



October 20, 2023

VIA EMAIL

Martha E. Pollack, President
Kraig H. Kayser, Chairman of the Board of Trustees
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

Dear President Pollack and Mr. Kayser:

We write on behalf of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), the oldest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. and a leader in the fight against antisemitism on college campuses and wherever this ugly bigotry exists. We were horrified by Cornell Professor Russell Rickford's comments at an anti-Israel rally on Sunday, October 15, 2023, at Ithaca Commons. Just days after Hamas brutally slaughtered at least 1,400 children, women and men; decapitated babies; raped girls and women; tortured children and their families by gouging out their eyes and cutting off their fingers; burned people alive; mutilated dead bodies; and kidnapped and took as hostages hundreds of innocent civilians – including children and the elderly – Rickford said that he was “exhilarated” and “energized” by Hamas' actions.

We appreciate the [statement](#) you issued on October 17, 2023, condemning Rickford's comments as “reprehensible” and showing “no regard for humanity.” You assured the community that Cornell “is taking this incident seriously and is currently reviewing it consistent with our procedures.”

This is a critical time for university leaders to show moral leadership. We urge you to implement Cornell's [dismissal procedure](#) without delay and terminate Rickford's employment. His grossly unethical conduct renders him “[unfit to participate in the relationship of teacher and student](#)” and unfit to teach at Cornell University.

Rickford is a history professor, someone who should and must be committed to promoting historical facts and truths. Yet at the rally, Rickford made it clear that his hatred of Israel trumps all; facts and truth don't matter. Rickford [blamed](#) Israel for the plight of Palestinian Arabs in Gaza who he said, when they stormed Israel's borders, “were able to breathe for the first time in years.” When he later “[clarified](#)” his remarks, he accused Israel of “apartheid” and “occupation.” These are all lies, deliberately intended to demonize Israel and incite hatred of the Jewish state.

Israel is not to blame for the suffering that Palestinian Arabs may be enduring in Gaza. As Rickford knows or should know, Israel unilaterally withdrew from that region in 2005, after which Hamas took control of Gaza and has ruled there with an iron fist ever since. As Rickford knows or should know, there was no “occupation” of Gaza leading to Hamas’ gruesome massacre; not a single Israeli civilian or soldier remained in Gaza after Israel withdrew in 2005. And, as Rickford knows or should know, the so-called “apartheid wall” that separates Israel from Gaza was a necessary security measure that any country would and should take to protect its people from a U.S.-designated terrorist group like Hamas. As Rickford knows or should know, Hamas is openly committed to Israel’s elimination and to the murder of every Jew.

Days after his horrific comments, plainly worried about his job, Rickford “apologized” for his “choice of words.” But he issued no apology at all. Rickford did not condemn Hamas or its savagery in his “apology.” Instead, he tried to justify his comments, claiming that he intended to “stress grassroots African American, Jewish and Palestinian traditions of resistance to oppression” – again wrongly blaming Israel for its alleged “oppression” of people who are in fact ruled by the terrorist group Hamas, not Israel.

Rickford’s “apology” is also an affront to African Americans and Jews everywhere. Their “grassroots resistance to oppression” and persecution has never included breaking into innocent people’s communities and homes, slaughtering them, raping them, decapitating them, torturing them or mutilating their bodies after they are dead.

As you contemplate next steps, please consider how Cornell would react to this scenario: Days after a white supremacist commits mass murder of innocent Black people, a Cornell professor publicly celebrates their murder and calls the white supremacist’s barbaric actions “exhilarating” and “energizing.” We have no doubt that Cornell would immediately condemn this hateful, immoral professor and terminate him without delay. The professor’s continued relationship with Cornell would be an irrevocable stain on the university’s reputation.

Please do not treat Rickford’s reprehensible celebration of the murder of Jews any differently. Cornell has a procedure in place for dismissing professors and it should be implemented without delay. Russell Rickford has shown that he is morally unfit to teach at Cornell and that he poses a danger to students, particularly those who are Jewish and Israeli. He should be terminated as soon as possible.

Very truly yours,



Morton A. Klein
National President



Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.
Dir., Center for Law & Justice



Jonathan Ginsburg
Managing Dir., ZOA Campus

cc: Cornell University Board of Trustees