

Outside Agitators: How the Power Elite Talk About Dissent

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The phrases and statements used to justify police action against Columbia University students supporting Palestine is a blast from the past. The blast is not a hopeful one, or one that demonstrates how far we have come as a country. Instead, it demonstrates the more things change the more they remain the same. I heard Eric Adams, Mayor of New York City, justifying police action at Columbia by citing the urgency to act because of "Outside Agitators". These "Outside Agitators", the rationale goes, infiltrated the student movement at Columbia and spurred them to more extreme actions. These actions would not have happened, the reasoning continues, had it not been for those "Outsiders". You can hear a stereotypical Southern Sheriff with a beer belly mumbling, 'our "Ns", and in this case Columbia students are happy-go-lucky, and don't make no trouble outside of the usual rowdiness. But Adams is no Southern Sheriff of the 1950s and 60s, but instead a Black man running a major northern police department. It appears that he took a step back in time, and appropriated a classical fascist and segregationist response to dissent. The statement implies that people don't have a mind to think on their own, or know what they are feeling, or see what they see unless some "Outside Agitator" tells them what to think, feel, and how to interpret their perception. This response believes that people are children to be controlled, and most certainly do not have agency of their own.

People across the country and around the world, inclusive of Jewish organizations, have watched and been horrified by what they have seen unfold in Gaza and the Occupied Territories. People have watched as more than 35,000 Gazans, the majority of them civilians and children, have been killed. There are reports daily of Israeli Defense Forces and Jewish settlers killings Palestinians in the West Bank. People have watched as people are being starved to death and faced with health services virtually destroyed because of Israeli military actions. People have watched as journalists have been targeted and killed, and humanitarian workers murdered. People have watched and the outrage has been growing worldwide and on US campuses. All of this has been taking place while the US administration and its politicians first denied the devastations, doubted the casualty count,

vetoed condemnations at the UN, and found creative ways to minimize any criticism of Israel while the US enabled the death and destruction in Gaza.

The US government has consistently supplied Israel with weapons to prosecute the war. Even as the US administration admonished Israel to be more careful of killing civilians it supplied Israel with \$17 billion in supplemental aid. The support to Israel occurs despite the Leahy Law, named after former US Senator Patrick Leahy. The rules under the law require that military assistance be withheld from forces engaged in human rights. Clearly the excessive death and destruction, and the extra-judicial killings in the West Bank constitutes gross human rights violations. Yet, the Biden administration, as well as other administrations before has persisted in violating its own law.

As people have watched and advocated to stop the war outrage has been building as the Biden administration doggedly proceeded to support the war without regard for the opinion of the US public. In recent polls Americans oppose the war in Gaza by a solid margin. Fifty-five percent currently disapprove of Israel's actions, while 36% approve. The people are outraged. People are not asleep, and people see what they see and feel what they feel. Also watching were students on US campuses. They have watched, spoken out, advocated, and demonstrated with little avail. They have witnessed how their voices on college and university campuses have been censored. Organizations like Jewish Voices for Peace, If Not Now, and Students for Justice in Palestine have been banned on numerous campuses. Zionist and Status-Quo politicians have condemned these groups arguing that they have been influenced by "Outside" forces, and have maligned them like children needing to be disciplined. But people had seen, and they have felt, and seeing and feeling they could not be silent. They do not need "Outside Agitators" to validate what they have come to know.

College students have always led the agenda for change. It was students that brought energy to the civil rights movement, and it was students that stood up against the unjust war in Vietnam. It was students that helped to raise the issue of divestment on university and college campuses in the Free South Africa Movement. And, today it is students camped out, seeking justice for Palestine, and asking where are their school's dollars invested. They know full well, as the saying goes, "he who pays the piper calls the tune." "Outside Agitators" have not inform them of this reality.

As I listened to Mayor Adams I had a deja vu experience. I was thrown back in time to the 1940s, 50s, and 60s where segregationists implied that their "Ns" were content until those Northern "Outside Agitators" came and stirred things up. The suggestion is clear, the people were just fine, contented and happy, and didn't have any complaints about anything until someone showed up and told them what they should be upset about. The "Outside Agitator" told people where they hurt, how they hurt and what they ought to do about their hurt. Our "Ns" or natives were content, is the implication, they were happy and sated until someone came and told them that they weren't. This is a paternalistic view of people and their grievances. It says to the masses that you don't know what you feel until you are told what you feel. It is really saying that those in power are the authority for what you should think and feel, and if anyone sees or feels anything differently it is because an "Outside Agitator" has infected them. Mayor Adams as a Black man should know a little more of his history and the history of US and the way phrases have been used and by whom. His words very much sounded like the segregationists and fascists that I thought was relegated to a long gone era.

The other statement that is offensive is the suggestion that people are being used by Hamas or Iran. This is the same critique of segregationists and status-quo politicians in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. The movement was often accused of being sponsored, used, and manipulated by communists. Why else would they be upset and agitated? The characters of deceit and manipulation may have changed from communists to Hamas and Iran, but it is still the same equation. It implies that people can't think for themselves, and that we really don't understand what we see and feel.

As I hear these phrases being used, as a Black man, I understand that what these so-called leaders and politicians are really inferring is that we are children. As children we lack the experiences or knowledge of the world, and we are too inexperienced to know what we see or feel. They are demanding from us that we see the world the way those in power want us to see it, and accept what we are told to accept. On a plantation where people are subjected to chattel slavery, or in the brutality of segregation this may work. But, we are not on a plantation, and we speak from an emancipated position, and are educated with the ideals of justice and fairness. As grown folks we are not subservient or ignorant beings, but are

demanding that democratic institutions be truly democratic and listen to the calls and cries of all its people, and not just those with wealth and in power.

As police rip down encampments, and President Biden offers speeches of law and order these are shallow but dangerous antics to something that begs for a deeper and more meaningful discussion. What does democracy really look like? Why are some people regarded and heard while others are disregarded? Why does the hurt of some matter more than the hurt of others? And, we don't need "Outside Agitators" to tell us what we see and feel. The killing of children and civilians are wrong even when the political elite speaks down at us and attempt to belittle us into submission. But we know what death and genocide looks like, and we know who is doing what to whom.