

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

CAMPUS ACTIVISM

Actually, HBCUs Have a Lot to Say About Gaza

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ELIJAH NOUVELAGE, GETTY IMAGES

President Joe Biden speaks at the Morehouse College commencement on Sunday in Atlanta.

At Morehouse College on Sunday, around 20 of the 400-some graduates walked into commencement with Palestinian flags and keffiyehs, a scarf traditionally worn in the Middle East. They wanted President Biden, the keynote speaker at the historically Black college for men, to know they disapproved of his support for Israel.

Morehouse's valedictorian, DeAngelo Fletcher, and other speakers voiced their support for a ceasefire amid the Israel-Hamas war.

Days earlier, Morehouse's faculty had been closely divided on whether to award Biden an honorary degree. Professors ultimately signed off, 50 to 38, with 13 abstentions.

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No one disrupted Biden's speech or the rest of the ceremony. The activism was more muted than some recent protests at colleges that have [ended in prolonged standoffs and arrests](#).

But many on Morehouse's campus last weekend had the Middle East on their minds — with some graduates turning their chairs from the podium and lowering their heads as Biden spoke.

Marq Riggins was among them. The graduate said he and his peers decided to engage in a more subtle and silent protest for safety reasons. A faculty member also turned her back to Biden, fist raised, head bowed, and eyes closed.

Some within the Atlanta University Center Consortium, which includes Morehouse, Spelman College, and Clark Atlanta University, were frustrated by the perception laid out in a recent *New York Times* [article](#) that Black colleges hadn't been involved with protests against the war.

The idea that HBCUs haven't been active surrounding the war isn't true, said Ra Malika Imhotep, an assistant professor in Spelman's international studies department. Students have been organizing all year with the support of faculty members, Imhotep said.

"To witness how hard my students work and how much they are sacrificing," Imhotep said, "and to see that erased in one of the highest newspapers ... was heartbreaking."

Morehouse's graduation ceremony was a closely watched example of the recent surge in campus activism against the war, which began after Hamas-backed militants killed 1,200 Israelis in an attack on October 7. Since then, Israel's military strikes have killed over 34,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Opposition Builds

When Morehouse officials announced a month ago that Biden would speak, there were mixed feelings about the president's presence, widely seen as a political play to show support for Black voters in an election year.

On Friday, Riggins and Sydney Wilson, a rising senior at Spelman, published [an op-ed about Biden's appearance at commencement](#).

"President Biden and his team have circled the Atlanta University Center like a flock of vultures, frequenting our institutions for the social currency that comes with posturing themselves next to Black exceptionalism," the two wrote on Mondoweiss, a website that says it publishes articles "regarding the struggle for Palestinian

human rights.”

Some faculty members released a letter criticizing the invitation. Andrew J. Douglas, a professor of political science at Morehouse, said that some professors opposed Biden’s selection because they thought students should have been consulted before the college made the call.

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Douglas stressed that not all professors were in opposition, however. “There’s a huge sort of political disagreement between the faculty and more outspoken folks that have been out front around sort of protesting and ascending against Biden,” he said. “That’s not, maybe not necessarily, the majority.”

As commencement neared, Riggins said in an interview that it was difficult to get the graduating class to agree on one form of protest. Some wanted to chant, while others wanted to stand or walk out.

Ultimately, Riggins said, they decided to turn their chairs or not engage in Biden’s speech. For his classmates who weren’t necessarily opposed to hearing the president speak, he said, they weren’t thrilled about the idea of graduation being disrupted.

Preceding Biden’s speech was Fletcher, the valedictorian, who started his remarks with a discussion of how his college experience was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Then he pivoted to the war.

“From the comfort of our homes, we watch an unprecedented number of civilians mourn the loss of men, women, and children,” Fletcher said. He then called for a ceasefire, pointing to the example set by Morehouse’s most famous alumnus, Martin Luther King Jr., as a reason to support Palestinian rights. Behind the podium, Biden clapped along with the crowd.

Biden then [spoke](#) for nearly 30 minutes. He joked about trusting an Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. member from Howard University, a reference to Vice President Kamala Harris, over a Morehouse man. He talked about how much he valued the

Morehouse alumni in his cabinet.

Biden asserted that his administration had invested more in historically Black colleges than any other president, and pledged an additional \$16 billion.

He acknowledged the references to a ceasefire earlier in the ceremony.

“Innocent Palestinians caught in the middle of all this,” Biden said. “Men, women, and children killed or displaced in spite of the desperate need of water, food, and medicine. It’s a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.”

As Biden said his administration is working “around the clock” to bring aid to those in Gaza, some of the crowd erupted in cheers — including the alumni section, seated next to the graduating class. At one point, there were chants of “four more years!”

When Biden finished speaking, the alumni gave him a standing ovation. Most of the graduates remained seated.

Riggins said Biden’s speech made him feel disillusioned and frustrated.

“It seemed very much like this very cobbled-together attempt to gain sympathy and support from the Black students and the Black guests,” he said. “He wasn’t necessarily speaking to us students, but more so speaking at us for other people to watch.”

A Heightened Responsibility

Outside Morehouse's ceremony, about 200 faculty, students, and community members marched and chanted through campus and later through the streets of Atlanta.

Some protesters carried flags from countries of African ancestry where political unrest has killed thousands of people; a few graduates at commencement did the same.

Anwar Karim, a rising junior at Morehouse, protested alongside a few classmates from Morehouse and Spelman. Karim held up a sign that read: "Black voices will never be silenced. #FreePalestine."

Karim said the announcement of Biden as commencement speaker was a "gut punch" because of the administration's support for Israel. Karim and other students have called on Morehouse's board to divest the college's endowment from companies associated with Israel's government and military.

"You have to understand that this is a movement and not a moment."

"We have a heightened responsibility here, as HBCU students, as Black people," Karim said, "and obviously we know that anytime it comes to the pecking order, and the class hierarchy in this country, that we are often forgotten."

Wilson, the Spelman student who co-wrote the op-ed opposing Biden's selection, has been among those organizing and attending teach-ins not only about Palestinians, but also a range of countries across the African diaspora, such as Haiti

and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The first Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at an HBCU was founded at Spelman in 2014; that chapter now represents the entire Atlanta University Center Consortium.

At the Spelman commencement ceremony, which took place a few hours after Morehouse's, students [said on social media](#) that administrators "forcibly confiscated" keffiyehs worn by graduates.

In recent months, Wilson said the SJP chapter has worked on getting more people involved.

"We always make it a point to talk about [how] our liberation is interconnected," Wilson said in an interview. "A lot of times when we're trying to bring people in, the attitude is, What does this have to do with me? And we're trying to release ourselves from the shackles of individualism."

Douglas, the Morehouse professor, has spent the year supporting the SJP chapter. He said students' activism extends to local initiatives they see as problematic, such as a [Georgia State University program](#) that trains American police officers in Israel, as well as the [Atlanta Police Department's decision](#) to build a new training center.

For Karim, the reasons to protest went beyond his frustration with Morehouse's invitation to Biden.

"You have to understand that this is a movement and not a moment," he said. "We're not just protesting today because of our displeasure with Joe Biden. It's bigger than that. It's about, again, it goes back to humanity."

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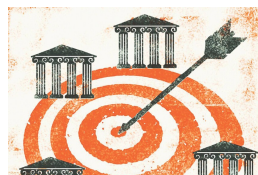
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