

Interviews with CENFAD Speakers

“Protests, Power, and the Price of Silence: A Conversation with Aaron Gell on Gaza, Free Speech, and Higher Education”

GRACE ANNE PARKER: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. For more than a year now, college campuses around the country have been experiencing intense protests related to what is happening in Gaza. Can you provide some insight into the historical precedent for this?

AARON GELL: Anti-war protests have been a factor in college life for decades. During Vietnam, students and their friends were being drafted and sent against their will to fight in the war, so they had a very personal stake in ending the conflict. But even when I was in college in the late 1980s, a relatively peaceful period for the US, there was a healthy anti-apartheid movement and protests of US involvement in Nicaragua. And it’s a constant because the United States keeps involving itself in these violent conflicts around the world. In this case, we’re not even technically at war—we are funding and supporting the war—but there’s nothing surprising or unusual about the student protests. It’s part of a long tradition. By this point, you would think that campuses would be able to handle a certain amount of dissent by their students. What is disturbing to me about this instance is the response of college administrators, which really exposed the hypocrisy and the moral and political bankruptcy of the US higher educational system.

The academy, in theory, represents one of the most important institutional pillars of American society, along with government,

news media, the private sector, labor unions, churches, the military, the arts and so on. In theory, higher education stands for certain ideals: free inquiry, critical thinking, thoughtful debate, reason, negotiation, compromise, intellectual curiosity. Now we have schools facing a challenge—a controversial issue with various stakeholders, including students and faculty, who have differing opinions, donors, government regulators, and other outside forces in conflict. So what do they do? With a few exceptions, rather than employing and uplifting the ideals they represent, such as debate, inquiry, and critical thinking, instead the administrators called the cops. They abdicated their social function and tossed out their own stated ideals. Instead, they partnered with another important institution, the police, which essentially stands for only one thing, controlling behavior through violence.

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will come from their refusal to model their own stated principles. Take, for example, Columbia University, an educational institution. What lessons is it teaching? When you're in a conflict, use force. That's it?

They have essentially made themselves irrelevant as a positive social force at a time when we desperately need our institutions to stand for something. And now that we have a government that's pledged to co-opt, politicize, or essentially destroy the university system, they have no real moral authority with which to fight back. If you cannot defend your students' right to protest, who will defend you when your academic freedom is threatened, when they come for your departments and tell you what to teach?

GAP: Is media coverage challenging the university's response, or is it also reinforcing what it is doing?

But in this case, the claim of antisemitism was weaponized against antiwar groups, and the media bears a lot of responsibility for that.

AG: Yeah, I find that a hard question because there is so much media. I have been impressed with campus newspapers, which often produce better reporting on these protests than their professional peers. In general, what you might call the corporate media seems to have accepted the premise, which Israel advocacy groups pushed quite hard, that the antiwar or pro-Palestine protests are de facto antisemitic. To make this case, the media often cherry-picked particular incidents—many of which fell apart under

minimal scrutiny—and used them as evidence of a pattern that I do not think existed. I do believe antisemitism is a real ideological force in our society, and leftist groups need to be vigilant about not letting it grow within their movements, just as they need to insulate themselves against racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and other bigoted ideologies. But in this case, the claim of antisemitism was weaponized against antiwar groups, and the media bears a lot of responsibility for that.

GAP: This makes me think about the rhetoric around all of this in terms like Zionism and anti-Zionism and genocide and war and all these terms that media outlets and people in general use to discuss what is happening. Can you talk about the role of rhetoric?

AG: I think you're onto something interesting, particularly in this debate, which is that we do have a huge focus on language, the use of phrases such as "from the river to the sea," "genocide," "apartheid," and so on. For the most part, this focus distracts us from the material reality, which is mass civilian deaths and individual tragedies on an unthinkable scale. When people are literally dying, this question about the precise technical definition of apartheid or the implications of "globalize the intifada" feels like a distraction to me. The term genocide has a variety of definitions, but probably the most salient one here is a legal one, so I tend to leave that to experts in international law. But whatever you call it, what's happened is a tragedy. Almost everyone agrees on that. Then the question is, how do we address that tragedy? It is a rhetorical technique to jump on a single word and use it to distract from the more fundamental questions that would otherwise be raised: is it legitimate to fight the war in this way? How do we prevent more suffering? I would add, this is not just a tactic employed by the Zionism camp. I saw

somebody yesterday taking Bernie Sanders to task online because he had not used the word genocide, even though Sanders has been the most aggressive member of the Senate so far in calling for an end to weapon sales to Israel.

GAP: Can you discuss the relationship between the protests, the media coverage, and the Biden administration's response?

AG: The demands by student protesters fell roughly into a few categories: Some focused on university endowments and how money was invested. Others focused on university-supported institutions, such as Hillel, or a given professor or guest speaker. They might protest a particular school policy or incident specific to that school, like firing a teacher or expelling students.

But overall, most were protesting US government policy, which was seen as wantonly funding, enabling and even encouraging the mass murder of civilians, refusing to hold Israel accountable for apparent war crimes and violations of international law, and making bad faith or insincere efforts to bring about a ceasefire.

The response from the Biden administration to these protests has been simply to ignore them. And Vice President Harris, for whom Michigan, with its large constituency of Arab American voters, was considered a must-win state, seemed to do her best to avoid taking a meaningful stand on the legitimate question of whether the US is funding a genocide. There was a viral moment in the campaign when Harris was confronted directly by protesters during a rally, and she delivered this huge applause line, "Everyone's voice matters, but I am speaking now." Unfortunately, not everyone's voice matters. The Democratic Party was not even willing to allow a Palestinian American to address their convention for five minutes—a convention at which even

Liz Cheney was afforded a slot. I assume the calculation by Harris's advisors was that foreign policy is never high on the list of voter concerns, which may well be true. When so many lives are being lost, though, dismissing them that way sends a disastrous message. What it said was that the Democratic Party's rhetoric cannot be taken seriously, and if Harris is willing to prevaricate about this issue—claiming repeatedly that she was working "around the clock" to end the bloodshed when it was obvious she was in fact in the middle of a busy political campaign—one had reason to wonder whether she meant anything she was telling people.

As for how things might change under Trump, it is hard to say. There's a reasonable assumption that Trump will be worse. He has criticized Biden for being insufficiently supportive of Israel, which seems ridiculous. He said Israel should "finish the job," which I find horrifying. Meanwhile, the Netanyahu government plainly favored Trump's election. That said, Trump does not seem to have a lot of moral convictions. His policies tend to be very transactional. I doubt he feels any real allegiance to Israel. If he thinks he can derive some benefit—say, from the Saudis or other Gulf allies—from engineering a deal, I can imagine him putting pressure on Israel or the Zionist lobby in the US. You never know.

GAP: Can you envision a scenario in which colleges stand up to defend their students' right to protest and try to scramble back onto the ground they lost?

AG: I mean, who knows? Under Trump, with colleges' own rights under attack, they might be more inclined to stand up for their students' right to free expression. It'll depend on the issues. One can imagine various actions of the Trump administration leading to another cycle of mass protests, and college administrators feeling more

sympathetic to a student movement and actually turning back toward a support of “the right of the people peaceably to assemble,” as the First Amendment puts it. They will have considerably less moral authority to do that after their terrible response to the Gaza protests, but they might be inclined to try.

GAP: Do you think the Gaza protests have been productive overall?

AG: Most protests don’t deliver on their stated goals, but I think it’s essential to acknowledge the other vital benefits they provide. First, everybody who has participated in any street activism has experienced a feeling of solidarity, political identity, and belonging, which is incredibly important for students and everyone else. That habit of dissent will become crucial in the coming years, maybe in the coming months, as we face various forms of repression that do not necessarily involve US foreign policy. I would also say that to some extent Occupy Wall Street, the George Floyd protests, the protests at Standing Rock, Gaza, and protests about climate all feed into each other. People exposed to one of these movements often brought that experience into

subsequent actions. And to me these issues are all manifestations of the same critique of a broken political reality. At the root of so many of these problems is the capture of our political system by corporate interests and billionaires, the failure of our democracy, and the use of violent repression to stifle dissent. In that sense, you do not have to choose the “right” issue. Any of these issues could be the vehicle that presents a real challenge to the system. And success or failure isn’t entirely the point—the point is the act of standing up for your beliefs and seeing that as a lifelong responsibility, win or lose. There’s a whole strategic question that’s worth considering—how can a given movement be more effective? And there’s a lot of great research on this. For people who are interested, *This Is an Uprising* by Mark and Paul Engler does an excellent job of examining those questions. But I would also say there is tremendous value in simply being out there in solidarity with others on behalf of something you care about.

GAP: I really appreciate your insights, and I think they’re very refreshing. Thank you so much for your time.

“The Trump Doctrine Revisited: A Conversation with Nikolas Gvosdev on Foreign Policy, Cybersecurity, and the Shifting Global Order”



Nikolas Gvosdev gives his CENFAD lecture while Grace Anne manages the technical aspects of the talk

GRACE ANNE PARKER: Thank you for meeting with me today to follow up on your talk. First, were you surprised by the election results, and how much of a role do you feel foreign policy played in everything that happened?

NIKOLAS GVOSDEV: It is an excellent place to start. There’s always an element of surprise when an election is expected to be close as to why it flips the way it does. Donald Trump, more as an individual than Republicans, made inroads in traditionally democratic-leaning constituencies. It reflects a reality that we’ve been dealing with for a while: the electorate is unpredictable, and there is a lot of this phenomenon of voters who do not feel that the system is necessarily generating the

outcomes they want. So, they are attracted to candidates who they see as outsiders.

In terms of foreign policy, foreign policy generally doesn’t exercise a particular influence on the general electorate. Still, it can have impacts at the margins, and indeed, the results from Michigan indicate that among some voters, how the Biden-Harris administration was handling the Middle East was a factor in how they voted. More generally, among voters, you did have a sense that the Biden administration, because of what’s been happening in Ukraine and because of the escalation in Ukraine, a sense that perhaps was the United States headed towards greater involvement with conflict. Again, Donald Trump’s message is that he can get deals and end wars. Now, whether he can do all of that is a separate question. However, on the campaign trail, the idea that a future Trump administration would be able to stop conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere may have had an impact and then tied into the economic question. Those were fantastic poll results moving into the election, with many Americans saying they did not feel the country was moving in the right direction.

GAP: Yeah, it makes me think about how the rest of the world is responding to this news. Is Trump’s policy of America first reflected in the news? Is that happening globally, or is it more specific to the United States?

NG: Well, I was in Europe after the elections, consulting colleagues. It’s a wake-up call. Even though some of us have been warning that these trends are apparent in American politics, this greater reluctance for American intervention, the sense that America needs to pull back, I think that at least in Europe, many Europeans did not believe that Donald Trump would return to the White House, that there would be a continuation of the Biden administration into a Harris administration.

And so there is this sense of what it means if the United States becomes less involved in Europe. Can Europe transition to a relationship with the United States, where the United States supports European security but is not the main provider of European security?

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On the other hand, Europeans look at their own elections and see that traditional politics are not producing results. This was reflected in the French elections and the collapse of the German governing coalition, which put Germany into new elections. What you have is that around the world, people are evaluating what a second Trump administration would mean. Is it going to be more transactional? Does it mean coming up with a “deal” that looks good? What does it mean regarding how the Trump administration looks at competition with China, for instance? Is it likely that the President has signaled the real resumption of economic competition, economic warfare, for lack of a better word, tariffs, trade interruptions, and the like? Is he going to follow through on that? What happens in the Middle East? Is he going to go back to a very rigid position on Iran? And we see it now with an Iranian government trying to determine whether it can salvage something from a nuclear arrangement with an outgoing Biden administration before a new team comes in. So there’s a lot of uncertainty. That uncertainty is also fueled by the fact that when we’re looking

at the nominations, we’re looking at who is being announced for senior positions in the sense of trying to understand and saying well, what’s up? What’s our approach here? Hence, you have, you know, a Secretary of Defense pick who is very reluctant on alliances and has questioned alliances in Hegseth. You have a Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, someone who was very anti-interventionist and questioned American interventions over the last decade, but balanced against Senator Rubio, would not have been out of place in a John McCain administration or a George, sorry, or a Jeb Bush administration. So, these choices are more traditional but certainly, you know, it is more interventionist, has a strong use of American power, reassures allies, and the like.

And so, you’re looking at this and trying to determine who will have the ear of the President. There is this dynamic between Donald Trump and Elon Musk, where Elon Musk, at times, has almost functioned as a vice president in the traditional role of what we would expect a vice president to play, meaning that he is at the President’s side, being on calls that the president-elect is having with world leaders and the like.

GAP: What will happen to NATO, the United Nations, and those sorts of establishments? Will he handle it the way he did in his first term? Or is it going to be something different?

NG: So, the announcement that Congresswoman Elise Stefanik will become the new UN ambassador, at least in his administration, raises questions because, on the one hand, she is very critical of the United Nations, but on the other hand, again, very much someone who in her earlier career would have been very much part of an establishment Republican approach to foreign policy that would not have been out of place again in a McCain or Bush administration. She started in the Bush administration in terms of public

service. So it's always hard to tell: is Trump picking people he agrees with and empowering and saying, take the football and run with it? Or is he empowering people that he believes are loyalists? And the question will be the extent to which the Senate rubber stamps appointments or holds them up. Democrats, of course, are a minority in the incoming Senate. However, they still retain influence as well, if by nothing else, by being able to put holds on nominations for moving forward or to make demands for documents, to have people come in and explain policy stances or behaviors.

With Congress weighing in, the President can only unilaterally withdraw the United States from specific organizations. So, as a slight aside, we had the United States rejoin the Paris Agreement. States were just represented at the climate conference in Baku, the COP 29 sessions. But obviously, people are taking the US stance there with a grain of salt because they know it rests on a presidential decision that once he's inaugurated President, future president Trump is likely to, once again, withdraw the United States from the Paris Accords. A president can reverse that in areas where US participation rests on presidential decisions. The other, of course, is the security agreement with Ukraine. President Biden negotiated that with President Zelensky as an executive agreement, which was never sent to Congress, is not a treaty, and therefore, President Trump, once he's in office, can abolish it at will.

GAP: This makes me think about the role of the American public and the influence that the American public has or may not have on Trump's foreign policy decisions.

NG: How economics works can immediately impact people; when you impose tariffs and interrupt the flow of goods and services through supply chains, that immediately impacts people. If I'm an American farmer and

I sell a good chunk of my produce to China and there's a new trade war with China, I may be unable to sell. If I'm an American manufacturer and I require specific supply chain inputs from China and those get tariffs placed on them, which raise the costs, maybe the good I'm producing is no longer viable, so that's an immediate issue. The issues of war, military intervention, and conflict hit home. And then, of course, the question is the motivation. What I'm fascinated to see is to hear people talking about military engagement in Mexico, so not talking about Ukraine or the Middle East, places that we usually associate with American intervention, the idea that the US military might be used in a combat role against cartels in Mexico and the idea of what we have not had a military intervention to Mexico in more than a century. The last time we went into Mexico to go after different military groups, militant groups, Pancho Villa, and the like, it was something that drew Americans in and didn't necessarily end successfully. So that would be very interesting if you have an intervention to say, we're going to secure the southern border we're going to go in, and we're going to think about the cartels not as a law enforcement issue as a military issue and what that might mean. We are moving forward if you have low-level insurgency developing in northern Mexico that then spills over into the southern United States as part of an operation. Most people have not thought about that.

GAP: Do you think his tendency to engage in personal diplomacy with foreign leaders is a little bit more consistent in terms of his foreign policy, and are we likely to see a lot of that sort of thing again in his second term?

NG: It speaks to part of his cognitive style. He is someone who believes that top guys should be able, the two of them, in any given case, to work something out, and you don't want, you know, you don't want a significant coterie of

advisors and people who are going to naysay you and raise all the objections. We saw it with his attempts with Vladimir Putin in the first term, with Kim Jong-un. And, of course, there's a certain personality type that he jibes with. And this time, in contrast to the first term, he is going to look for people around him who will not try to manage him, not try to control his ability to do that. And then the question will be, does he go out and pick up the phone and say to Xi Jinping, you and I ought to have a one-on-one in a dramatic location, and we'll work all of this out? Of course, the problem that he's going to have that foreign leaders, particularly leaders from more authoritarian states, are well aware of is that the American process still constrains him. So there's a lot he can promise, but unless he shows that he, for example, has a Congress, a Republican majority in both the House and Senate that moves in lockstep with him, then that will undercut some of his diplomacy. And keep in mind, right, that Trump's term is limited. He can't run again in 2028. And, you know, you have people in the Senate who are young enough to think about running in 2028 in a contested Republican primary. So, the Senate's institutional interests combined with the senators' personal ambition can often act as a check on what presidents hope to accomplish.

GAP: Can we shift gears a little bit to discuss the importance of cybersecurity and hybrid warfare and how Trump and his administration are thinking about these national security threats that go beyond traditional military threats?

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It also touches on questions of trust and verification. People don't trust information, and you can interfere in the cyber realm either by misinformation or disinformation or by saying that data is not secure. Does it begin to produce a lower trust society?

And we certainly have seen the belief of at least several people on the incoming team that the efforts undertaken during the Biden years to try to deal with cyber were not designed to make the system secure, but they were designed to penalize and go after people who were supporters of the Trump administration or who were affiliated with pro-Trump movements.

GAP: Social media has changed much about how the public understands our government's decisions. Trump had a particular relationship with social media, announcing policy decisions through that. Is that something we'll see going forward after Trump's second term? Will presidents use social media directly with a more significant portion of the public?

NG: Yeah, social media is part of that evolution. That was why, back in the 1930s, Franklin

Roosevelt turned to the radio and said, why should I give press conferences to reporters when I can speak directly to the American people? He had fireside chats and could uninterruptedly and unchallengingly give his message to the American people. In a way, social media continues to have unfiltered access to the President. This is why you've constantly pressured presidents before Donald Trump to give up social media access and not have unfiltered access. Trump's tweets are a stream of consciousness that reveals a lot about him and his thinking, and sometimes, people in the policy process don't want others to have that unfiltered look into the President's mind and decision-making.

This raises some more significant questions we're going to be grappling with. Every 20

to 30 years, a sea change in American politics occurs, in which the old ways of doing things are disrupted. The old norms are disrupted. The old coalitions are disrupted. Ronald Reagan, in 1980, reflected this type of disruptive change. Then Bill Clinton picked that up as a successor. Reagan and Clinton created the political era we live in up to this point. We'll have to see whether or not Donald Trump is a one-off with his disruption and reorganization of political coalitions. People in the future may look back and say that the period after 2016 was another one of these sea change moments.

GAP: This is excellent and very informative. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this follow-up companion piece after the election.