

At Columbia, fairness is job one

By ALAN DERSHOWITZ

Thank goodness the Israelis don't have to make peace with Columbia University's department of Middle East and Asian languages and cultures. All the Israelis have to do is make peace with the Palestinian Authority. Several influential members of Columbia's Middle East faculty are so extreme that they regarded even the warmongering terrorist Yasser Arafat as too soft on Israel.

It all started with the late Columbia professor Edward Said, who by Columbia standards was regarded as a moderate. When Arafat signed the Oslo Accords with Israel in 1993, Said broke with him. Said absolutely refused to recognize the right of Israel to exist. When Said died, a professorship was endowed in his name, paid for largely with Arab and Muslim money.

His influence still pervades Middle East studies at Columbia. That is why Columbia, when it comes to hatred of Israel, has become France on the Hudson.

Carrying on the tradition is Joseph Massad, one of Said's followers and an untenured professor in the Middle East department. I am told that he is a mediocre scholar whose main claim to fame is his vocal extremism.

Yet he is likely to receive tenure, largely because there are some on the Columbia faculty who fear that denying him tenure would open the school to criticism from anti-Israel zealots around the world.

A Columbia committee is looking into charges that Massad denied some students academic freedom in his classroom. According to one student, and at least one other witness, she raised her hand during a discussion of Israel's incursions into the West Bank to point out that Israel often issued warnings to civilians prior to its bombings. Massad allegedly replied:

"If you're going to deny the atrocities being committed against the Palestinian people, then you can get out of my classroom."

The committee appointed to look into the charges includes, among others, at least two anti-Israel extremists. They signed a petition calling for Columbia to divest only from Israel, a democracy struggling to fight against terrorism.

By singling out Israel for economic capital punishment and ignoring such real violators of

human rights as Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Libya, the Sudan and China, these committee members have demonstrated their own bigotry against the Jewish nation.

Asking pro-Israel Jewish students to present their grievances to the committee members who signed the divestiture petition would be like asking African-American students to present grievances to a committee that included the late Strom Thurmond and David Duke. Nonetheless, I have urged the students to present their evidence to the committee, and I have urged the committee to allow the students to maintain an accurate record of their testimony so as to avoid recriminations.

I also urge President Lee Bollinger to assure the students that there will be no recriminations against them as a result of what they may tell the committee.

I strongly believe in academic freedom and freedom of speech, even for those who themselves do not believe in it. Many of those who have insisted on freedom of speech for the one-sided bigots among the Columbia faculty would be the first to deny that same freedom to a pro-Israel professor - if there were one - who made comparable comments on the other side.

This double standard is all too common with regard to Israel, and it cannot be tolerated at Columbia.

Whatever Columbia decides is the appropriate standard regulating alleged harassment of pro-Israel students must become the standard for judging claims of harassment against other groups.

Columbia University must know that the world is watching what it does.

Dershowitz, whose latest book is "Rights from Wrongs," is a Harvard law professor.