

**“In Defense of Academic Freedom” Conference
University of Chicago, October 12, 2007
John Mearsheimer’s Comments**

I would like to thank Tariq Ali for organizing this event and I would like to thank all of you for coming out today to hear us speak.

Over the past six years, individuals and groups outside of academia have become increasingly active in trying to influence American academic life in ways that are antithetical to long-established traditions. For example, outside groups like Campus Watch monitor what academics say and write. Others have been pushing legislation that would cut off Title VI money to Middle East and other area studies centers that are considered biased by outsiders. Furthermore, outside forces have intervened in academia to influence hiring decisions and tenure decisions, and to prevent particular individuals from speaking on campuses. They have also put pressure on university presses not to publish controversial books.

This assault on academic freedom is largely driven by the politics of the Middle East, especially as they relate to Israel. Universities are the one place in the United States where Israel tends to get treated like a normal country. It gets criticized for its past and present behavior in ways that rarely happen in the mainstream media or among politicians and policymakers inside the Beltway. Many hard-line supporters of Israel find this situation intolerable, which causes them to work very hard to stifle criticism of Israel and American support for Israel, and instead promote a positive image of Israel on campuses.

I would like to talk in more depth about this phenomenon by examining Norman Finkelstein’s tenure case in some detail. I believe it provides an excellent example of how pro-Israel forces interfere in academic life in dangerous ways. I would then like to explain why I think Israel’s supporters are so deeply committed to making sure that Israel – and America’s relationship with Israel – is portrayed in a positive light.

I believe that DePaul's decision to deny Norman Finkelstein tenure was wrong and that the case for his tenure was open and shut. Before explaining why he deserved tenure, let me make three preliminary points. First, I was asked by DePaul to write a tenure letter on Finkelstein, which I did. So, I am familiar with almost all of his writings and I have thought long and hard about how to assess him for promotion to tenure at DePaul. Second, I have now been at Chicago for over 25 years and during that time I have been involved in many tenure decisions. I have also written numerous tenure letters for other universities and I have participated directly on two separate occasions in the Harvard decision-making process for tenure. In short, I know a lot about how the sausage is made. Finally, while Finkelstein and I agree on many issues, we also have marked disagreements on a number of important subjects. Indeed, he wrote a piece that was critical of the article that Steve Walt and I wrote in the London Review of Books in March 2006. We also have sharp differences about the viability and desirability of a Jewish state. Nevertheless, I recommended with enthusiasm and without reservation that DePaul grant Finkelstein tenure. Let me explain my thinking.

There are four main criteria for assessing an individual for tenure: 1) teaching, 2) citizenship within the university, 3) scholarship, and 4) future trajectory.

With regard to teaching, nobody disputes that Finkelstein is an excellent teacher, and that he has done a fine job with students inside and outside of the classroom. In fact, DePaul said that he was an "outstanding teacher" in the statement it released when Finkelstein resigned. I do not have first-hand knowledge about whether he was a good citizen, but his department voted overwhelmingly to give him tenure and a college-level tenure committee voted unanimously to tenure him. Votes like that usually indicate that the candidate for tenure is a good, if not excellent, citizen.

Trajectory is about the question of whether a candidate for tenure is likely to continue writing and publishing after he or she gets tenure. The great fear, of

course, is that a newly tenured professor will become complacent and stop producing scholarship. I do not believe that anyone fears that this will happen to Finkelstein. In fact, his detractors fear that he will be as productive in the years ahead as he has been over the past three decades. Finkelstein is clearly a driven person who loves what he is doing. Scholarship is his life. And there are certainly no shortage of subjects for him to write about regarding the Middle East, the Holocaust, and American Jewry.

That leaves the critical issue of Finkelstein's scholarship, and here we have to talk about both the quantity and the quality of his written work. Regarding quantity, Finkelstein has written five books and numerous articles. There are few people on any faculty – me included – who have written five books. So, he easily satisfies the quantity criterion, which brings us to the all-important quality criterion.

There is no question that Finkelstein's scholarship is of a high enough quality to merit tenure at DePaul. Indeed, he is a major scholar whose works are known all around the globe. For sure, he is controversial, but that is mainly because he is making arguments that challenge conventional wisdoms about subjects which are difficult to talk about in the United States without getting into hot water. The key point, however, is that Finkelstein makes compelling arguments in almost all of his writings, and thus he has played a key role in shaping both the academic and public discourse on a host of important subjects. In my opinion, that is the highest accolade one can accord a scholar.

Let me say a few words about Finkelstein's four most important books for the purpose of making it unequivocally clear that he has produced first-rate work. *Image and Reality* is one of the best books written about the origins of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. It is full of interesting arguments, probably the most important of which is Finkelstein's challenge to Benny Morris' claim that the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 was "born of war, not of design." *Image and Reality* also contains Finkelstein's devastating critique of Joan Peters' book, *From Time*

Immemorial, which falsely claimed that there were hardly any Arabs in Palestine when the Jews first began arriving there from Europe in the late 1800s. William Quandt, who was in charge of Middle East issues on the National Security Council for President Carter, wrote that "this thoroughly documented book is guaranteed to stimulate and provoke. It will be required reading in the continuing war of the historians." Image and Reality has been translated into five languages

Finkelstein's next important book is Nation on Trial, which he wrote with Ruth Birn. This book examines Daniel Goldhagen's famous claim that Germany before the Holocaust was consumed with "eliminationist anti-Semitic beliefs." In other words, virtually all Germans were filled with hatred towards Jews and wanted to exterminate them. Nation on Trial is one of the best two or three critiques of the Goldhagen thesis, which was the subject of a huge literature. Ian Kershaw, the highly regarded British historian, writes that "Finkelstein and Birn provide a devastating critique of Daniel Goldhagen's simplistic and misleading interpretation of the Holocaust. Their contribution to the debate is, in my view, indispensable." Christopher Browning, one of the leading Holocaust scholars in this country, writes: "Among the dozens of reviewers of [Goldhagen's book], Ruth Bettina Birn and Norman Finkelstein stand out for the seriousness and thoroughness with which they have undertaken their task." Nation on Trial has been translated into three languages.

The Holocaust Industry is Finkelstein's third major book. This is probably his most controversial work, because it makes the provocative argument that some Jews have exploited the memory of the Holocaust for personal gain. Regarding this book, the late Raul Hilberg, one of the most distinguished scholars of the Holocaust, wrote: "When I read Finkelstein's book, The Holocaust Industry ... I was in the middle of my own investigations of these matters, and I came to the conclusion that he was on the right track. I refer now to the part of the book that deals with the claims against the Swiss banks, and the other claims pertaining to forced labor. I would now say in retrospect that he was actually conservative, moderate and that his conclusions are

trustworthy. He is a well-trained political scientist, has the ability to do the research, did it carefully, and has come up with the right results. I am by no means the only one who, in the coming months or years, will totally agree with Finkelstein's breakthrough." *The Holocaust Industry* has been translated into 24 languages.

Beyond Chutzpah is Finkelstein's fourth important book. He performs three tasks in this outstanding work, which was published by a leading university press. He shows in crystal-clear fashion how defenders of Israel use the charge of anti-Semitism to protect Israel from criticism when it is pursuing brutal policies in places like Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. Furthermore, he details how Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories consistently violate international law. He does this by showing that virtually every human rights group, including B'Tselem, agrees about the essentials of Israeli behavior. Finally, he provides a devastating critique of Alan Dershowitz's work on Israel. It is no accident that Dershowitz tried to prevent the publication of *Beyond Chutzpah*. This book has already sold many copies, is widely cited, and is guaranteed to have a long shelf life, because it makes compelling arguments on a set of very important issues.

Finkelstein has written much more that I could talk about, but it is not necessary, as it should be clear at this point that the quality and the importance of his scholarship are far beyond what should be necessary for tenure at DePaul. However, this is not to deny that there are a few scholars who do not like Finkelstein's work and would pan it if asked to write a tenure letter on him. But that is true of almost every major scholar, especially if they write on controversial subjects.

I want to make one final comment about Finkelstein's written work. There is no question that he occasionally uses polemical language to make a point. This is especially evident in *The Holocaust Industry*. I believe that this is a mistake on his part, and indeed a number of other scholars agree with me, including Raul Hilberg and Avi Shlaim, one of the leading historians of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Nevertheless, this is hardly a fatal flaw and it does not detract in any meaningful

way from his scholarly contributions. In the academic world, substance matters far more than style, and when it comes to substance, I will let Avi Shlaim have the last word: “I regard him as a very able, very erudite and original scholar who has made an important contribution to the study of the study of Zionism, to the study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, in particular, to the study of American attitudes towards Israel and towards the Middle East.”

The bottom line: Finkelstein should have gotten tenure at DePaul this past spring. But that did not happen. Putting the tenure decision aside for the moment, it is worth noting that Finkelstein has been demonized over the years by pro-Israel individuals and groups. Not only is he routinely called an anti-Semite or a self-hating Jew, but he is said to be a Holocaust denier, which is a truly remarkable assertion in light of the fact that both of his parents were Holocaust survivors. His mother was in Majdanek, while his father was in Auschwitz.

Of course, his scholarship has been vilified as well. One would never know from what his most vehement critics say about his writings that they are held in high regard by a large number of well-established mainstream scholars at prestigious universities around the world.

But back to the tenure decision. As noted, Finkelstein’s department voted to give him tenure and a college-level tenure committee voted unanimously in his favor. Given these votes, his teaching record, and his publishing record, one would have expected the dean, the provost, and the president to approve his tenure. But they decided otherwise. The \$64,000 question is why?

Almost everyone admits that significant outside pressure was brought to bear on DePaul to deny Finkelstein tenure. Alan Dershowitz’s intervention in this regard is the most visible example of outside interference, but he was surely not the only outsider to weigh in against Finkelstein. DePaul’s leaders acknowledge the outside pressure, but deny it had any effect on the final decision. Of course, what else are

they going to say? They are certainly not going to admit that they caved into pressure from the Israel lobby. But there is little doubt that they did, as there is no other plausible explanation for the top administrators' decision to override the recommendations of the political science department and the college-wide tenure committee.

Let me now try to explain why I think key elements in the Israel lobby have worked so hard to demonize Finkelstein and make sure that he was denied tenure, and more generally, explain why the lobby has become so active on campus in recent years. In other words, I want to attempt to explain why the lobby thinks that Finkelstein and others critics of Israel are so dangerous and wants to marginalize if not silence them.

There are two closely related reasons. First, the case for the special relationship that now exists between the United States and Israel is weak. Second, contrary to the claims of Israel's strongest backers, support for that relationship among the American people is not wide and not deep. All of that means that if there was an open and free-wheeling discussion of Israeli history, Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, and the US relationship with Israel, it would probably lead many Americans to pressure their leaders in Washington to abandon the special relationship and treat Israel like a normal country, much the way it treats other democracies like Britain, France, and India. The lobby naturally wants to make sure that this does not happen, and thus it works 24/7 to shape the discourse about Israel in ways that portray it in a favorable light. In effect, this means making sure that Norman Finkelstein does not get tenure at DePaul or any other school.

Let me explore these matters in a bit more detail. Regarding the basis of our special relationship with Israel, it is often said that Israel is a vital strategic asset and shares our values. Viewed objectively, however, these arguments cannot explain why US gives Israel so much help, and with so few strings.

Israel may have been a strategic asset during the Cold War, but the Cold War is now over. Today, giving Israel nearly unconditional support is one of the reasons we have a terrorism problem, and it makes it harder to address a range of other problems in the Middle East. Support for Israel is not the only source of anti-Americanism, of course, and our problems in the Middle East would not disappear if the US had a more normal relationship with Israel. The US does benefit from some forms of strategic cooperation with Israel, but it is hard to argue that giving it nearly unconditional backing is making the US more popular around the world or making American citizens more secure. On balance, it is now a strategic liability.

As for the claim that Israel is a democracy that shares our values, yes, Israel a democracy, but so are many other states and none gets anywhere near as much support. Plus, Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens and Palestinian subjects are sharply at odds with US values. I want to emphasize that there is a strong moral case for Israel's existence—based on the long history of anti-Semitism—but its existence is fortunately not in jeopardy, and past crimes against the Jewish people do not justify giving Israel a blank check today.

Turning to the second factor, some say US backs Israel because there is broad public support—politicians are just doing what the public wants. This argument isn't persuasive, for several reasons. Americans do have a generally favorable image of Israel—in part because media coverage tends to be favorable, but they do not think the US should give unconditional or one-sided aid. A survey conducted for the ADL in 2005 found that 78% of Americans think US should favor neither side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and another survey conducted by the University of Maryland in 2003 found over 70% of “politically active” Americans favored cutting aid to Israel if it refused to settle that conflict.

Furthermore, most Americans recognize that the United States pays a price for its unyielding support of Israel. For example, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press has been asking Americans for many years whether they sympathize

more with Israel or the Palestinians. There has always been much more sympathy for Israel, but from 1993 through 2006, the number sympathetic to Israel only went above 50 percent once – it was 52 percent during the second Lebanon war in 2006 – and was as low as 37 percent in July 2005.

Regarding the consequences of U.S. support for Israel, a Pew Survey conducted in November 2005, found that 39 percent of the American public said that it was “a major cause of global discontent.” Among opinion leaders, the numbers were substantially higher. Indeed, 78 percent of members of the news media, 72 percent of military leaders, 72 percent of security experts, and 69 percent of foreign affairs specialists believe that backing Israel seriously damages America’s image around the world.

So while Americans have a generally favorable image of Israel and want it to exist and be secure, they are not insisting that we back it no matter what. But that is pretty much what our policy is, and this gap is due mostly due to the political influence of the various groups in the Israel lobby.

In sum, the case for America’s special relationship with Israel is weak and support for it among the people is neither wide nor deep. Given that the Israel lobby is deeply committed to maintaining that special relationship, it has had to work especially hard to shape the discourse about Israel, and it has had the most difficult time doing so in the halls of academia – where free speech and open discourse are considered sacred rights. Still, it has had its share of successes as evidenced by the Finkelstein tenure decision.

Let me conclude with a few words about where I think this problem is headed. To put it bluntly, I think the situation is going to get worse not better in the next few years. Of course, I hope that I am wrong, but I do not think so. There is little reason to think that Israel will abandon the West Bank and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Instead, Israel is likely to continue colonizing large

portions of the West Bank while keeping the Palestinians trapped in enclaves on the West Bank and Gaza. In other words, Israel is going to stay in the Occupied Territories and continue to brutalize the Palestinians under its control.

At the same time, increasing numbers of scholars and students are almost certain to become aware of what Israel is doing to the Palestinians, and some of them will be motivated to speak out on the matter. Why? Because it is difficult to disagree with Leon Wieseltier's description of Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories as a "moral and strategic blunder of historic proportions." Of course, the threat of even more criticism of Israel policy, not to mention America's support for those policies, will motivate the Israel lobby to work even harder to intervene in the affairs of academia and do everything possible to silence Israel's critics. The lobby has no choice if it wants to maintain unconditional American support for Israel as it colonizes the Occupied Territories. It simply cannot afford to allow an open discourse in the United States about Israel without putting the present relationship at risk. So the outside intervention will continue and possibly worsen. We should all recognize, however, that this situation will do serious harm to the academy. Thank you.