds for termination?

Thank you for your prompt attention to these urgent matters. I respectfully request answers to these important questions no later than September 30. I look forward to working with you and your administration during your tenure as Interim President.

Sincerely,

  
Claudia Tenney  
Member of Congress