

Wake Forest, A Politically Docile Campus
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Flags are taken down, sidewalks are scrubbed, faculty are forced to resign, and statements are released. This is the new normal at Wake Forest when discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict. Our prestigious academic bubble, meant to facilitate debate, has turned silent as students fear protesting or sharing their beliefs will negatively impact their reputations and futures.

In a conflict as deep-rooted and personal as the Israel-Palestine war, tensions run high; however, one thing that both pro-Israeli and pro-Palistine students can agree on is that voices must be heard, to an extent, of course.

Ethan Bennett, a junior studying politics and international affairs, spent a semester in high school living in Israel, participating in a program affiliated with the Israeli Defense Force. This summer, he took his birthright trip to Israel mere months before the initial attack on the Israeli music festival that sparked the start of the war. Coming back to campus this winter, Bennett felt passionate about his Jewish roots yet became fearful of the consequences of publicizing his opinion on campus.

“If I was writing a paper for a class and I chose to write about Israel in a good light, I would be seriously worried about my grade,” said Bennett.

Hazik Azum, the president of the Muslim Student Association, also addressed his feeling of censorship on campus.

“I don't feel particularly free. I think that's true on both sides of the aisle. I think it's generally very large-scale self-censorship with a fear of what if my professor or peers see this,” said Azum, “We have general fears about what's happening on other campuses about students being blacklisted.”

Universities across America are struggling with this same problem.

At Harvard, a pro-Palestine statement was released and signed by 30 student organizations. Many of the students in these groups did not consent to be added to this statement or signed it under false pretenses. The faces and names of those students were put on a mobile billboard truck that drove around campus and through downtown Cambridge, effectively hurting their reputations.

A similar situation happened at New York University when a student released a newsletter supporting Palestine's Independence. This resulted in the student losing his already accepted job offer at a prestigious law firm.

Two events on our campus sparked debates over freedom of speech vs. hate speech and the universities' role in facilitating peaceful debate and protest.

On Feb 5, students supporting Palestine planted white flags on the Quad, hung up the Palestine flag, and wrote messages of solidarity for the Palestine people in chalk. By morning, all evidence of the protest had been wiped away.

“I think people like Wentz are very scared at acknowledging either side, and they felt they had to act quickly on the protest due to the outcomes we've been seeing at places like UPenn and MIT,” said Bennett.

Another instance occurred when a Wake professor resigned after posting on Facebook, “I could be tempted to shoot up your dance party.” Wake Forest released a statement offering its policy on freedom of speech, but pressure from students and parents forced the professor to resign.

Junior Madeleine Wilson expressed her opinion on this after becoming interested in the war because of a course she took at Wake called The Communication Of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

“I think it's such a complicated issue that people are quick to make aggressive cancellations of people when they express their belief,” said Wilson.

Some students feel that censorship is necessary to an extent, like political science major Katherine O'Donnell.

“I think Wake has a duty to protect freedom of speech to the extent that people feel safe, not just physically but emotionally,” said O'Donnell, “If people are saying hateful things, then they should be controlled, especially at private institutions like Wake.”

Wake faculty has made efforts to express their support for freedom of speech, such as hosting candlelight services for both Jewish and Muslim students. However, the general consensus is that our politically docile campus and cancel culture, reinforced by professors, peers, and culture, is what is really creating this censorship.

“In an academic setting, shouldn't we be able to voice our opinions without backlash? Isn't that why we are here, to learn how to fix the mistakes our parents made by sharing knowledge?” said Wilson. “Nothing good comes from silencing people.”