

AMCHA INITIATIVE
CAMERA
SCHOLARS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
SIMON WIESENTHAL CENTER
ZIONIST ORGANIZATON OF AMERICA

December 7, 2016

VIA EMAIL

President Beverly Warren
Kent State University
P.O. Box 5190
Kent, OH 44242-0001

Dear President Warren:

We are national educational and advocacy organizations committed to fighting anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias, including on college campuses. We are deeply troubled by the outrageous demands that Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and its allies are making on Kent State University to remove a display featuring a photo of Golda Meir, the late Prime Minister of the State of Israel, and one of her many inspiring quotes. Ms. Meir, a Milwaukee native, is one of the first woman leaders of any nation. Despite her many achievements, the president of Kent State's SJP chapter objected to the display, actually claiming that Ms. Meir's quote "contributes to a climate that makes us feel like we [Palestinian Arab and black students] do not belong here." After Kent State considered the objections to the display and correctly decided that the display should remain, a group called Palestine Legal, representing SJP members, wrote you a long letter, absurdly contending that the display "threatens their [Palestinian Arab and Muslim students'] ability to access equal educational opportunities at Kent State" in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

We strongly urge you not to succumb to these baseless threats and anti-Semitic accusations that SJP and its allies are making, and to retain this important and inspirational display featuring a great female leader, Golda Meir. While SJP members may claim to be personally offended by it and are free to object to and criticize it, removing the display would violate the First Amendment which Kent State is bound to respect and uphold.

In fact, there is nothing remotely threatening or harassing about the display itself. Golda Meir is an admired historical figure around the world, and the quote is a stirring message to students. Given SJP's well-documented and undisguised animus toward the State of Israel and Jews, SJP members would undoubtedly object to a university display featuring *any* representative of the Jewish State – unless that representative supports Israel's destruction. SJP

members are engaging in anti-Semitic discrimination and Kent State University dare not be a party to it.

Moreover, SJP is plainly trying to bully Kent State into removing the display, by threatening a legal action that has no basis in law or fact. Bullies should never be appeased.

For all these reasons, you must stand firm. Kent State's initial decision to retain the display was the right one and should be maintained.

The Golda Meir Display is Protected by the First Amendment

As you surely know, the First Amendment is binding on public universities such as Kent State University. *See Widmar v. Vincent*, 454 U.S. 263, 268-69 (1981) (“With respect to persons entitled to be there, our cases leave no doubt that the First Amendment rights of speech and association extend to the campuses of state universities.”); *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) (“[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, ‘the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.’”) (internal citation omitted).

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the expression of an idea may not be punished or prohibited merely because some or even many find it to be offensive or disrespectful. *See Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989) (“If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.”); *Papish v. Board of Curators of the University of Missouri*, 410 U.S. 667, 670 (1973) (“[T]he mere dissemination of ideas – no matter how offensive to good taste – on a state university campus may not be shut off in the name alone ‘conventions of decency.’”).

Thus, notwithstanding SJP's claim to be offended by the Golda Meir display, the display is constitutionally protected. The protection is particularly important at Kent State University because “[t]he college classroom with its surrounding environs is peculiarly the ‘marketplace of ideas.’” *Healy*, 408 U.S. at 180 (internal citation omitted). SJP members and their allies do not have a right to be free from speech they find offensive or upsetting. *See Schenck v. Pro-Choice Network Of Western New York*, 519 U.S. 357, 373 (1997) (“[In public debate our own citizens must tolerate insulting, and even outrageous, speech in order to provide ‘adequate breathing space’ to the freedoms protected by the First Amendment.”) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

Kent State University's own written policies reflect its obligation to protect our First Amendment freedoms:

Kent State University is committed to the principles of freedom of expression, academic freedom and a respectful quality of life. Members of the university community and visitors, under the First Amendment, have the right to hold,

vigorously defend and promote their opinions, thus entering them into the life of the university, there to flourish or wither according to their merits.

(<http://www.kent.edu/housing/hh-3-residence-hall-policies>.) Indeed, according to Kent State's policies, "the freedom of thought and expression is the lifeblood of our learning community." (*Id.*)

The display must therefore remain in place. It would violate the Constitution if Kent State University removed the Golda Meir display simply because SJP members and their allies claim to be offended by it.

The Golda Meir Display is Inspiring

Golda Meir was a Bridge-BUILDER and Peacemaker

The claim that SJP members feel threatened and harassed by the Golda Meir display is, in a word, absurd. The display features one of Ms. Meir's beautiful and inspirational quotes:

Trust yourself. Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement.

As one Kent State student so eloquently [expressed](#), Ms. Meir was a hero "to the world." Prior to becoming Prime Minister of the State of Israel in 1969 – Israel's first female prime minister and the third female prime minister worldwide – Ms. Meir worked tirelessly to assist Jewish refugees to return to their Jewish homeland. She was one of the signatories to Israel's Declaration of Independence and served her country in many roles: In 1948, Golda Meir was appointed Israel's Ambassador to the Soviet Union. After she was elected to the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, in 1949, she served as Minister of Labor and National Insurance until 1956, and then as Foreign Minister until January 1966.

Far from being discriminatory, Golda Meir was a bridge-builder. She played a key role in nurturing relationships with African nations, worked to cement relations with the United States, and successfully created extensive bilateral relations with Latin American countries.

In addition to being a bridge builder, Golda Meir was a peacemaker. When she became Israel's Prime Minister, she made it clear that she would go anywhere to achieve peace with the Arabs, [stating](#), "If Nasser [the president of Egypt] chooses New York for negotiations, it's all right," she said. "If he wants to go to New Jersey, that's fine too. If he says Geneva, we agree. I'm even prepared to go to Cairo--how about that!--to sit down at the table."

Golda Meir was the Most Admired Woman in America

It is thus no surprise that Golda Meir was one of the most admired women among the American public, [according to Gallup polls](#). In 1969, when she was elected Israel's first woman prime minister, she was fourth on the most admired list. The next year, she was third on the list. The following year, she was third on the list. In 1971, she became the second woman outside the

U.S. to top the Gallup Top-10 list of most admired women. She was number one on the list again in 1973 and 1974. No polls were conducted in 1975 and 1976, but in 1977, though she was out of office, she still came in second on the list. She died in 1978.

SJP members' objections to Golda Meir are thus shared by almost no one else. And let us be clear: It is not Golda Meir in particular whom SJP and its allies find offensive. SJP would object to *any* Israeli being featured in a display at Kent State, unless the Israeli shared SJP's animus toward the Jewish state. SJP's antipathy to the one and only Jewish state in the world is anti-Semitic. And Palestine Legal's claim that Title VI is somehow implicated here shows a complete misunderstanding of the law. A photo and stirring quote from Golda Meir do not in any way interfere with the right of Palestinian Arab and Muslim students "to speak out in favor of Palestinian freedom." These students cannot twist the law to squelch the expression of views with which they disagree.

We urge you not to be complicit in this anti-Semitism and Israel-hatred, and to keep the display as is, regardless of the absurd, outrageous and bigoted accusations that SJP and its allies are making about an inspirational world leader who was justifiably admired around the world.

Kent State University Should Not Surrender to SJP's Bullying

The accusations and legal threats made by Palestine Legal on behalf of SJP members are nothing short of bullying, which is the modus operandi of SJP and its allies. Palestine Legal has promoted lies about many of the undersigned organizations, in an obvious effort to bully us into silence. Likewise, SJP has bullied Jewish and pro-Israel groups on campuses across the country, attempting to squelch their free expression – even when the speech has nothing to do with Israel or the Middle East conflict.

This is true at Kent State, too. For example, last year, when the campus group Students Supporting Israel (SSI) hosted a Tu B'Shevat event – to celebrate the Jewish "new year for trees" – SJP reportedly protested the event and handed out anti-Israel flyers. An SJP member was reportedly yelling at the event that "SJP is not anti-Jewish, just anti-Zionist" – an obvious falsehood since SJP was protesting a Jewish holiday celebration having nothing to do with Israel or Zionism.

Now, this anti-Semitic, Israel-bashing extremist group is seeking to intimidate you and the rest of the Kent State administration. We have recently learned that SJP is planning a protest at the Golda Meir display and is also planning to bombard you and other administrators with thousands of "tweets" demanding that the display be dismantled.

Do not reward the bullies. SJP members have the right to object to and criticize the Golda Meir display, but their claim that the display should be removed because they are offended

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by it cannot be indulged. The display is inspiring and constitutionally protected. Kent State University's initial decision to retain the display was the right one. We strongly urge you to stand firm and stick with that decision.

Respectfully,

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