

Commencement Marred by Anti-Israel Political Statement

By Don Sutherland

On May 31, 2019, [Inside Higher Ed](#) reported:

Graduation and commencement speeches have frequently been an outlet for speakers to advocate for political positions, but a recent speech at New York University that expressed support for the controversial Israel boycott movement has now sparked debate over free speech on college campuses. While BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) debates are hardly new, the discussion has focused on the reaction to the address -- and giving the talk at commencement -- as much as its substance.

Steven Thrasher, who earned his doctoral degree and gave the student address at the NYU Graduate School of Arts and Sciences graduation event, said he was proud of the NYU student government for supporting the BDS movement -- a movement which calls for organizations to discontinue involvement with Israel.

The publication also revealed:

Thrasher also received criticism after the speech from critics who looked through older tweets of his and found several that some, including Hamilton, found to be anti-Semitic. These tweets included a comparison of Israel's government to the Nazi Party.

Technically, speakers have the freedom to express their views, even objectionable ones. But one would reasonably expect that speakers, especially those who are pursuing careers in Higher Education, would comprehend the significance of Commencement, possess reasonable judgment, and demonstrate sufficient respect for his or her classmates to avoid deflating the joy of those who have completed among the most important journeys in their lives. Remarks aimed at detracting from the efforts, persistence, and excellence of those graduating are neither constructive nor consistent with the idea of Commencement exercises. Commencement was not the appropriate venue for such remarks. The timing of such remarks demonstrated very poor judgment.

Going forward, a legitimate question can be raised as to whether the speaker will unduly politicize his work in academe. If a speaker knows few limits at Commencement, why would that speaker respect limits within the classroom?

By no means does this mean that the speaker could not or should not express himself. Myriad opportunities to do so existed throughout his studies and also beyond the academic realm. The United States remains a land in which everyone possesses the right to free speech.

Finally, on a note, a substantive debate over BDS is worth having, just not at Commencement. Contrary to the speaker's position, it is important to note that the BDS movement is not a noble, enlightened, or liberal movement. It is the antithesis of all those attributes. The BDS movement is an illiberal movement that has attempted to impose de facto limits on academic collaboration between American colleges and universities and their counterparts in Israel based on a lack of

historical understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, rejection of Israel's legitimacy, and the belief that Israel, unlike any other sovereign state, lacks an inherent right of self-defense against enemies that seek to harm its statehood and its people.