

"SING FOR THE PRO-PALESTINIAN STUDENT ACTIVISTS."

**A COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AND THE FIGHT
TO PROTECT THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

**EDITED BY
REBEKAH MODRAK**

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STUDENT ACTIVISTS"**

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The **AAUP / AFT** is an alliance between higher education unions. The partnership brings together the AAUP (American Association of University Professors)—a non-profit professional association and union founded in 1915 and dedicated to advancing academic freedom and shared governance, defining professional values, promoting the economic security of all higher education faculty and researchers, and ensuring that higher education contributes to the common good—and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers)—a national labor union that champions fairness, democracy, economic opportunity, and high-quality public education.

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Historians for Peace and Democracy began in 2003 to oppose the Iraq War. We continue to organize against U.S. militarism as well as for academic freedom and democracy. In 2025 and 2026 American Historical Association (AHA) members voted overwhelmingly to support our resolutions condemning attacks on academic freedom and scholasticide in Gaza, which the AHA Council subsequently vetoed.

The **Jewish Voice for Peace** Academic Council is a network of scholars dedicated to furthering JVP's vision and values. Drawing upon our shared commitment to both progressive Jewish values and Palestinian liberation, we organize in solidarity with the Palestinian freedom struggle in educational and academic settings. We defend employment rights, academic freedom, and rights of association within higher education and confirm the core values of Jewish Voice for Peace.

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INTRODUCTION: ON FORFEITING THE HONOR OF THE UNIVERSITY

JULY 7, 2026

SILKE-MARIA WEINECK

“An adult consents where a child obeys,” Hannah Arendt writes in her 1964 essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” and she closes: “if we could eliminate this pernicious word ‘obedience’ from our vocabulary of moral and political thought ..., we might regain some measure of self-confidence and even pride, that is, regain what former times called the dignity or the honor of man: not perhaps of mankind but of the status of being human.”¹

Obedience comes in many forms, none more pernicious than the obedience to commands that need not be spoken—what German calls “*vorausseilender Gehorsam*,” the obedience that scurries ahead, ever servile to power. Derek Peterson could have obeyed the unspoken command that graduation speeches be cobbled together from sports anecdotes and the kind of platitudes found in self-help books aspiring

businessmen read. Instead, during the University of Michigan's Spring Commencement, he delivered a beautifully crafted speech praising the men and women who changed the university for the better: the women who fought for admission, the first Jewish professor hired at U-M, the students who demanded a curriculum that addressed the history, experiences, and perspectives of Black Americans, and, in one single sentence, the "pro-Palestinian student activists who have over the course of the past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza." His words elicited a sustained roar of applause as well as some boos (though not nearly the amount of booing that greeted AI peddling commencement speakers this season).² A few hours later, the university published a formal apology, calling Peterson's remark "hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community" (Grasso).

This volume collects thoughtful commentary on the aftermath of these two texts, the speech and the apology. Many of the essays, letters, and blogs have been previously published shortly after

the event, others were written specifically for this book. They are overwhelmingly sympathetic to Derek Peterson, though two of them (Chait, Rosen) are not. Taken together, they suggest that the real scandal was not the senate chair's speech but the institution's apology, which threatened not just freedom of speech at the University of Michigan, as many of the writers note, but emerge as part of a larger and well-coordinated attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the press in general (Rashid, Wilson). Open letters signed by more than 2,000 U-M faculty, staff, students and alumni have demanded that the apology be withdrawn, as do many of the contributors to this book (Zafar, *Historians for Peace and Democracy*).

Professor Peterson's first act of disobedience was not that he invoked the massacres in Gaza but rather that he said anything meaningful at all (Efros)—there is a reason none of the dozens of people I polled could recall a single speech from their own graduation ceremonies beyond the name of the main speaker. His second transgression was to praise activists still alive when we prefer to

honor the dead ones, the ones who no longer make trouble (as several of the contributors point out, U-M did not apologize to those opposed to the advancement of women or Jewish and Black faculty and students, even though a crowd of 50,000 would surely have included those people as well). His third transgression was voicing a mainstream opinion when those who do not share it control the federal government and many other levers of power.

That Israel has conducted the war in an inhumane and unjust manner is not, of course, an uncontroversial take, but it is hardly a niche position. A Gallup poll conducted in February 2026 found that “forty-one percent of Americans now say they sympathize more with the Palestinians in the Middle East situation, while 36% sympathize more with the Israelis.”³ The gap is larger in young Americans, such as the graduating students Peterson addressed: 53 percent to 23 percent.

The obedience machine cranked up before commencement was over. At 11:51 a.m., a recent U-M business school graduate posts on

X (formerly Twitter)⁴ that “Professor Derek Peterson shoutouts terrorist sympathizers during this morning’s commencement.” Less than an hour later, @StopAntisemites, one of the most toxic social media accounts of our era, calls Peterson’s remarks “sickening” and asserts that “turning a commencement speech into a political rant like this is grounds for termination.”⁵ The next day, Sarah Hubbard, one of U-M’s two Republican regents, expresses her chagrin by noting that “it is very difficult to execute meaningful consequences on tenured faculty”⁶—an example of bottomless dishonesty discharging itself into the most tortured prose. Ms. Hubbard is, of course, one of the regents who relentlessly invokes the need for “viewpoint diversity” and one of the driving forces behind our execrable “institutional neutrality” bylaw. To mildly adapt an old adage, conservatism is once again summed up in the proposition that there must be in-groups whom the bylaw protects but does not bind, alongside out-groups whom the bylaw binds but does not protect. It is, of course, good news that even she understands that tenured faculty at least

(note the implicit threat to the untenured) cannot easily be made to obey.

It's all well-rehearsed from there on: "Jew hater," "jihadist," "trash," "campus intifada," defund him, fire him, put him in fear for his life. The pro-Israel right was jubilant over an opportunity to revive the flagging "antisemitism on campus" narrative, a line that was always designed less to protect and support Jewish students, faculty, and staff than to punish and control universities for being one of the last quintessentially liberal institutions standing—as J.D. Vance informed us years ago, "professors are the enemy," and the disobedient Professor Peterson would serve nicely as an example.

It is worth spelling out the obvious: Derek Peterson's sentence contains not a hint of antisemitism, and his sentiment is widely shared amongst Jewish Americans, 61 percent of whom say that Israel has committed war crimes, according to a poll by *The Washington Post* conducted in October 2025.⁷ It is surprising, then, to see Rabbi Davey Rosen, CEO of Michigan's Hillel chapter, speak of "political statements

that singled out and alienated our Jewish community.” The same poll suggests that 39 percent of Jewish Americans believe that Israel is guilty of genocide, a stronger claim than Peterson’s formulation. Accordingly, a number of Jewish contributors (Kirshenbaum, Leibovitz, Wald) explicitly reject Rosen’s implication that critiquing the Israeli government would have been necessarily troubling to all members of the community for which he speaks.

This is not to say that nobody was genuinely offended: many Jewish Americans do see their support for Israel as a non-negotiable aspect of their Judaism, and they would indeed have been hurt by Peterson’s remark. When Rogério Pinto calls for “radical empathy” in the concluding essay of this volume, I am sure he is thinking of them as well, as we should. I imagine they would likely feel vindicated by the fact that a handful of the activists in question were recently indicted (but not convicted) for alleged acts of vandalism, some of it quite serious. As Chait points out, the pro-Palestinian activists did not exactly find a place in *everybody’s* heart.

At the same time, what matters here is not whether we side with the activists but whether we side with Derek Peterson's right to speak well of them. What is most shocking about this affair is not that a rabid online mob formed quickly, staffed by all the usual suspects, demanding that Peterson be punished for what is without a doubt protected speech. Or that right-wing senators such as Rick Scott pretended to think that U-M should lose its federal funding because its faculty senate chair called an unjust and inhumane war unjust and inhumane.⁸ Not even that this same mob sent violent death threats to Peterson (Peterson). This is how we live now. What is most shocking is that the university sided with the mob, even if gingerly. Domenico Grasso had barely finished proclaiming that "Michigan is for everybody!" when he felt it necessary to attach the customary asterisk to "everybody"—several of the contributors (Cole, Mohammad, Ray) remind us of the "Palestinian Exception," also known as "Progressive Except for Palestine" (PEP).

It is certainly worth noting that the university did not move to sanction Peterson, as other schools

would have been tempted to do—U-M is better than most, while never being good enough. At least, unlike the events John K. Wilson recounts, we did not ask the speakers to pre-record their speeches, dehumanizing what ought to be a deeply human event, as they did at CUNY Law School and CUNY College Staten Island. At least, we did not disinvite Derek Peterson after he made it clear he would mention the war in Gaza, as Rutgers' School of Engineering did to Rami Elghandour.

Publishing a formal apology, however, is nonetheless not merely a violation of the very institutional neutrality the apology belatedly footnoted—a policy that binds President Grasso and the Regents, but not the faculty senate chair. The apology is also a calculated political act of appeasement at a time where academic freedom and all freedom of expression is under near-unprecedented attack. By far the worst passage is the assertion that “the Faculty Senate Chair deviated from the remarks he had shared before the ceremony,” accusing him of disobedience to a norm never established, suggesting that he had acted sneakily and dishonestly. As the

Historians for Peace and Democracy point out, Grasso “knowingly and intentionally tarnished [Peterson’s] reputation” by publicly rebuking a highly accomplished scholar.

It is true that the written remarks Peterson had submitted in advance were somewhat less pointed than the sentence he spoke: “Sing for the student activists, who over these past few years have sacrificed much to open our hearts to the injustices happening in Gaza.” On the occasion, he added the words “pro-Palestinian,” “Israel,” and “inhumanity”—the first two simply clarifying, the last one sharpening his point. Everybody knows that the offense machine would have ramped up in exactly the same manner had Peterson clung to the script. The university’s claim, in other words, may not technically be a lie, but its intent was to deceive (Carson and Wu), in a manner utterly unbecoming an institution dedicated to the truth.

What about comity? President Grasso takes refuge in the tired cliché of “neither the time nor the place.” According to whom? I imagine that, like contributor Gabe Efros, many of the students were elated to be given a brief reprieve from the

aggressive banality of the proceedings (sadly a hallmark of U-M's institutional persona). As Peterson and Wald point out, our students are not fragile flowers who need to be protected from even a hint of conflict—at least not if we faculty have done our job. The students who across commencement ceremonies drowned AI-friendly speakers in their scorn⁹ demonstrate that what many of them crave is not stifling civility.

In the end, Grasso's apology backfired in a fairly spectacular manner when a chorus of voices rose in support of Derek Peterson, keeping the story alive for weeks and weeks, in a manner that now saw U-M under attack from all sides.

The apology, then, was not only craven and inappropriate, it was a deeply stupid move. The university had had several options: ignore the attacks, in which case everybody would have forgotten about Peterson's sentence within the week; defend Peterson's right to free expression, deplore the attacks on him, and censure Regent Hubbard, in which case the university would have abided by its stated policies and commitments (Bagenstos, Smith); denounce Peterson and seek

to discipline him, in which case the university would have failed even more spectacularly than it did; and, lastly, the path it actually took: issue a dishonest apology, violate your own stated commitments, do significant harm to your already tattered reputation, do not succeed in appeasing your enemies, and ensure that dozens of op-eds speaking on behalf of Peterson's freedom of thought and speech bloomed, many of which are collected in this fine volume, which misses only two documents I would have liked to see included. One is an op-ed from several colleagues in the Law School that establishes in great detail why the university's apology violated its own institutional neutrality bylaw (Bagenstos)—it carries particular weight because those professors co-authored the very bylaw in question, but the colleagues did not give their consent to re-publish it.¹⁰ The other one is a statement of support from SACUA, the executive committee of the faculty governance system, on behalf of their chair. It is missing because SACUA never issued it (Pinto).

You could conclude that not much happened—Professor Derek Peterson spoke a

sentence that offended some people and pleased others, the university apologized to those who either were or claimed to be offended, nobody got sanctioned, we are all limping on, diminished and demoralized. We have learned what many of us already knew: there is no such thing as institutional neutrality, and those who proclaim their support for a diversity of viewpoints the loudest are frequently the ones who find even a hint of dissent the hardest to tolerate.

Some of us will be frightened by the university's willingness to attack its own at a time when we need principled support for the core values of this and any university, and they will fall silent, change their syllabi, watch their words. Others will be even more determined to fly the flag of the most essential freedom we still enjoy and must defend. The ones who will keep fighting will be the ones to "regain some measure of self-confidence and even pride, that is, regain the dignity or the honor" of the university.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE SPRING 2026 SENATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNIVERSITY AFFAIRS (SACUA) CHAIR COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

MAY 2, 2026

DEREK PETERSON

ALL RIGHT, SO MY NAME is Derek Peterson. I'm a professor of History and African Studies and Chair of the Faculty Senate. And I'm very impressed with our student musicians.

I'm very glad to be in front of you all today. I'm delighted to have the chance to talk with all of you.

In 1858, a young woman named Sarah Burger applied for admission to the University of Michigan. In those days, there were 450 students on campus and all of them were men. There were also twenty members of the faculty, and all of them were men, too. Michigan's president at the time was a man named Henry Tappan, and he was opposed to the admission of women. [Audience booing] Right, go ahead, boo. "When we attempt to disturb God's order," he wrote, "we produce monstrosities." That was President Tappan's view. So it must have taken a lot of courage for young Mrs. Burger to make her application to UofM. She was no wilting flower. She was a suffragette who was familiar, that is, with the program of women's rights. She had attended a conference on

women's rights in Cleveland at the tender age of fourteen.

Her application to Michigan was received skeptically by the Board of Regents who wrote to the presidents of East Coast universities to ask for advice. And the president of Rutgers, among others, wrote back to say that allowing women into the University of Michigan would obliterate their refined and retiring delicacies. [Audience booing] So, in 1858, the Board of Regents unanimously voted against Sarah Burger's admission to the university. She, however, was not deterred.

In 1859, she applied again and got 1,429 other women of the state also to apply to Michigan. [Audience cheering] It was a whole campaign. The Board of Regents again refused to consider Sarah Burger's application. In the end, Michigan waited until 1870, after the U.S. Civil War, to finally get around to opening its doors to women.

Today, the landscape is very different. Fifty-three percent of the graduating class of 2026 is made up of women. [Audience cheering] So it's easy to look upon these things and say

“Go Blue, congratulations to all of us.” The point that I want to make though is that the freedoms that we all enjoy were hard won. They weren’t handed to us by a generous and far-seeing administration. This is the greatest public university in the world *because* people like Ms. Sarah Burger refused to accept the enclosures and orthodoxies of their time. They saw in the University of Michigan a promise that this great university would actively place itself in the service of all the people of this great state.

So, the next time you sing “Hail to the Victors,” our fight song, sing for Sarah Burger. [Audience cheering] And sing for the thousands of other students who have dedicated themselves to the pursuit of social justice over the course of centuries.

Sing for Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor at the University of Michigan. [Audience cheering] Appointed Professor of French in 1896, he was to open the doors of this great university to generations of Jewish students who found in Ann Arbor a safe haven from the antisemitism of East Coast universities. [Audience cheering]

Sing for the students of the Black Action Movement whose members demanded a curriculum that would reflect the experience and identity of Black people in this country. [Audience cheering]

Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists [Audience cheering] who have, over these past two years, opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza. [Audience cheering]

The greatness of this institution does not only rest on the shoulders and on the accomplishments of our student-athletes, who deserve all the congratulations we can offer them. But the greatness of this university rests also on the courage and the conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path toward justice. It is to them that we can rightly sing "Hail to the Victors Valiant, Hail to the Conquering Heroes. Hail to Michigan, the Leaders and the Best."

Congratulations to all of you who are graduating today. Go Blue!^{1,2}

**RESPONSE BY
PRESIDENT DOMENICO
GRASSO TO THE SPRING
2026 COMMENCEMENT
SACUA CHAIR ADDRESS**

MAY 2, 2026

AT TODAY'S U-M SPRING commencement ceremony, our outgoing Faculty Senate Chair made remarks regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict that were hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community. We regret the pain this has caused on a day devoted to celebration and accomplishment. For this, the university apologizes.

The Faculty Senate Chair deviated from the remarks he had shared before the ceremony. The Chair's comments were inappropriate and do not represent our institutional position.* Nor do they represent the diversity of views across our entire faculty.

Everyone in our community is entitled to their own views; but this was neither the time nor the place. Commencement is a time of celebration, recognition and unity. The Chair's remarks were expected to be congratulatory, not a platform for personal or political expression. Introducing such commentary in this setting was inappropriate and did not align with the purpose of the occasion. In the coming weeks, I will work with university

leadership to review and refine future commencement programming.

Make no mistake, we will not allow a 30-second soundbite to tear down the goodwill that so many on our campus have worked to build. Together, we have made Michigan a welcoming, safe and inclusive community—one that we can be proud of, reflects our values, and serves as a model for other institutions around the world. That work continues now and always. To be sure, the world has injustices; the only way we can address them is to work together and not create more divisiveness.

Domenico Grasso

PRESIDENT

* * * * *

*Our position is institutional neutrality.¹

ON BEING AT THE CENTER OF THE STORM

JUNE 20, 2026

DEREK PETERSON

I AM THE UNLIKELY protagonist of this controversy. My scholarly work celebrates rabble-rousers, malcontents, and assorted nonconformists, but in my person I am decidedly and boringly conventional. That is the point. I set out to chair the Faculty Senate at the University of Michigan in 2025-26 because I felt obliged to use my position to serve the common interest. Donald Trump's government has exposed the fragility of America's system of higher education, and in the past several years, the freedoms on which our academic work rests have been increasingly hemmed in. Faculty government is a bulwark against this encroaching authoritarianism. Serving as chair of the Senate allowed me to parlay my high-sounding titles into political and moral leverage, to push back against the foreclosure of academic freedom.

Here is a partial list of the controversies that broke over the University of Michigan during my year-long tenure as chair of the Senate. In May 2025, the president of the university, Santa Ono, summarily resigned and put himself forward for the presidency of the University of Florida. He

abased himself before Florida state legislators—he refused to offer an opinion about vaccine mandates and he disavowed the diversity initiatives he had formerly supported. Despite his pandering, he was turned down for the job.¹ In September, following the murder of the conservative activist Charlie Kirk, I wrote to the Michigan faculty lamenting his death and describing the damage that he had done to American higher education.² Two colleagues on the Michigan faculty made critical comments about the late Kirk in public forums. We were together pilloried in conservative media; one of my colleagues was doxxed and subjected to the worst kind of harassment.³ In December, the football coach was fired after it was found that he had had an inappropriate relationship with a member of his staff; when the affair came to light, he threatened her with violence. This occasioned an ongoing investigation into the management of the Athletic Department. In April 2026, the president-elect of the university was found to have brain cancer and was obliged to stand down shortly before he was to take office. That same month, one of the regents of the university was

accused of having shared his insider's knowledge of an undergraduate student's medical condition with his friends in an open Slack channel.⁴

These things brought the public's attention to bear on the university, but the real sources of our shared unease were harder to see. Many of us are bothered over the proliferation of surveillance technology on campus, which compromises free speech by making faculty, students, and staff feel exposed to constant scrutiny. International students, faculty, and staff have particular cause for concern. Early in 2026, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents picked up immigrants living in Washtenaw County, making all of us worry that the Trump government would target Ann Arbor as they had Minneapolis.⁵ There is lingering frustration over the university's summary closure of our Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI). Until it was shuttered in March 2025, ODEI had opened our campus to hitherto marginalized communities; in its absence, Black students and faculty and other minorities have been marooned.⁶ Many of us are convinced that generative artificial intelligence

poses an existential challenge to the work we do as teachers and researchers, for it undermines the very foundations of our pedagogy.⁷ And many of us are worried over the changing politics of federal research funding, which has made it impossible for medics, scientists, and engineers to pursue the research that they are equipped to do.

All of this has compromised faculty members' sense of security, making us cautious about what we say and how we teach. Faculty government conducted a survey of our colleagues in the first months of 2026.⁸ Almost half of the respondents have felt pressure to censor what they teach. A third of respondents reported that they had acquiesced to that pressure and altered their pedagogy or their curriculum. Here, at America's leading public university, faculty feel unable to speak freely about the most controversial subjects of our time in our own classrooms.

That is why, on that cold morning early in May 2026, I felt obliged to speak as forthrightly as I could. To do otherwise would be to concede to the forces that are stifling free inquiry.

On Having an Open Heart

I am a faithful Episcopalian, and like other people of faith, I believe that having an open heart to the suffering of other people is a fundamental human virtue. In medieval times Europeans thought the heart, not the head, was the site of learning, imagination, emotion, and sensation.⁹ Today open-heartedness toward the oppressed is written into the Book of Common Prayer, the text that guides Episcopalian liturgy. Here is the prayer titled “For the Oppressed”:

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and fair opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

My own heart was opened to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza by student activists of the University of Michigan. On a Monday afternoon in mid-November 2023, a small group of students attended a meeting of the Faculty Senate Assembly, an elected body of seventy representatives, to marshal opinion against the university's financial support for Israel's military assault against innocent people. Two of them brought a banner and unfurled it behind the speaker's rostrum. I was a member of the Assembly at the time. I attended the meeting on Zoom, and was struck by the quiet fortitude of the students, who held their banner aloft for the whole of our meeting. I thought it right that we should honor their resolve. So—toward the end of the meeting—I put forward a motion asking the university to disclose the extent of its financial investment in Israel.¹⁰ It passed by a vote of twenty-six to ten.

The university's leadership ignored the Senate Assembly's motion. In the weeks that followed, the awful violence of Israel's military campaign in Gaza became more transparently obvious. By

mid-December, when the Assembly next met, Israeli newspapers were reporting that 61 percent of those killed by Israel's airstrikes in Gaza were civilians.¹¹ One out of every 200 of Gaza's people were dead, and most of those killed were women and children.¹² With these numbers in view, a colleague and I put together a motion asking the University of Michigan to "divest from its financial holdings in companies that invest in Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza."¹³ The Assembly debated the motion over the space of two meetings, and in January 2024, the motion passed by a vote of 38 to 14.

These parliamentary maneuvers were of relatively little consequence. It was student activists—not circumspect faculty—who set the pace of things. In April 2024 they occupied the Diag, at the center of the university, to demand that the university divest from Israel. I watched with admiration as—over the space of several weeks—the students created a novel space for self-directed learning. There on the Diag was a library, stocked with books about the history and philosophy of global struggles for justice.

There was a schedule, with time set aside for morning prayer, for study, and for public action. There was a curriculum: every day there were talks from scholars and from members of the community, linking the struggle for Palestinian rights with broader struggles around the world. There were communal meals, with food supplied by local restaurants. Cups of tea were readily on offer. I was an occasional presence at the encampment: I gave a teacherly talk about the history of student activism in Kenya, and I spoke at a few rallies. For myself and for many others on the faculty the encampment was something of an experiment. Here was an opening toward a purposeful pedagogy, toward a curriculum that linked Ann Arbor up with wider struggles for justice.

All of that changed in the early hours of the morning on May 21, 2024, when a large force of police assembled at the encampment and ordered the student activists out. Over the ensuing half-hour, squads of police clad in riot gear pushed the activists north, outside the university's premises. By the time I arrived on campus at about 8 a.m.,

it was all over: police were bundling tents, books, and other equipment into a large dumpster, while a despondent crowd watched from a distance. In the weeks and months that followed, student activists who had been involved in the encampment were subjected to prosecution. At the request of the Regents, the state's Attorney General filed criminal charges against eleven protestors, accusing them of trespassing and resisting a police officer. Those charges were eventually dropped.¹⁴

My experience with the encampment was not shared by everyone at the Michigan campus. Some members of the Jewish community took offense at the slogans that student-activists chanted or at the signs they carried. Some of the activists acted in a discreditable manner; some appear to have committed vandalism. Someone spraypainted graffiti on the law offices of one of the members of the Board of Regents and threw mason jars filled with a noxious liquid through the window of his house. Someone threw a rock through a window at the Provost's house, and spraypainted "Free

Palestine” on the front of the building.¹⁵ Federal authorities have very recently indicted eight people for conspiring to commit these crimes.

In the main, though, the students conducted themselves in a manner consonant with Michigan’s proud tradition of student activism: they interrupted the usual course of things in order to draw the public’s attention, clarify the issues, and inspire action. The university’s disciplinary apparatus has been re-engineered to punish their activism. The Board of Regents rewrote the conduct code in the summer of 2024 without consulting with faculty or student governments. In the months that followed, administrators convened what the student newspaper called a “kangaroo court” to investigate activists’ conduct.¹⁶ Some students have been disciplined for obstructing the flow of pedestrian traffic during a protest at a student activities fair. Others have been disciplined for interrupting the annual Honors Convocation. The university’s prosecution of these and other modest infractions has been punitive and mean-spirited. As *The Guardian* revealed in a June 2025

report, the university hired dozens of undercover investigators to surveil pro-Palestinian students, trailing them on and off campus, recording them, eavesdropping on their conversations.¹⁷ Several students have been served with no-trespassing bans, barring them from visiting the university's campus. Others have been barred from further studies at U-M.

Sing for the Pro-Palestinian Student Activists

I had all of this in mind when, in May 2026, I spoke before the graduating class at Michigan Stadium. I was at the end of my one-year term as chair of the Faculty Senate. On the rostrum with me were the Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps and the basketball player Jalen Rose, both of whom were given honorary doctorates by the university. The men's basketball team had just won the national championship, and there were other athletic victories to hymn, too. Like other enthusiasts, I looked forward to honoring Michigan's long history of athletic excellence. But I also thought it important, on a day meant

to celebrate students' accomplishments in and outside the classroom, to honor student activists. The graduating class of 2026 included a number of students who had, a few years before, been actively involved in the encampment on the Diag. Some of them had been subjected to poorly-conceived disciplinary proceedings; others had had their studies interrupted. I thought it important that we would collectively recognize their work.

The speech that I gave focused on the long history of student activism at the University of Michigan. The heroine of my account was the suffragette Sarah Burger, the first woman to apply for admission to the university. In the late 1850s, she and her colleagues orchestrated a pressure campaign, enlisting hundreds of Michigan women to apply for admission to a university that had closed its doors against them. I ended the address by inviting the graduates to sing the university's fight song—"Hail to the Victors"—in honor of different generations of activists. Among them I mentioned the first Jewish professor, appointed in 1890; the Black Action Movement of the

1960s and 70s; and the pro-Palestinian student protestors. These and other activists caused offense, made provocations, organized people, and got things done. Whatever one might think about their methods, pro-Palestinian activists are part of this long and distinguished tradition.

I conveyed the text that I planned to deliver at the graduation ceremony to the organizers a week in advance, so that it could be loaded onto the teleprompter and printed in the podium guide. It was understood by all involved that I was not to be a spokesman for the institution. No one in the university asserted the power to approve or disapprove what I intended to say. The chair of faculty government represents the interests of the 7,800 faculty who teach at Michigan. It is not an administrative position, and the chair is not bound by the university's recently adopted policy on institutional neutrality.¹⁸ We at Michigan learned from hard experience in the McCarthy era that academic freedom is a foundational pillar of higher education, and today we host an annual lecture named in honor of Michigan faculty who were blacklisted and dismissed from university

service during the 1950s. That is why my words had to be my own. I was not working off a university-approved script. I was fulfilling my role as a representative of faculty opinion at America's leading public university.

Even so, I had a series of cordial and mutually informative conversations on telephone and over email with administrators at the university who were concerned about the sentence—toward the end of the text—in which I mentioned pro-Palestinian activists. In dialogue with the administrators, I agreed not to call Israel's war in Gaza a “genocide,” even though a United Nations commission found it to be so. I also agreed not to mention the specific student groups that had been involved in the protests, since I did not want to have to argue over the tactics they had employed. In other words: U-M's leaders were aware of the character of the remarks that I intended to give. I worked with them to ensure that the text was phrased as diplomatically as possible.

In the wake of my address, the president of the university published a statement claiming that I “deviated from the remarks [I] had shared

before the ceremony.” My “remarks were expected to be congratulatory, not a platform for personal or political expression,” he wrote. It is true, as President Grasso wrote, that I “deviated” from the prepared remarks. But they were the deviations of anyone who is accustomed to speaking before audiences of undergraduate students. I “deviated” by adding a sentence pointing out that all the faculty were men in 1858, when Sarah Burger first applied for admission. I added a sentence about the Board of Regents’ injurious investigations into her application. I added a mention of the 1,500 women who applied for admission to the university in 1859. I rephrased a sentence about the lessons that we ought to learn from Ms. Burger’s example. I added a sentence about Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor at the University of Michigan, crediting him with opening the doors to the University of Michigan to generations of Jewish students fleeing from the antisemitism of East Coast universities. I rephrased the sentence about pro-Palestinian activists: I credited them with opening our hearts to the “injustice and inhumanity of Israel’s war in Gaza.” And, at the

end, I added a few sentences in which I went through the Michigan fight song in honor of generations of student activists.

I did not surprise the administration by the substance of what I said, and neither did I substitute one speech for another. I was speaking as a teacher, confident in our students' abilities to reason for themselves. Michigan is not a finishing school for polite young men and women. The graduating class of 2026 had finished their degrees at the foremost public university in the country. They did not need cloying nostalgia; neither did they need platitudinous accounts of the good old days in Ann Arbor. They needed inspiration to face a flawed and unjust world head on, using the tools we've given them: critical reasoning, careful research, sympathy for the oppressed.

That is why I spoke as I did. If we are to be the world's leading university in the public service, then our graduation ceremonies ought to model purposeful civic engagement. We teach our students to face controversies, not run away from them. That's what being "the leaders and the best" (as we at U-M like to call ourselves) is about.

In the Aftermath

A flood of calumny poured out upon me in the days that followed the graduation address. The people who operate a social media account titled “Stop Antisemitism” excerpted a 26-second clip from my speech and posted it on Twitter and on Instagram, calling my address a “political rant.” The clip soon attracted over a million viewers. Nikki Haley, formerly Donald Trump’s ambassador to the United Nations, tweeted about the speech and called for punishment to be visited upon me. Rick Scott, United States Senator from Florida, urged the Trump government to cut off federal funding from the University of Michigan.¹⁹ A Republican member of the Board of Regents complained about the difficulty of disciplining tenured members of the faculty; a Republican candidate standing for election to the Board of Regents gunned for me, calling on the university to “put him on leave without pay, strip him of administrative support or research assistants, cut his expense budget.”²⁰

Over the space of a few days I received hundreds of profane emails, letters, and telephone calls. The worst of them threatened violence against myself and my family. Someone calling himself “Mike Smith” wrote to me a few days following graduation to say that “I hope someone puts your lights out permanently you piece of fucking garbage.” An anonymous caller to my office telephone called me an “Antisemitic piece of shit. Wait till we see you walking around.” Another man called to say that “I wish I was in Michigan right now. I’d come over and smash your fucking head in, you piece of shit.” Someone calling himself “Jeff Sork” wrote to say that he hoped “you experience a long suffering death.” There was a call from someone who called me “Professor Palestine,” speaking in an affected accent. “You’re a dead motherfucking dude,” he said. “Jewish people are coming for you ... we’re gonna throw you off the fucking roof, you piece of shit.” And there was a letter addressed to my university office from someone calling themselves “Yoor Dedmeet.” “Hey ignorant fucking asshole,”

the letter went. “Your problem with Israel (and therefore Jewish People) has been brought to our attention. You are now on ‘the List.’ You are fucked.”

I forwarded these and other emails and phone calls to the university police, who opened investigations into their provenance. The police installed security cameras at my home, and for several weeks police cars drove past my house on a regular schedule to ensure that nothing dangerous was happening. But there was not much to be done: the telephone calls had come from untraceable numbers; the emails had come from accounts set up specifically for the purpose. That is how digital communication works. It masks the identity of the sender, allowing ill-meaning people to make threats without attribution or consequence for themselves.

The weight of all of this has been substantial for my family and I. What carried us through was the support we received from friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers. One colleague brought dessert. Another brought a bouquet of flowers and a box of mangoes. I’ve had

supportive and loving emails and phone calls from friends I've not heard from in years. The priest at our parish church added us to the prayer list. A considerable number of people who I've never before met have stopped me on the street to convey enthusiasm and thanks for my remarks. Perhaps the most meaningful sources of encouragement have been the public statements authored by organizations and institutions that I care about. Some of them are included in this volume. I am especially glad for the open letter signed by thousands of members of the University of Michigan community. These and other acts of solidarity are tremendously fortifying, for it is, more than anything, the feeling of moral and social isolation that is most terrifying.

This is how demagoguery works: it transforms a reasonable difference of opinion into a pitched battle framed by moral absolutes. It empowers cranks and crackpots to see themselves as crusaders, as defenders of a people. That is why "Stop Antisemitism" could caricature my modest speech as an antisemitic rant. That is why the Republican candidate for the Board of Regents is

searching for a mechanism by which to punish me. That is why Rick Scott thinks it right to cut funding to the University of Michigan. That is why “Mike Smith” and his malign associates seem eager to commit violence against my person.

They claim that reasoned criticism of Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza is, by definition, antisemitic, a kind of moral perversion. In so doing they seek to make our righteous indignation at the human suffering in Palestine seem illegitimate.

The danger is that we would acquiesce to the force of their demagoguery, swallow our tongues, and close our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity that we can so readily see.

A MESSAGE TO FRIENDS OF MICHIGAN HILLEL

MAY 3, 2026

RABBI DAVEY ROSEN

DEAR FRIENDS OF Michigan Hillel,

We want to provide you with an initial update as we address the troubling incident that took place at the University of Michigan's commencement yesterday. Using that celebration as a platform for political statements that singled out and alienated our Jewish community was wrong, and we have made that known directly to University leadership.

President Grasso posted a statement Saturday night acknowledging that the remarks were hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community, stating, "For this, the university apologizes."

Michigan Hillel is engaged in thoughtful and deliberate conversations with the administration. Over the past year, we have worked with university leadership as partners in Hillel International's Campus Climate Initiative to identify and address the root causes of antisemitism on campus. Yesterday's incident highlights the ongoing and urgent need for this critical work.

We are fiercely advocating on behalf of our Jewish community, and we will share more detailed updates with you in the coming days.

Our commitment to the safety and belonging of our students is unwavering. Thank you for your continued trust and for standing with Michigan Hillel as we do this critical work.

Rabbi Davey Rosen

CEO MICHIGAN HILLEL

OPEN LETTER FROM U-M FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENTS

MAY 4, 2026

DEAR PRESIDENT GRASSO, Provost McCauley, General Counsel Lynch, Interim VP Kettenbeil, and Regents Acker, Behm, Bernstein, Brown, Hubbard, Ilitch, Meyers, and White,

Yesterday, President Domenico Grasso issued a public statement apologizing on behalf of the university for the remarks offered at commencement by U-M faculty member and outgoing chair of the Senate Committee on University Affairs (SACUA), Derek Peterson. But nothing in Professor Peterson's statement warrants any apology. To the contrary, it is President Grasso's statement for which the university should apologize. By using the university's highest-level perch to criticize a faculty member for offering views on a public issue, President Grasso's statement violates the university's stated policy to "maintain a position of institutional neutrality on political or social issues and events not directly related to its internal governance." It also reinforces the well warranted concern among many faculty that the university's professed commitment to institutional neutrality

has not been, and will not be, implemented in a neutral way.

It bears emphasizing that nothing Professor Peterson said was inappropriate to the occasion. In the course of a speech celebrating students and members of the community for many efforts to make this institution better, Professor Peterson celebrated students who had, through their protests, called attention to the injustice and inhumanity with which the present government of Israel has prosecuted its war in Gaza. His celebration of the students who engaged in those protests clearly connected to his discussions of past efforts by students to target injustice. Professor Peterson began by recalling the 1858 decision by the President and Regents to deny admission to Sarah Burger—and all women—and the efforts made by Burger and many other women to compel the university to change, propelling it closer to its “best.” Professor Peterson also celebrated the Black Action Movement, which among other things led to the founding of one of the academic units in which he holds a faculty appointment. Similarly, Peterson called upon the

graduating students singing our shared anthem, The Victors, to “sing for Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor at the University of Michigan” who “opened the doors of this great university for generations of Jewish students who found in Ann Arbor a safe haven from the antisemitism of East Coast universities.”

In this context, it should be obvious, contrary to the suggestion in President Grasso’s message, that Professor Peterson’s remarks were fully consistent with—and, indeed, an embodiment of—the “celebration, recognition, and unity” that are appropriate at commencement.

President Grasso asserts that Professor Peterson’s comments “were hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community.” But all those statements did was celebrate the actions of our students for expressing their own views on a pressing matter of policy and morality. It cannot be the case that the mere fact that Professor Peterson exposed members of our community to those views in a commencement ceremony warrants an apology. Our university’s own Principles on Diversity of Thought and

Freedom of Expression state that “Every member of our academic community should expect to confront ideas that differ from their own, however uncomfortable those encounters may be.”¹ If the university were truly committed to those principles, and its professed stance of institutional neutrality, it would not apologize for a faculty member’s statement on a pressing public issue simply because some members of the community are upset by the viewpoint the faculty member endorsed.

Indeed, President Grasso’s statement itself is “hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community.” Many members of our community have family members who have been killed, whose houses have been destroyed, and whose lives have been transformed by Israel’s conduct of the war in Gaza. Many other members of our community feel a distinct moral injury in the United States’ continued arming of the Israeli military—arming that provided necessary support for that conduct. To many, protesting against the war was a central part of their university experience, and one that was an expression of the values of free speech and

humanism that our institution supports when it is at its best. President Grasso has now told these members of our community that their perspective on this issue is so out of bounds that the university should apologize for its even having been expressed. We can think of little the university could do that is more “hurtful and insensitive” to the deep moral commitments and expressions of these community members.

Professor Peterson’s remarks were thoughtful, informed, instructive, and ethically rich. President Grasso’s response was none of that. It represents a sad abrogation of the ideals and principles which should have been upheld and celebrated on the dais and from the Office of the President. President Grasso and those who compelled him to issue his unfortunate statement would do well to go back and rewatch Professor Peterson’s speech, this time listening for what they can learn, from history and about the future. (Unfortunately, in a further cowardly act, the university has apparently removed the recording of the entire ceremony from its website.) Perhaps after watching the

entire video, then Professor Grasso will see that he himself should apologize.

We thank Professor Peterson for his care and insight. We call on President Grasso to withdraw his statement, republish the ceremony recording, and pledge to protect and uphold the university's own professed principles of free expression, free speech, and neutrality. Otherwise, we can only conclude that there is nothing neutral about the institution's supposed commitment to institutional neutrality, and that the institution's supposed principles on diversity of thought and freedom of expression cease to operate when a faculty member expresses a 'forbidden' view.

Signed by 1637 U-M Faculty, Staff and Students

OPEN LETTER FROM U-M ALUMNI

MAY 8, 2026

DEAR PRESIDENT GRASSO, Provost McCauley, General Counsel Lynch, Interim VP Kettenbeil, and Regents Acker, Behm, Bernstein, Brown, Hubbard, Ilitch, Meyers, and White,

We, the undersigned, are University of Michigan alumni writing to express our displeasure with the unjustifiably harsh response of University of Michigan President Domenico Grasso to the commencement address delivered by Derek Peterson, Professor of History and outgoing chair of the Senate Committee on University Affairs (SACUA), on Saturday, May 2, 2026.

In his brief and laudatory address, Professor Peterson made this central point:

[The] freedoms that we all enjoy were hard won. They weren't handed to us by a generous and far-seeing administration. This is the greatest public university in the world because people like Ms. Sarah Burger [the first woman to seek to matriculate at the University, in 1859] refused to accept the enclosures and orthodoxies of their time. They saw in

the University of Michigan a promise that this great university would actively place itself in the service of all the people of this great state.

Professor Peterson continued by calling out the example and inspiration of other individuals and groups who insisted the university live up to its mission and ideals, including students with the Black Action Movement whose advocacy led to the establishment of one of the first (and still one of the leading) programs in African American studies in the United States. Professor Peterson mentioned one other individual by name: Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor hired here, in 1898. Professor Levi's presence on campus signaled that this university, at least, would not follow the lead of Ivy League schools then still deeply committed to antisemitic policies in hiring.

Rather than appreciating Professor Peterson's generous tributes to a few of the individuals and movements that have changed our university for the better, President Grasso chose to single out this sentence for opprobrium:

Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza.

President Grasso found this sentence so problematic that he saw fit to issue a public apology on behalf of the university. Apparently he has also gone so far as to remove public access to the official video of the commencement address. Subsequently, at least one University of Michigan Regent, Sarah Hubbard, has doubled down on this egregious attack, insinuating that Professor Peterson might be facing disciplinary action in association with his speech, perhaps including a threat to his tenure, which is an especially serious attack on academic freedom.

If anyone has violated the standards of this great public institution, however, it would be President Grasso. Regardless of the position one may take on the merits of this phrase, "the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza," the hallmark of an institution of higher education ought to be a vigorous defense of free speech, academic freedom, and open discourse.

To seek first to censor and then possibly to punish Professor Peterson for what is, at worst, a statement about which reasonable people may disagree, is a serious betrayal of the ideals to which we believe the University of Michigan should be committed. At this particular historical juncture, it is more important than ever to celebrate, not denigrate, engaging with students, faculty, and staff who bring different and sometimes conflicting opinions to the table.

We stand in solidarity with Professor Peterson. We echo the demands articulated in the letter circulating with University of Michigan faculty, students, and staff, and call on President Grasso to withdraw his statement, republish the ceremony recording, and pledge to protect and uphold the university's own professed principles of free expression, free speech, and institutional neutrality.

Signed by 979 U-M Alumni

U-M CENTRAL STUDENT GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

MAY 13, 2026

SUMMIT V. LOUTH AND NAIMAH PEREZ

IN DEFENSE OF STUDENT Activism: CSG Calls on the University to Retract Apology for Dr. Peterson's Commencement Address.

ANN ARBOR, MI - To begin, CSG extends its congratulations to those who celebrated their graduation from our beloved university this past week. We wish you all the best while you all continue with bigger and brighter endeavors.

This past week's university-wide Commencement ceremony, however, also brought to light a matter that CSG feels compelled to address. During his speech, the outgoing Chair of the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA), Dr. Derek Peterson, gave brief remarks on the value of peaceful student activism. Dr. Peterson called on our university to praise Sarah Burger, who mobilized a movement that eventually led to the admission of women at the University of Michigan. He called on our university to praise Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor at U-M, who, despite virulent anti-Jewish violence and hatred that continues to this day, helped cultivate a more inclusive space at

U-M for Jewish members of our community. He called on us to memorialize the Black Action Movement, which sought increased admission of students of color at U-M and financial and community support for these groups. This movement eventually resulted in a pointed improvement of student diversity, as well as the creation of the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies at the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA).

Finally, Dr. Peterson called on us to sing for those student activists who have “Opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel’s war in Gaza.” Dr. Peterson’s speech emphasized that student and faculty activists are part of what makes our university the greatest in the world, and that, were it not for their voices now and throughout history, U-M would not be the premier institution that it is today.

Dr. Peterson’s remarks, specifically his comments on Gaza, resulted in an apology from the Office of the President of the University of Michigan. The apology stated that “[Peterson’s]

comments were inappropriate and do not represent our institutional position.”

Dr. Peterson’s comments did nothing but praise students who spoke up when they saw injustice, who pressured the university to recognize and ameliorate such injustice, and who sought to further Michigan students’ legacy of standing for what is right. Regardless of the university’s official view of the war in Gaza, it is a disservice to Mrs. Burger, Professor Levi, and the heroes of the Black Action Movement to imply that celebrating such bravery is inappropriate. It is concerning that the university felt it necessary to deny Peterson’s sentiment that we ought to value student and faculty activists confronting inequality on campus.

We ask the university to imagine where we would be today without student and faculty activism. We urge the university to value those students who protested against South African Apartheid and those who led teach-ins on campus about the Vietnam War. We urge the university to recognize the importance of the picketers who stood outside of Hill Auditorium protesting a

speech being given by George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party. We urge the university to recall the members of the 1862 Students' Lecture Association, who, at the behest of the community, invited abolitionist speakers to come to churches to call for the eradication of slavery.

In sum, we urge the university to retract their apology for Dr. Peterson's commencement address, and with it, their statement that Peterson's affirmation about the value of student activism does not "represent our institutional position."

Thank you, and Forever Go Blue,

Summit V. Louth, CSG PRESIDENT

Naimah Perez, CSG VICE PRESIDENT

AAUP, AFT, LABOR LEADERS SUPPORT UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PROFESSOR DEREK PETERSON

MAY 5, 2026

RANDI WEINGARTEN, TODD WOLFSON, TERRENCE
MARTIN, JULIE BOLAND, AND DANIEL BIRCHOK

THE AAUP AND AFT strongly defend the academic freedom of Professor Derek Peterson and condemn the escalating campaign of political pressure and public intimidation directed at him following his remarks at the University of Michigan's commencement ceremony.

Professor Peterson's comments—measured, principled, and clearly situated within a broader call to recognize those who work to advance justice—fall squarely within the protected sphere of faculty speech. Faculty members do not surrender their rights to speak as scholars and citizens when they participate in university forums—whether in classrooms, public venues, or ceremonial settings. On the contrary, such occasions are among the most visible expressions of the university's core commitments to thoughtful inquiry, ethical reflection, and engagement with the most pressing issues of our time.

Calls from political actors and government officials to investigate, discipline, or terminate Professor Peterson are deeply alarming. Such demands represent a direct threat to academic freedom and an unacceptable intrusion of partisan

politics into the life of the university. Just as concerning, they create a profound chilling effect: When faculty members see a colleague singled out for public vilification and threats of punishment for protected speech, the predictable result is self-censorship. Scholars may avoid addressing controversial or politically sensitive topics, narrowing the scope of inquiry and debate that universities exist to sustain.

The AAUP and AFT are also concerned by the University of Michigan administration's public response, including its characterization of Professor Peterson's remarks and its suggestion that he acted improperly. Institutional leaders have an obligation not only to tolerate faculty speech, but to defend it—especially in the face of external political pressure. An institution may disagree with the content of a faculty member's protected expression, but refusing to affirm his right to academic freedom risks legitimizing calls for sanction, amplifying the chilling effect on faculty speech, and inviting further political interference.

The AAUP and AFT call on the University of Michigan to affirm unequivocally that Professor Peterson will face no discipline for his protected speech, to reject external efforts to dictate the terms of academic expression, and to recommit itself to the principles of academic freedom and shared governance that are foundational to its mission.

At a moment when faculty speech is increasingly subject to political attack, universities must stand firm. The AAUP and AFT stand with Professor Peterson and with all faculty members who exercise their rights and responsibilities to speak, teach, and engage the pressing issues of our time without fear of retaliation.

Randi Weingarten, AFT PRES.

Todd Wolfson, AAUP PRES.

Terrence Martin, AFT-MI PRES., AFT VICE PRES.

Julie Boland, U-MICH-AA AAUP CHAPTER PRES.

Daniel Birchok, U-MICH-FLINT AFT-AAUP LOCAL 5671 PRES

CONDEMN ATTACKS ON FREE SPEECH OF UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HISTORIAN DEREK PETERSON

MAY 20, 2026

HISTORIANS FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

TO PRESIDENT GRASSO, Provost McCauley, General Counsel Lynch, Interim VP Kettenbeil, and Regents Acker, Behm, Bernstein, Brown, Hubbard, Ilitch, Meyers, and White,

Historians For Peace and Democracy strongly condemns the response of University of Michigan President Domenico Grasso to the commencement address delivered by Derek Peterson, Professor of History and African-American and African Studies and outgoing chair of the Senate Committee on University Affairs on May 2, 2026, and the subsequent campaign of political pressure and public harassment directed at Professor Peterson.

In his remarks, Professor Peterson celebrated generations of University of Michigan activists, including Sarah Burger, who organized the first petition by women for admission in 1859; Moritz Levi, the school's first Jewish professor, appointed in 1896; the students of the Black Action Movement, who demanded that their history and experiences be incorporated into the curriculum, and finally the pro-Palestinian student activists

who protested Israel's war in Gaza. He concluded that "the greatness of this university rests also on the courage and the conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path towards justice." These remarks were informed, ethical, and fully within the right of faculty to speak out about university matters and the pressing public issues of our time.

Focusing on the one sentence on pro-Palestinian student activism, President Grasso immediately issued a public apology for Professor Peterson's remarks, calling them inappropriate, insensitive and a violation of the university's institutional neutrality. Public officials and at least one Regent have called for Professor Peterson to be investigated, disciplined, and perhaps fired. As so often in recent years, the mere mention of Palestine or defense of the rights of students and faculty to speak honestly and to protest has led university administrators to capitulate to criticism from within or pressure from without.

Historians for Peace and Democracy strongly condemns these egregious attacks on Professor Peterson's protected speech. The failure to defend

free speech rights not only harms him, but will also have a chilling effect on free speech and academic freedom throughout the university.

We defend the right of faculty and student speakers at graduation to express their views without prior censorship or post speech punishment by university administrators. We call on President Grasso to withdraw his statement, condemn the calls to discipline Professor Peterson, and unequivocally defend free speech.

Signed by 154 Historians and the members of the Historians for Peace and Democracy Steering Committee:

Marc Becker, TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Carolyn “Rusti” Eisenberg, HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

Van Gosse, FRANKLIN AND MARSHALL COLLEGE (RET.)

Linda Gordon, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY (RET.)

Mary Nolan, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY (RET.)

Jim O’Brien, U-MASS BOSTON (RET.)

Margaret Power, ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECH. (RET.)

Samantha Payne, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Prasannan Parthasarathi, BOSTON COLLEGE

Ellen Schrecker, YESHIVA UNIVERSITY (RET.)

Kevin Young, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Barbara Weinstein, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ON PROFESSOR DEREK PETERSON'S COMMENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN COMMENCEMENT AND PRESIDENT DOMENICO GRASSO'S HARMFUL RESPONSE

MAY 15, 2026

THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL OF JEWISH VOICE FOR
PEACE

THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL of Jewish Voice for Peace extends its gratitude and admiration to Professor Derek Peterson, the outgoing chair of the faculty senate of the University of Michigan, for his comments at the university's spring commencement ceremony, urging recognition and appreciation for Michigan's "pro-Palestinian student activists who have ... opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza."

These were words of basic decency—and love. And yet, as the response later the same day from the university's president quickly demonstrated, speaking these words at the commencement was also an act of public courage, given the pervasive hostility of higher education administrators to faculty and students who bear witness to the humanity of Palestinians and the injustice of the Israeli state. In his response, Michigan President Domenico Grasso shamefully "apologized" for Professor Peterson's humane words of decency and love, smearing them as "hurtful and insensitive."

The Academic Council condemns President Grasso's response. This includes the inaccurate

and misleading claim that Professor Peterson “deviated from the remarks he had shared before the ceremony.” We take Professor Peterson at his word that he shared with the administration his intention to condemn the war on Gaza and support the student protestors. The few words he added for clarification do not constitute “deviation” in any reasonable or honest sense of the term. This means that President Grasso knowingly and intentionally tarnished the reputation of a member of his faculty in ways that have placed Professor Peterson in harm’s way. We find this unconscionable.

President Grasso’s response is, moreover, an attack on academic freedom. Here it is crucial to note that the president’s statement at no point offers anything akin to legitimate counter-speech to Peterson’s comments—that is, it offers no reasoned basis for disagreeing with Peterson’s propositions about the university’s pro-Palestinian student activists or the Israeli state’s war on Gaza. Very differently, Grasso’s statement deploys institutional authority to *admonish* Peterson for having expressed his views. Put otherwise, the

president's statement effectively sanctioned Peterson's speech, thus chilling future expression of support for Palestinian rights and lives—especially from the many faculty possessed of less security and stature than Professor Peterson. President Grasso certainly has the right to express his own views, but as president, he abuses his office and harms the university when he sanctions and chills speech he opposes (rather than engaging with that speech on a democratic and reasoned basis). Let us be clear: an attack on academic freedom by a university president is itself a failure to meet a core responsibility of that office.

Grasso's response is, in addition, wrong and harmful because of the sly way in which it mischaracterizes Professor Peterson's comments about the pro-Palestinian students as "hurtful and insensitive." The key move here is that Grasso's statement identifies these feelings as the feelings of "many members of our community." But given that many *others* must have had the opposite reaction to Peterson's words, what Grasso's text elides is any serious assessment of why some persons would find Peterson's words of decency

and love to be “hurtful and insensitive.” White supremacists, for instance, typically find “hurtful” the opposition of racial justice advocates to the display of the Confederate Flag. This does not, however, mean we should credit or accede to these feelings—or fail to tell the important truth that these are the feelings—the resentments—of persons invested in white supremacy. Grasso, in turn, should recognize, rather than obscure, the basis of anyone finding “hurtful and insensitive” Peterson’s recognition of Palestinian humanity and suffering. The claim in Grasso’s statement that these are the feelings of “many,” without evidentiary support and specificity, is a rhetorical move that evades seeing these feelings for what they are: the feelings and resentments of anti-Palestinian hate, the feelings and resentments of a specific ethno-national supremacy (i.e., Zionism).

President Grasso’s statement is especially shoddy and shameless in its final sentence: “To be sure, the world has injustices; the only way we can address them is to work together and not create more divisiveness.” The initial acknowledgment

of “injustices” in general is, in an important sense, a refusal to acknowledge the specific injustice Peterson’s comments named: the Israeli state’s war on Gaza. In effect, Grosso’s comment buries this specific injustice in the vast pool of all of the world’s injustices, thus denying it the attention Peterson, following the lead of the student activists, called for. The second part of this final sentence is even worse. It makes the Orwellian claim that fighting injustice depends on total social unity, as if injustice is something other than oppression and exploitation by persons of power. To speak such an inversion of truth is to travesty the intellectual integrity for which a university must stand and defend.

Here we should return to the great clarity and beauty of Professor Peterson’s brief commencement comments. Without any note of apology, Peterson named the specific injustice of Israel’s war on Gaza, but he also took care not to privilege or isolate this injustice. He did not lose this specific injustice in a vast pool of all the world’s injustices. Rather, he placed it in the context of other injustices, asking his audience to

recall and recognize the importance of struggles to open the university to women and Jews. That President Grasso then singled out for sanctioning Peterson's recognition of Palestinian suffering makes clear just which injustice he (President Grasso) felt compelled to support, with all the authority of his presidential office.

Again, the Academic Council of Jewish Voice for Peace is grateful for and inspired by Professor Peterson's careful and compassionate words, and concomitantly, condemns President Grasso's stubborn defense of the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war—Israel's ongoing genocide—against Palestinians.

PRINCIPLES UNDER PRESSURE: THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN'S RESPONSE TO DEREK PETERSON'S COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

JUNE 28, 2026

SAMUEL R. BAGENSTOS

IN JANUARY 2024, the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan adopted Principles on Diversity of Thought and Freedom of Expression.¹ Those principles expressly “recognize that free inquiry and expression can offend.” But they affirm that “[e]very member of our academic community should expect to confront ideas that differ from their own, however uncomfortable those encounters may be.” At the meeting in which the Regents voted to adopt those principles, current Chair Mark Bernstein effused that “We are a public university with a long and proud history of robust engagement on issues of great societal consequence, indeed, actively confronting the most controversial, a hallmark of our culture that we fully embrace.” He called the principles “the North Star of the university.”²

If so, the university administration’s reaction to Professor Derek Peterson’s remarks at commencement suggests that its compass needs fixing. In his message apologizing for those remarks, President Domenico Grasso suggested that the supposedly core principles of free inquiry and expression do not apply to speeches at public

ceremonial events.³ President Grasso described commencement as “a time of celebration, recognition and unity” that is “neither the time nor the place” for a speaker to express views on a controversial topic.

President Grasso’s statement flies in the face of the university’s own policy on Freedom of Speech and Artistic Expression, which specifically affirms that “[i]t is the right of members of the University community (including students, faculty, staff, and administrators), speakers, artists, and others invited by members of the University community to set forth their views and opinions at the University.”⁴ It also disregards this university’s long history of hosting commencement and other public speeches addressing controversial issues.

Back in 1991, President George H.W. Bush gave the university’s commencement address.⁵ He used his platform to attack what he called “political correctness,” which, he said, “replaces old prejudice with new ones.” That speech triggered criticism for “deflect[ing] pressure from demands for greater access to higher education and for an elimination of the racism and sexism

that, among their other functions, limit the pool of applicants for economic and social advancement.”⁶ In 2011, President Barack Obama’s own commencement address said “that partisan rants and name-calling under the guise of legitimate discourse pose a serious danger to America’s democracy, and may incite ‘extreme elements’ to violence”—a clear slap at his Tea Party opposition.⁷

No doubt, some in attendance at President Bush’s or President Obama’s speeches were uncomfortable with or even deeply offended by their remarks. Surely, the same was true when the university’s then-President Robben Fleming—speaking in his personal and not institutional capacity—gave a speech calling the Vietnam War a “colossal mistake” but also calling out what he believed to be the excesses of the radical left.⁸ But all of these remarks served the high purpose of solemn university events—not to offer anodyne platitudes that give everyone in attendance a superficial good feeling, but to challenge the community to think for themselves about matters of great public importance.

Critics of Professor Peterson's remarks argue that, because he spoke in his capacity as chair of the Faculty Senate, he was obliged to abide by the university's Institutional Neutrality Bylaw and avoid taking a position on "political or social issues and events not directly related to its internal governance."⁹ But the chair of the Faculty Senate does not speak for the university, and he is not bound by the Institutional Neutrality policy. That policy, by its own terms, binds only members of the university administration: "Regents, the president, executive officers, chancellors, deans, directors, chairs, and others in similar positions."

The whole point of a faculty senate is that it is *independent* of the university administration. Faculty senates provide a vehicle for faculty to make their voices heard—often in conflict with the views of the administration.¹⁰ When Professor Peterson spoke as the chair of the Faculty Senate, he was not speaking on behalf of the university administration, and he was not bound by the Institutional Neutrality policy.

By contrast, President Grasso was certainly bound by the Institutional Neutrality policy

when he apologized for Professor Peterson's speech. And, as an open letter signed by over a thousand members of the university community (including me) argued, that apology plainly violated the Institutional Neutrality policy. By calling Professor Peterson's remarks "hurtful and insensitive" and promising they would not be allowed to "tear down" campus goodwill, President Grasso himself took an institutional position on a contested political question—the merits of pro-Palestinian advocacy and how to characterize the Israeli government's destruction of Gaza. Four of the members of the committee that drafted the university's Institutional Neutrality policy have concluded that, "[g]iven its tone and framing, Grasso's apology could easily be taken to suggest that the University holds an 'institutional position' opposed to pro-Palestine activism—rather than no position at all."¹¹

Like President Bush, President Obama, and President Fleming before him, Professor Peterson used a university assembly to take a position on an important matter of ongoing public controversy.

Though many in the audience may have disagreed with his point of view—and some, no doubt, felt deeply personally offended—the university’s Principles on Diversity of Thought and Freedom of Expression rightly declare that “[o]ur practice of confronting controversial topics is a hallmark of our culture.” In that regard, Professor Peterson’s commencement speech reflects the best traditions of our university.

AT GRADUATION, DEREK PETERSON SPOKE FOR ME

JUNE 27, 2026

GABE EFROS

I PROPOSE THAT there is another, very obvious reason as to why Dr. Derek Peterson's speech at the U-M Spring 2026 Commencement has been garnering so much attention: Every other speech sucked.

Imagine, if you will, being at this year's spring commencement. Imagine that you are a senior, actually graduating. You are sitting on the astroturfed lawn of the Big House. You have just completed four years of college. Maybe they were grueling and required much more work than you thought they would. Maybe you experienced periods of intense isolation and are glad it's over. Maybe you were lucky and college really was the four best years of your life. In any case, it's over now, and the culmination of your efforts is your commencement. During this commencement, you anticipate there will be speakers—selected by the administration, mind you—tasked with crafting a message that matches the experience of the most formative years of your life.

The first undergraduate speaker steps up to the microphone. Will they talk about a specific moment that defined their college experience?

No: their speech sounds like it could have been written by any other undergraduate student at the University of Michigan. They put extra emphasis on the basketball team winning the National Championship. Okay, sure. Fine. You like watching sports enough to enjoy the speech. This is the second year in a row that the commencement speech has been about athletes. You begin to think your degree was just theater—a performance in the background for the main show: the sports teams.

But now, it's time for the keynote speaker. You look up and see Jalen Rose, a former basketball player who committed questionable actions while attending the University of Michigan.¹ Perhaps he will expound upon this experience and the growth he achieved alongside it. Wrong. His speech is incoherent.² It is about nothing and everything all at once, to the point where a central message is nowhere near discernible. He bounces around, shifting from a lecture on integrity to congratulating himself for just giving the address. Okay, that's disappointing.

But, alas, there is one last undergraduate speaker. You hold out hope that he will make you feel like that wistful eighteen-year-old again, the one who just graduated from high school instead of college. You want an escape from the reality that you do, indeed, need a job now. You want to finally be inspired. He walks up to the microphone and immediately starts talking about football, basketball, and winning championships all over again. You spent four years here, and the symbolic and literal end to your undergraduate experience is defined by your school's athletic department.

I don't see how anyone could feel inspired by any of these speeches. But it is because of that failure to inspire that I felt so much pride when Derek Peterson spoke.

I was sitting at graduation, thinking about how formulaic the previous speeches had been when Peterson, the former chair of the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs, stepped on stage. When he began speaking about social justice, I knew exactly where his speech was headed. And when he received widespread cheers after mentioning pro-Palestine activists, I

smiled—not only for his praise of the movement itself, but for his ability to say what needed to be said when others wouldn't.

It's no wonder that Peterson's speech garnered so much attention. He pulled me out of the university's lull in a way that every other speaker failed to do, and I am sure he did the same for many others.

Do you see what I'm saying? When I heard every other speech, the intense focus on sporting events, athletes, and meaningless anecdotes felt calculated; the university's choice of gutless speakers who only spoke in a conservative manner felt almost purposeful. It felt like they wanted me to ignore the world around me and indulge in their distractions. Looking back on it, I don't even blame the administration. A sense of negativity about our world feels pervasive now. Every time I wake up, there is a new opportunity to see a headline that will ruin my day. But the solution is not to ignore that pervasiveness: it is to confront it head-on.

Beyond being inspired by Peterson, I felt embarrassed. Ironically, despite the university's

rich history of student protest, for all of our student-activist predecessors, it was not a student who was able to capture my own bottled-up anger at our administration and government. It was not a student who was able to relate to and thereby elicit the biggest cheer from the tens of thousands of people at the Big House. It was not a student who garnered national attention. It was a professor.

While I felt proud that someone, even a professor, said the thing we tried to ignore, I couldn't help but feel some loss. By his own admission, Peterson did not state that Israel is committing genocide.³ Considering that the commencement controversy happened even with a genocide-free speech, why not be truly transgressive? Why not acknowledge the genocide and then some? Why limit yourself?

Perhaps Peterson should have gone further by directly calling out administrators—some of whom were present at commencement—for their role in suppressing the activists he was praising, as each member of the board of regents actively participated in surveilling activists, while denying

to hear reasonable pleas to divest from genocide. Activism is inherently transgressive. There is no better way to stand in solidarity with those you are commending than by engaging in transgressive behavior yourself.

But at the end of the day, despite believing that Dr. Peterson should have called the inhumanities and atrocities occurring in Gaza a “genocide”—given its classification by the United Nations—I can’t help but feel that what he did was enough.⁴ I know it was enough now, and I knew it was enough then, sitting in the Big House, listening to him praise pro-Palestine activists and appreciating the attention he was giving the movement, even before I could envision the national attention that was to come.

* * * * *

EDITOR’S NOTE: A version of this essay was previously published under the same title on May 22, 2026 in *The Michigan Daily*.

SING FOR JUSTICE

JUNE 20, 2026

JOHN CARSON AND YI-LI WU

IN HIS SPEECH at the University of Michigan Commencement on Saturday, May 2, 2026, President Dominico Grasso exhorted the graduating students to always work for the greater good. “There will always be injustices in our world,” President Grasso observed, “whether they are in nearby communities or in so many places around the globe. Always commit to righting the wrongs and improving the welfare of others. Large or small, your gestures or contributions will matter.”

Indeed. It was precisely in this spirit that Derek Peterson, SACUA Chair and Ali Mazrui Collegiate Professor of History and African Studies, had used his own remarks—just before President Grasso’s—to praise the activism of diverse U-M students and faculty who had worked for justice: Sarah Burger, who fought for the admission of women to U-M starting in 1858; Moritz Levi, appointed in 1896 as the first Jewish professor at U-M, who pushed for the admission of Jewish students; the Black Action Movement members of the 1970s and 1980s who demanded a more inclusive curriculum; and the

“pro-Palestinian student activists who over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel’s war in Gaza.”

Professor Peterson’s speech drew enthusiastic cheers from much of the crowd, and even a shout-out from President Grasso, who emphasized that “the broader university was founded in the public interest and has remained grounded in that public interest ever since. And this is what Derek Peterson was talking about. We want the world to look to Michigan for the common good, for discoveries, ideas, cures, and actions that advance humanity.”

After the ceremony, however, it became clear that this humanity was not to be extended to all. Online critics immediately took to social media to accuse Professor Peterson of giving an antisemitic speech. Two of the U-M regents reportedly asked Professor Peterson to publicly apologize for praising the pro-Palestinian protestors. In this fraught moment, President Grasso was faced with a choice: back up a faculty member’s principled speech or join with the powerful voices denouncing the faculty member. He chose the latter. Later that same day, President Grasso issued

a statement declaring that “the university apologizes” for Professor Peterson’s remarks, which he then characterized as “hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community” and “inappropriate.” President Grasso also declared that the remarks did “not represent our institutional position,” which he later clarified was “institutional neutrality.”

President Grasso’s evocation of institutional neutrality was disingenuous, given that Professor Peterson spoke as an individual faculty member, not for the institution. But the most egregious aspect of President Grasso’s public response was his suggestion that Professor Peterson had blindsided the administration by having “deviated from the remarks he had shared before the ceremony.” As a result, critics and supporters alike immediately assumed that Professor Peterson had gone rogue by sneaking a statement about Gaza into his description of student activism at U-M.

In fact, however, U-M officials had pre-approved Professor Peterson’s speech, including his mention of Gaza in his commencement remarks. In a statement posted

on the Faculty Senate website, Peterson provided the original text of his approved speech, which said, in part, “Sing for the student activists, who over these past few years have sacrificed much to open our hearts to the injustices happening in Gaza.” The administration had asked Professor Peterson to make one substantive change to an earlier draft, which he graciously did. On the eve of the commencement, they were fine with Peterson referring to “injustices in Gaza,” as long as these injustices were presented as disembodied actions, like fog descending on the land, without any political decision-making at work. What they were not happy with was the backlash, which sent them scurrying into defense mode.

Admittedly, there were several places where Peterson literally “deviated” from the specific words in his pre-approved speech. For example, while the submitted speech said simply: “Sing for Moritz Levi, professor of French, the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Michigan,” the delivered speech heightened Levi’s importance by adding that “he was to open the doors of this great university to generations of Jewish students

who found in Ann Arbor a safe haven from the anti-Semitism of East Coast universities.” Professor Peterson made similar additions when describing the Black Action Movement. And when Peterson delivered his remarks on Gaza, he elaborated the description of student protests when he said, “Sing for the *pro-Palestinian* student activists who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice *and inhumanity of Israel’s war* in Gaza.”

These were not the words of a cynical actor sneaking ideas into a speech. They were the words of a seasoned, deeply knowledgeable professor, who habitually extemporizes on the basis of that knowledge when addressing students. Professor Peterson’s delivered words in no way altered the substance of his prepared remarks. Since the campus protestors at U-M and elsewhere have routinely been called pro-Palestinian, and since it is common knowledge that it is the government of Israel that has been attacking Gaza, it is specious to claim that these “deviations” altered the substance of Professor Peterson’s remarks.

President Grasso should thus be thoroughly ashamed of his “apology.” Indeed, President Grasso had no trouble praising the remarks during the event itself. He and those who vetted the remarks knew what was coming and raised no objection. In fact, they had heard something similar during the Winter 2025 commencement, when Professor Peterson addressed the graduates and spoke of “Victors Valiant ... who have risen to defend the humanity of suffering people ... in the ruined cities of Palestine.” On what basis can they now claim that they were surprised and justified in attempting to deflect all public anger onto Professor Peterson, who has exhibited far more backbone and ethical resolve than any and all of them? President Grasso’s suggestion that Professor Peterson went rogue served to intensify existing anger about his remarks, with the result that Professor Peterson received hundreds of threats against his safety and his life.

Ironically, U-M’s dissembling only underscores the urgency of Professor Peterson’s message to the Class of 2026. When we sing our university fight song, he argued, we must also sing

for student activists who have fought to make the world more equitable and just. Like football players, activists can expect to be tackled and blocked. They can also expect to face referees predisposed to favor the home team.

The times are dark right now, for the country and the university. Our students are coming of age at a time when powerful forces in American society are working to make racism, sexism, and antisemitism “great again.” It was entirely appropriate for Professor Peterson to praise the 168 years of U-M student and faculty activism at graduation. We need leaders who will stand tall and defend our values. Disingenuous responses and throwing members of the U-M community under the bus is not the way forward. Speaking as historians, we cannot help but wonder what U-M graduates of the future will think of Professor Peterson’s speech and U-M’s “apology” as they look back on us today.

Professor Peterson asked us all to stand tall and sing for justice. We must heed his words.

UNIVERSITIES ARE ENABLING AMERICA'S PRESS FREEDOM COLLAPSE

MAY 4, 2026

QASIM RASHID

MAY 3 WAS WORLD Press Freedom Day—a celebration of free expression and speech.

On May 2, Professor Derek Peterson stood before the graduating class of the University of Michigan and delivered an inspiring commencement address, one that will be remembered—not because it was radical, but because it is now censored.

Professor Peterson is no ordinary faculty member. He is a historian, an African Studies scholar, a MacArthur Genius Grant recipient, and the outgoing chair of the Faculty Senate. He is, by any measure, precisely the kind of voice a university should be proud to elevate at its most ceremonial moment.

So what did Professor Peterson say at commencement that was so egregious? So egregious that it motivated the University of Michigan President to remove his remarks from the university website, remove the entire commencement ceremony in which he spoke, issue a formal letter of apology to the public, and distance himself and the university from Professor Peterson? The disturbing answer reflects

a growing trend of censorship and collapsing press freedom nationally and internationally.

Let's Address This.

What Professor Peterson Said

Here is what Professor Peterson said—in full—about the students who have spent the past two years speaking up for Palestinian lives:

Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists who have, over these past two years, opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza. The greatness of this institution does not only rest on the shoulders and on the accomplishments of our student-athletes who deserve all the congratulations we can offer them. But the greatness of this university rests also on the courage and the conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path towards justice.

Preceding these remarks, Professor Peterson celebrated three other iconic voices. Sarah Burger—the suffragette who fought to open

Michigan's doors to women. Moritz Levi—the first Jewish professor at Michigan, who opened those same doors to generations of Jewish students fleeing antisemitism at East Coast universities. And the Black Action Movement students who demanded a curriculum reflecting Black identity and experience.

But it was Professor Peterson's additional recognition of all students who spoke up for Palestinians—Jewish and Muslim, Christian and atheist, Black, brown, and white—that enraged the University of Michigan. Professor Peterson dared place Palestinian solidarity and activism in its precise historical context—that of a long and honorable tradition of students refusing to accept the injustices of their time.

For this, University of Michigan President Domenico Grasso issued a public apology on behalf of the entire university for Professor Peterson's remarks. The speech was scrubbed from the university's website. President Grasso's letter states in part:

At today's U-M spring commencement ceremony, our outgoing Faculty Senate

Chair made remarks regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict that were hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community. We regret the pain this has caused on a day devoted to celebration and accomplishment. For this, the university apologizes. Make no mistake, we will not allow a 30-second soundbite to tear down the goodwill that so many on our campus have worked to build.

Let's be precise about what just happened. A MacArthur Genius who celebrated Jewish students, Black students, women, and Palestinian solidarity activists in the same speech was publicly reprimanded, had his speech erased from the public record, and was subjected to a university apology that treats the mere mention of Palestinian humanity as something requiring institutional contrition.

There was no apology when Professor Peterson elevated Jewish students. To do so would be absurd. No apology when he elevated Black students. No apology when he celebrated women. The apology came exclusively for the Palestinians.

That is not a coincidence. That is a policy. It is one of the most explicit demonstrations of institutionalized xenophobia in recent American academic history. Sadly, and perhaps even more frighteningly, this is not the exception in the United States today.

The University of Michigan Is Not Alone

What happened to Professor Peterson is part of a rapidly accelerating national pattern that should alarm every American who believes in free expression, regardless of where they stand on any particular political question.

Commencement ceremonies at several universities have undergone a post-October 7 overhaul, with some students saying their free speech rights are being suppressed. There will be no live student speakers at CUNY School of Law or at NYU's school-specific ceremonies, after former students gave speeches that were fiercely critical of Israel. The restrictions have prompted an ongoing lawsuit brought by CUNY law students who allege violations of their First

Amendment rights. “We have our voice taken away in what’s supposed to be our biggest moment,” said CUNY Law’s student government president.¹

NYU will no longer allow live student speeches at school-level commencement ceremonies, instead requiring remarks to be pre-recorded and approved in advance. The change follows controversy over a 2025 commencement speech by student Logan Rozos, who accused Israel of committing genocide—prompting the university to withhold his diploma.

Read that again: a university withheld a student’s diploma for a commencement speech, because that student called out genocide.

Columbia University, which was at the center of the pro-Palestinian student movement, cancelled its university-wide commencement altogether in 2024.

The American Association of University Professors has long held that academic freedom—the faculty’s right to speak freely—is the “*indispensable requisite for unfettered teaching and research in institutions of higher education.*”²

Universities are not merely buildings where credentials are distributed. They are, by design and by historic purpose, the spaces where orthodoxies are challenged, where power is interrogated, and where the next generation learns that the pursuit of truth requires the courage to speak it.

We are instead witnessing the systematic dismantling of that purpose. And not by fringe actors—but by university presidents, boards of trustees, and administrators who have decided that protecting Israel from criticism matters more than protecting the foundational principles of higher education itself.

The hypocrisy is not subtle. These are the same institutions that proudly invoke free speech when hosting conservative provocateurs, far-right commentators, and speakers whose records include documented bigotry against a range of communities. The principle of free expression, it turns out, has a very specific carve-out: it ends the moment a Palestinian life is mentioned with empathy.

America Is Collapsing on Press Freedom

But this phenomenon on university campuses does not exist in isolation. It is part of a broader, documented, accelerating collapse of press freedom in the United States that should be front page news—and conspicuously is not.

According to the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the United States dropped seven places to 64th—its lowest ranking ever. RSF attributed the decline to the Trump administration’s “systematic” attacks on press freedom (including the detention and deportation of journalists), the “drastic reduction” in funding for U.S. international broadcasting, efforts to dismantle public broadcasters, and the use of government agencies and lawsuits to punish media outlets critical of the administration. Clayton Weimers, Executive Director of RSF’s North America section, stated:

The US has experienced a steady decline in the RSF Index over the past decade, but President Trump is

pouring gasoline on the fire. Trump and his administration have carried out a coordinated war on press freedom since the day he took office, and we will live with the consequences for years to come.

This collapse is not happening in a vacuum. For the first time in the history of the RSF World Press Freedom Index, over half of the world's countries now fall into the “difficult” or “very serious” categories for press freedom.³ In twenty-five years, the average score of all 180 countries and territories surveyed has never been so low.

The percentage of the global population living in countries where press freedom is rated “good” has dropped dramatically—from 20 percent in 2002 to less than 1 percent in 2026. This is a global emergency. And it is global in the most literal sense—crossing every political and religious boundary.

Vladimir Putin's Russia, ranked 172nd, has become a specialist in using laws designed to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism to restrict press freedom. As of April 2026, Russia held forty-eight journalists behind bars. Saudi

Arabia executed reporter Turki al-Jasser, and the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi will forever stain all those who turned a blind eye. Iran, ranked 177th, remains near the bottom of the index, with the regime's ongoing crackdown on journalists. India has fallen to 157th place, with RSF describing intensifying judicial harassment of independent media through defamation statutes and national security laws.

Press freedom is not collapsing because of any one religion, culture, or political system. It is collapsing because power—wherever it concentrates, whatever flag it flies—instinctively moves to silence the voices that hold it accountable. Meanwhile, over the past two and a half years, Israel has killed more journalists than were killed in all other global conflicts combined.⁴ Yet, Israel remains the only nation for which thirty-eight U.S. states have criminalized the protected First Amendment right to boycott.⁵ This continued suppression of free speech helps no one but those seeking autocratic power. This is why we must talk about Palestine, and why Professor Peterson's case is so critical to this discussion.

The Gaza Press Freedom Crisis Corporate Media Won't Name

No honest accounting of the global press freedom collapse can omit what has happened in Gaza—the single most catastrophic assault on journalism in modern recorded history.

Since October 2023, more than 235 journalists have been killed in Gaza, according to the International Federation of Journalists.⁶ Israel has banned all international media and journalists from entering the territory. It has bombed press offices. It has killed reporters with their press credentials clearly displayed. It has done so with American weapons, American funding, and American diplomatic cover. Israel has killed more journalists in less than three years than were killed in the twenty-four years of World War II and the Vietnam War *combined*. And corporate media has covered virtually none of it with the sustained outrage it deserves.

Democratic Congressman Dan Goldman has posted publicly about the importance of

protecting journalists and defending world press freedom. He has not, to date, issued a single condemnation of Israel's killing of nearly 300 journalists in Gaza. Not one.

This is not an oversight. It explains the University of Michigan's response to Professor Peterson. It demonstrates the systemic nature of the collapse of press freedom.

Corporate media, for its part, continues to cover this genocide while sanitizing the language used to describe it, ignoring the journalist death toll, and treating the targeting of press freedom in Gaza as a sidebar rather than the central story it is.

This is a genocide acknowledged by the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, Israeli scholars like Omer Bartov, and Israeli human rights organizations including B'Tselem and Israeli Physicians for Human Rights. The evidence is not in dispute among those who have examined it honestly. What lacks in our institutions, universities, media organizations, and elected officials, is courage and integrity to say so.

Professor Derek Peterson had that courage.
And the University of Michigan is punishing him
for it.

* * * * *

EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay was originally
published in the May 4, 2026 issue of *Let's Address
This with Qasim Rashid* at <https://www.qasim-rashid.com/p/universities-are-enabling-americas>.

HAIL TO THE VICTORS (*REALLY*)

JUNE 2, 2026

JUAN COLE

FACULTY SENATE President Derek Peterson's courageous commencement address rallied our university community to think of social justice achievements alongside the victories of our intrepid college athletes when we sing "Hail to the Victors." Here I'd like to mention some further such Wolverine pioneers.

Professor Peterson might have urged us to remember exemplars of freedom of conscience such as Professors Chandler Davis, Clement Markert, and Mark Nickerson, who were grilled by the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee in 1954, with Davis and Nickerson being fired by the University of Michigan. Their persecution was clearly unconstitutional, egregiously violating their First Amendment rights. The regents have never apologized.

He might have recalled the 250 students, faculty, and staff who held an alternative graduation ceremony in 1986 where they honored then-imprisoned South African anti-Apartheid activist Nelson Mandela, after the regents refused to award him an honorary degree. Thanks to their protests, which included a brief occupation of

the regents' offices, the university awarded him an honorary degree in 1987. Mandela was released on the fall of the Apartheid regime and became president of South Africa in 1994.

Peterson might have recalled Tabbye Chavous, a former University of Michigan professor of psychology and education who served as Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer, spearheading our efforts for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). The university made some progress in this decade on achieving a more diverse student body. Still, African American representation on campus is a fraction of their proportion of Michigan's population, and so the university is still falling woefully short in serving the entirety of the state of Michigan. The administration unfortunately abolished DEI in January 2025. Other universities chose to challenge the Trump administration's crusade against DEI in court, demonstrating a courage that is increasingly rare in Ann Arbor off the football field.

Peterson has been most vigorously criticized for his praise for the student activists who rallied

against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. At the request of the university, he omitted the term “genocide” and did not name the student organizations that led this campaign, seeking to avoid controversy. It appears, however, that the term “Palestinian” is so triggering for the American right wing that simply bringing up the obvious atrocities that the Israeli military has committed against Gaza’s civilians guarantees a bout of public hysteria. The International Court of Justice in January, 2024, issued a preliminary injunction against the Israeli government’s atrocities. The judges thus acknowledged the plausibility of the charges by South Africa and other plaintiffs that genocide is Israel’s policy in Gaza.

Professor Peterson joins a long tradition of Wolverines who worked for and spoke out for a better, more humane society. Those now pillorying him stand in a tradition of losers who stood against the drive for Civil Rights and the anti-Apartheid movement. The rest of the University of Michigan will continue to sing “Hail to the Victors” and mean it.

A COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AND AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

JUNE 5, 2026

BASIT ZAFAR

AT LEAST AT THE OUTSET, what I found most striking about the university's response to Professor Derek Peterson's commencement remarks was its candor. President Grasso said, "The Chair's comments were inappropriate and do not represent our institutional position."* Taken at face value, this is an honest admission. Professor Peterson's speech placed different groups—women, Black people, Jewish people, and pro-Palestinian protesters—within a shared historical narrative of inclusion and moral progress at the University of Michigan. However, for those who have been paying attention to what has been going on at U-M over the last two years, the institutional position has consistently elevated some subgroups while marginalizing others. Professor Peterson's "offense," if one can call it

* The university later amended the statement by adding the footnote, "Our position is institutional neutrality." ("Institutional Neutrality," University of Michigan Board of Regents, October 17, 2024, <https://regents.umich.edu/files/meetings/10-24/2024-10-X-5.pdf>.) However, as pointed out by several U-M Law School professors who served on the committee that recommended the policy, portions of President Grasso's statement violated institutional neutrality. (Gabriel Mendlow, et al., "President Grasso's apology violated institutional neutrality," *The Michigan Daily*, May 14, 2026.)

that, was to place these perspectives on equal footing, and that clearly runs counter to this institution's actions.

For me, Professor Peterson's remarks did something that has become increasingly rare: they made me feel proud of this institution. His remarks were among the most inclusive and unifying speeches I have heard in a long time. Whether one agrees with every aspect of his message is beside the point.

This is why the university's response is so troubling. After that initial moment of clarity, the statement quickly retreats into the same hollow, formulaic language we have all become accustomed to. It invokes unity and inclusion while simultaneously distancing the university from a faculty member's protected speech at a ceremonial event. It effectively suggests that the mere exposure to contested ideas is grounds for apology. That position is difficult to square with the university's stated commitments to diversity of thought, academic freedom, and institutional neutrality.

The administration may disagree with the content of a faculty member's protected expression, but refusing to affirm that protection risks legitimizing calls for sanction, amplifying the chilling effect on faculty speech, and inviting further political interference. And that is precisely what has transpired since the university's response. There is a reason, after all, why U-M (and higher education, more broadly) finds itself where it is today—none of this happened in a vacuum. It's been enabled by the steady and deliberate erosion of basic protections by university administrations.

It is also worth noting that the speech was not a surprise to the administration, despite President Grasso's misleading statement. According to reporting and Professor Peterson's own statement on the Faculty Senate webpage, university officials had reviewed the draft and even suggested edits (such as removing the word "genocide" to make it less provocative!).^{1,2} This makes the subsequent public distancing all the more difficult to rationalize.

Prof. Peterson's remarks are not the problem. The response to them is.

I AM A JEWISH AMERICAN WHO DOES NOT NEED TO BE PROTECTED FROM THE TRUTH ABOUT GAZA

MAY 21, 2026

SHAMAI LEIBOWITZ

I AM A JEWISH AMERICAN and a veteran of the Israeli Army. But according to the University of Michigan administration, I am someone who needs to be protected from the truth.

On May 2, the outgoing Senate Faculty Chair, Professor Derek Peterson, a distinguished historian, gave an inspiring, five-minute commencement speech. Shortly thereafter, the university administration deleted it from its website. To remove any doubt regarding the motive for this censorship, U-M President Domenico Grasso issued an apology for Peterson's "remarks regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict," claiming they were "hurtful and insensitive."

What in Peterson's speech was such radioactive heresy that the entire speech had to be scrubbed from the record as if a crime had been committed?

Peterson addressed the conflict in only one sentence, but context is crucial. He suggested that the university's greatness lies not so much in its scoreboard but rather in its pursuit of justice. Peterson specifically honored a list of pioneers: Sarah Burger, who paved the way for women to be

admitted; Moritz Levi, the first Jewish professor, who opened doors for generations of Jewish students; and the Black Action Movement, which fought for the inclusion of Black students.

Then, he praised “the pro-Palestinian student activists” for “opening our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel’s war in Gaza.”

For this sentence alone, the Administration censored the speech and published a groveling apology. In their view, honoring a suffragette is commendable, celebrating a Jewish pioneer is admirable, and praising Black students’ struggle is noble. But dare to suggest that Palestinians, too, possess human rights worth defending—that, in this administration’s view, is heresy. To highlight the coalition of students—Jewish, Christian, Muslim and people of conscience—who protested the slaughter in Gaza and the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe—is apparently unspeakable.

What this Administration fails to comprehend is that these students and staff were on the right side of history. Israel’s two-and-a-half year-long brutal campaign of mass killing, siege, and

starvation in Gaza was never about self-defense or punishing the Hamas terrorists who committed the October 7, 2023 massacre. Rather, the campaign of destruction was of such unprecedented magnitude and duration that the United Nations¹ and a global consensus of human rights organizations—including the Israeli groups B’Tselem² and Physicians for Human Rights Israel,³ as well as the International Association of Genocide Scholars⁴—have deemed it a full-fledged genocide.

But for Grasso and his administration, the real scandal, apparently, is not the decimation of a society’s civic institutions and the slaughter of thousands of innocent men, women, and children. He is troubled by the possibility that “members of our community” found Peterson’s words “hurtful and insensitive.” Who are these members? Grasso did not elaborate on their identity, but using basic facts and common sense can lead us to the answer.

I know firsthand from my two college-aged children—corroborated by dozens of their friends on campuses across the country—that thousands of Jewish students and faculty participated in or

quietly supported the pro-Palestinian encampments. Far from holding a fringe position, the majority of young American Jews clearly oppose the mass killing of civilians and the carpet-bombing of cities and refugee camps. In their eyes, standing against this state-sponsored violence is not only a moral imperative, but a mitzvah—a Jewish commandment.

Since Jewish students were welcomed into the encampments and demonstrations, Grasso cannot be referring to them. It is therefore reasonable to assume he is talking about some of the donors. It is the height of moral bankruptcy to turn a blind eye to the mass extermination of a society, facilitated by the American supply of arms, munitions, and diplomatic cover, while claiming to be “troubled” by the feelings of donors who dislike hearing those crimes named aloud.

The irony is staggering. The administration’s official statement claimed that commencement was “neither the time nor the place” for such remarks. But the public deserves to know: when, then, is the “correct” time to acknowledge the systematic destruction of every hospital in Gaza

and the killing of nearly 1,800 doctors, nurses, and medics?⁵ Is there a pre-approved window during which the University of Michigan permits its faculty to decry the murder of more than 21,000 children? Or is there a donor-vetted litmus test to determine which atrocities we are allowed to name?

As a lawyer who knows this conflict intimately, I find the university's "outrage" to be particularly ignorant and insulting. We are not protected by the silencing of truth. The administration does not honor Jewish history or heritage by censoring those who acknowledge these horrors and appeal to conscience. The contrast could not be clearer: while thousands of students and faculty fulfilled the fundamental Jewish tradition of speaking truth to power, the Administration's actions brought great shame upon the Block 'M.'

This incident serves as a grim reminder that, under the current leadership, the pursuit of truth ends exactly where the protection of donor money begins. It must be a heavy burden for these administrators to carry all that "hurt" while tens of thousands of human lives are being extinguished.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this essay was previously published under the title "At UM, Mentioning Gaza at Commencement Sparked an Apology" on May 11, 2026 in *The Detroit News* and *Informed Comment*.

**I DISCOVERED
ANTI-ZIONISM AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN.
I'M GLAD IT LIVES ON
THERE.**

MAY 8, 2026

GAYLE KIRSHENBAUM

AT THE UNIVERSITY of Michigan's recent commencement ceremony, history professor Derek Peterson delivered a five-minute speech in which he celebrated all those who have fought for justice at the university, my alma mater. Invoking our legendary sports-focused fight song, he asked the crowd to "sing" for suffragist Sarah Burger, who battled to get women admitted as students; for Moritz Levi, Michigan's first Jewish professor; for all the students who fought for racial justice at Michigan as part of the Black Action Movement; and for the "pro-Palestinian student activists, who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza."

Peterson's address was a historian's invitation to every student and parent in the Ann Arbor stadium to recognize that the fight for Palestinian rights shares roots with our greatest movements for justice, including the struggle against antisemitism.

The backlash, predictably, was swift.¹ The university's president apologized; the speech was condemned by pro-Israel Jewish organizations

and outlets; and I know it upset many college parents, my Gen X peers—we who were raised to believe with all our hearts that Jewish identity and Zionist identity are inextricable.

But to me, Peterson's speech was a reminder of one of the most important lessons I took away from my time at the University of Michigan: that questioning Zionism is a necessary part of any Jewish life that aims to center justice.

I graduated from Michigan in 1989, and spent much of my last year in Ann Arbor ensconced at Hillel, where I edited a magazine for Jewish students. I'd grown up going to Young Judaea summer camps and had spent a college semester in Israel, where I'd witnessed the beginning of the first Intifada. I returned to find a shanty in the middle of campus that had been erected, a student organizer told our magazine, "to bring the uprising to the community. It is to show the conditions of the Palestinians and the brutal oppression of the Israeli army."

The shanty evoked those then prevalent on campuses everywhere to symbolize the struggle of Black South Africans against settler colonialism

and apartheid. The new shanty on our campus asserted that these words also applied to Israel.

While I was strongly against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—where Israel would not remove any settlements until 2005—I was distressed and confused by the shanty’s silent, everpresent message about Israel’s past and present. Is Israel an apartheid state, I wondered?

So I put that question on the cover of our magazine.

The Hillel director called me into his office and somberly expressed his concern. But Hillel International had not yet officially clamped down on student activities that question Israel and Zionism.^{2, 3}

So our cover story ran and we dropped our magazine in bundles across campus. At the time, I thought of myself as a liberal Zionist, and I secretly rooted for the student who tried to disprove the devastating charge. But as young journalists, my fellow magazine staffers and I were committed to exploring the views of those who erected the shanty, no matter their hostility to Zionism. We

didn't code the hostility as danger. No one thought we should report our ideological opponents—the kids who fell asleep on their books in the library just like we did—to the dean or to the government for arrest or deportation.

Over my time as an undergraduate, I'd come to recognize in these kaffiyeh-clad Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students the same history-minded, righteous hope that animated me.

Decades later, in the spring of 2024, we all watched as pro-Palestinian student activists—including many Jewish students—set up campus encampments around the country to protest Israel's assault on Gaza. At Michigan, the encampment was set up on the Diag, the university's public square, where on the day of my own graduation I'd protested the university's military research. As the mother of a recent college grad, I was humbled by the determination of these kids, who put up tents, organized teach-ins, and then suffered as police turned off their bodycams and used pepper spray against them.^{4, 5} They were lawfully protesting for the university to divest from Israel as it bombed the people of Gaza, the

children of Gaza—which is now home to the largest number of child amputees in modern history.⁶

What I understand, and Professor Peterson understands, is that the student activists that he lauded at the commencement are fighting not against Jewish life but for Palestinians' right to survive daily, as people, and as a people. These activists have asked us to understand, finally, that Zionism is what it does.

“It has been hard work to examine my own mind,” Tzvia Thier, a Jewish Israeli mother, wrote in an essay in the 2021 collection *A Land With A People: Palestinians and Jews Confront Zionism*. As a child, Thier immigrated to Israel from Romania in the wake of the Holocaust. In 2009, Thier accompanied her daughter to “protect” her while she joined an action to fight the evictions of Palestinians from their homes in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. Thier was 65, and realized that it was the first time in her life that she had had conversations with Palestinians. She understood then that “it was not my daughter who needed to be protected, but the Palestinians.”

“Many questions leave me wondering how I could have not thought about them before,” she wrote. “My solid identity was shaken and then broken. I have been an eyewitness to the systematic oppression, humiliation, racism, cruelty, and hatred by ‘my’ people toward the ‘others.’ And what you finally see, you can no longer unsee.”

When that shanty went up on Michigan’s campus in the late ’80s, I began to question all that I’d learned about Israel’s founding. I began to question the very idea of an ethnostate—in the name of any people, anywhere—that enshrines the supremacy of one group of people over another.

By the time I became a mother, I’d become anti-Zionist. I understood—with a grief that does not abate—that, as Jews, our history of oppression has become an alibi for Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people.

We must reject the bad faith accusations of antisemitism that have emptied the word of meaning and enabled authoritarian repression. When students on campuses today charge Israel with apartheid and genocide, they are echoing reports from B’Tselem, Israel’s leading human

rights organization.^{7,8} I ask the parents of my generation to read these reports and do as Thier did—to allow themselves to see what we have not wanted to see.

I stand with the more than 2,000 University of Michigan faculty, staff, students and alumni who have condemned the university's response to the commencement address heard round the world.

For the sake of all of our children, I ask that we each do all we can to open our community's heart to Palestinian history and humanity. That we each join the urgent struggle for the liberation of the Palestinian people.

This is the way that our Jewish college kids will find the deep and true safety of community: by leaving hatred, fear, and isolation behind; by honoring Jewish history by standing in solidarity with all who are oppressed; and by roaring in a stadium for freedom and justice, along with their entire generation.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay was originally published in the May 8, 2026 issue of the *Forward*.

A DANGEROUS GAME

MAY 26, 2026

ALAN WALD

I WRITE ABOUT the controversy over Derek Peterson's 2026 University of Michigan Commencement remarks as a Jewish research scholar, one who has been exploring and publishing about Jewish American political activists for over 50 years. Like many others drawn to social justice advocacy, I am anxious to thwart the perilous new normalization of antisemitic conspiracy theories and the upsurge of right-wing violence targeting Jews as Jews. That is why I am alarmed at the confusion produced by hyperbolic claims about the existence of "rampant" threats to Jewish safety and feelings on college campuses that come as a response to protests in opposition to Israeli state policies.

Instances of actual bullying of anyone are to be deplored, and ambiguous and insensitive behavior is to be avoided, but we are faced with a national blueprint: The federal government and complicit university administrations dependably exploit any such allegations—even when anecdotal, undocumented, and debunked—for the purpose of suppressing the voices of

Palestinians, Muslims, and other minorities on our campuses.

Pro-Palestinian activists, many of whom are Jewish, are by now familiar with the playbook used by University of Michigan President Domenico Grasso in his denunciation of Professor Peterson's five-minute speech. It was spelled out clearly in the following sentence: "Everyone in our community is entitled to their own views; but this was neither the time nor the place." Grasso's exercise of a shameful, formulaic loophole as a warning to the faculty, students, and staff is unambiguous: One can privately hold views critical of the Israeli state but articulating them in any campus venue—and especially in the public sphere—runs the risk of possible punishment by fungible and arbitrary policies and definitions. The U-M administration has taken the same approach with the Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities when it comes to protests that do what they are supposed to do—disrupt normal business. For example, in May 2024, dubious claims by the university that the encampment for divestment constituted a

“fire hazard” were used to shut it down and arrest a number of students.

The declaration by Grasso that Peterson “deviated” from the agreed-upon character of his remarks erodes the anchors of standard meaning if one compares Peterson’s original version with his spoken remarks. The draft Peterson submitted clearly shows his intention to unequivocally express his political views by giving a shout-out to recent protestors and condemn the war on Gaza; the original would have yielded the same negative response from those with a different opinion even if he had not added several adjectives for clarification.

There was no “deviation” from the essence of his agreed-upon remarks nor is it believable that such minor adjustments so transformed Peterson’s statement that, if acceptable before, it was now suddenly rendered “hurtful and insensitive.” Besides, Peterson’s viewpoint was far from fringe on this campus and nationally. It reflects recent polls that show a steady increase in opposition to U.S. support of Israeli state policy in general and among Jewish Americans.

What Peterson's slight adjustments did do, however, was provide Grasso with a convenient excuse to unleash a troll mob on the internet through a public besmirching of Peterson's integrity. This, of course, is the method of demagogues who evade real issues in favor of issuing personal calumnies—and the opposite of what most of us have spent our careers teaching as a method to argue with integrity. As a political fable, the narrative of duplicity for which Grasso lit the fuse is potent stuff—a dog-whistle for a social media pile-on by bad actors. Predictably, Peterson was deluged with hundreds of defamatory insults and threats following Grasso's lead in claiming that Peterson had committed an unprofessional breach of trust.

Even worse, Grasso's reference to Peterson's causing "pain" to "many members of our community" was an inevitable entrée for insinuations of antisemitism so that the hate messages characterized him as "a bigot and antisemite." The operating levers for an identification of those community members suffering "pain" (over pro-Palestine perspectives)

with Jews as a group have long been built and instantly go into action. True to form, U-M Hillel, a proudly Zionist organization deeply connected to the Israeli state, jumped in with the self-aggrandizing assertion that his remarks did indeed “alienate the Jewish community.”

Immediately, Israeli American investor Adam Milstein publicly called for Jewish people to stop donating to U-M, and his words were echoed. Elyssa Schmier, regional director of the Michigan Anti-Defamation League, announced that “Jewish students at the University of Michigan were once again made to feel othered when the Chair of the Faculty Senate used a commencement speech to praise anti-Israel protesters and demonize Israel.” Rabbi Davey Rosen, chief executive officer of U-M Hillel, and Rabbi Alter Goldstein, director of U-M Chabad, chimed in with comparable statements invoking Jewish safety and demanding accountability.

There are a wide range of perspectives about Jewish identity, Israel, and Zionism among Jews. Any organization or individual claiming to speak on behalf of the monolithic imaginary of “the

Jewish community,” especially as defenders of Israeli policy, is playing a dangerous game. The suggestion that Jews throughout the world are on board with what is happening in Gaza feeds into right-wing fever dreams and is far from the views of actual Jews who are becoming more critical of the Israeli state every day. It’s an untruth made even worse when combined with the idea that suppressing and criminalizing dissident political views is being carried out on behalf of the interests of “the Jewish community.” The backlash to this constant overplaying of the antisemitism card will be ugly.

When this misuse of the antisemitism charge is combined with efforts to depict Jewish American opinion homogenously—i.e., pretending there is a community consensus that opposition to the structure and behavior of the Israeli state constitutes Jew-hatred—the situation is truly dire. The finger is being pointed in the wrong direction to identify and fight racist antisemitism; distinctions are being opportunistically mishmashed rather than clearly made. Moreover, the Jewish population is being set up as a future

scapegoat in the most familiar way; as if Jews are a cabal of behind-the-scenes puppet-masters receiving special privileges.

A democratic decay is at work in the U.S. and Grasso's "apology," and his pledge of further repressive action at U-M facilitates the process. The will to ignorance seems strong in the U-M administration, but also in the leadership of Hillel, Chabad, and other traditional Jewish institutions. Grasso's blue-skies vision that graduation ceremonies are to be exclusively congratulatory, "devoted to celebration and accomplishments" by merry boosters on the faculty, may seem perfect for what *The New York Times* called "The Era of Indifference." Yet our colleges and universities educate best as cauldrons of debate and discussion.

Grasso's Hallmark greeting card platitudes have nothing to do with current commencement addresses around the country where students cheer and boo with some regularity. Nor do they honestly acknowledge the U-M past. Who can forget when President George H.W. Bush launched his national attack on "political correctness" at U-M in May 1991, so outraging students and

faculty that a major conference was organized to respond? Or when Governor Rick Snyder was faced with protests and shouts of opposition for his 2011 remarks supporting budget cuts in higher education?

U-M graduates are not fragile things for whom the response to troubling and divisive issues in the world should be to look away. When a full moral reckoning of the recent war on Gaza takes place, there will be many questions about those who refused to speak out when they should have and who curbed those who did. At that time, the place of honor will go to Professor Peterson and his admonition that “the greatness of this university rests also on the courage and the conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path toward justice.”

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EDITOR’S NOTE: A version of this essay was previously published in “Letters to the Editor Re: Derek Peterson’s commencement address” on May 14, 2026 in *The Michigan Daily*.

WHEN SPEAKING THE TRUTH BECOMES AN ACT OF COURAGE

JUNE 8, 2026

RIMA MOHAMMAD

AS A PROUD PALESTINIAN American, a grandchild of 1948 Nakba survivors, a University of Michigan faculty member, and an elected leader, I stand firmly with Professor Derek Peterson and the pro-Palestinian students he stood beside.

As I attended graduation, celebrating remarkable students and their achievements, I was reminded of what our universities are meant to uphold: truth, courage, and the freedom to speak without fear. These are not abstract ideals; they are the foundation of academic integrity.

Professor Peterson demonstrated that integrity when it mattered most. In a moment when many feel pressure to stay silent, he chose to speak. That is courage. That is the role of a scholar.

What is unfolding in Gaza is mass devastation and the systematic denial of Palestinian life and dignity. For many, this is not theoretical, it is deeply personal. And yet, students and faculty who speak out are increasingly treated as the problem. They are not. Silencing them is.

Universities cannot claim to value free inquiry while punishing those who challenge dominant

narratives. Freedom of speech must mean something, especially now. It must protect voices that are uncomfortable, urgent, and necessary.

The students speaking out today are continuing a long tradition of moral courage. They are demanding that our institutions live up to their values. Faculty who stand with them are not stepping outside their roles, they are fulfilling them.

As we celebrate these graduates, we should be clear about the kind of academic community we believe in: one that enforces silence, or one that defends truth.

I stand with those who speak out, who refuse silence, and who demand justice for Palestine.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this essay was previously published in "Letters to the Editor Re: Derek Peterson's commencement address" on May 14, 2026 in *The Michigan Daily*.

PROGRESSIVE EXCEPT FOR PALESTINE (PEP)

JUNE 16, 2026

CARINA RAY

PRESIDENT GRASSO'S condemnation of Derek Peterson's brief remarks at the University of Michigan's Spring 2026 Commencement was a textbook example of PEP. Short for Progressive Except for Palestine, PEP succinctly captures how those who champion progressive causes capitulate when it comes to Palestine.

Peterson extolled generations of activists who have pushed U-M to live up to its claim of being "leaders and best." While not exhaustive, the four examples he cited sketched out a trajectory of progressive causes that have been at the heart of some of the most consequential political debates in the university's history.

Yet, it was a single sentence about Gaza that caused President Grasso to quickly condemn Peterson's speech as "inappropriate" and as "hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community." He went so far as to imply that this one line could "tear down the goodwill that so many on our campus have worked to build" and might even make Michigan a less "welcoming, safe and inclusive community." The rapturous

applause that broke out in response to Peterson's call "to sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists, who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza," suggests the opposite.

For a fleeting moment, many of our graduates finally heard the words of validation, solidarity, and moral clarity that the university administration has refused to utter. That one line rejected university leaders' malicious characterization of our students as terrorist supporters and antisemites in favor of seeing them for who they are: young people who brought Palestinian suffering into view and who insisted that we reckon with the moral implications of Israel's war on Gaza, not least by demanding that the university divest from companies with financial ties to Israel.

Then came Grasso's publicly issued statement. In an example par excellence of PEP, he did not describe Peterson's remarks about activists who championed women's rights and who fought against antisemitism and racism as ill-timed "personal or political expression." Nor did Grasso

include those remarks in his apology for “the pain” he alleges Peterson caused “on a day devoted to celebration and accomplishment.”

I don’t doubt that Grasso thinks the history of struggle against sexism, antisemitism, and racism at U-M is something we should celebrate. His own track record points to a progressive vision of what the university ought to be. Earlier in his career he was the founding director of the Picker Engineering Program at Smith College, the first of its kind at a women’s college in the United States. More recently, as Chancellor of U-M Dearborn, he championed the city’s diversity and dramatically increased resources to make it possible for the least advantaged to get a Michigan education. All of this makes Grasso’s denunciation of Peterson especially emblematic of the Palestine exception.

In 1997, as Nelson Mandela led the arduous task of dismantling the Apartheid regime in South Africa, he reminded the nation “that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.” Mandela knew that where freedom is concerned there can be no exceptions.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this essay was previously published in "Letters to the Editor Re: Derek Peterson's commencement address" on May 14, 2026 in *The Michigan Daily*.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN?

JUNE 16, 2026

LAUREN BARRETT SMITH

I WAS EAGER TO WATCH the commencement address by our SACUA Chair Professor Derek Peterson. I had heard it was an inspiring talk that included mention of the history of the admission of women, curricular reform by Black students, and the first Jewish professor at our university. It ended with the inclusion of another marginalized group, the pro-Palestinian students who protested the war in Gaza. As the cheers erupted, I felt great pride in my institution and alma mater. That pride quickly faded when I learned shortly thereafter that President Grasso had apologized for this speech within hours of the ceremony.

Professor Peterson's remarks embodied the core value of integrity. Integrity includes adherence to our principles, questioning the assumptions of the past, and fighting for a more just future. Resilience and strength are needed along this journey in order to persevere when the road becomes difficult. Integrity and grit are essential for young graduates as they navigate the world. In the case of Professor Peterson, his malignment came from his own institutional

administration after seemingly restrained remarks. This affront was only magnified and exaggerated in the social media frenzy that followed.

This event led me to question our commitment to free speech and academic freedom. Who has the right to speak freely in our current academic environment? Does the administration approve all remarks given publicly and, if so, why? The apology showed great disrespect and disdain for Professor Peterson's role within our institution and stature as an academician. Our university should stand for intellectual rigor and academic freedom. How can professors teach in an environment where they risk censorship for the mere mention of controversial issues? As educators, we can become paralyzed in these efforts to avoid offense, and it is untenable.

In 2024, the University of Michigan Board of Regents adopted a free speech policy aligned with the statement first championed by the University of Chicago in 2016.^{1,2} We did not lead the way in establishing this policy as, according to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, we were the 105th school to do so.³ However, in the

university's public statement on this policy, President Santa Ono and General Counsel Tim Lynch wrote "we have a proud history of engaging with issues of great societal importance" and "our practice of confronting controversial topics is a hallmark of our culture." In the final paragraph of the statement, it says "we recognize that free inquiry and expression can offend. Every member of the community should expect to confront ideas that differ from their own, however uncomfortable those encounters may be." Do we believe this? If so, the apology did not conform to this pledge. Let us stand up for our values and teach the students to do so as well. As a wise mentor and philosopher reminded me recently, if we do not stand up in the face of tyranny, we are complicit.

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PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISTS ARE SOMETIMES ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY

MAY 5, 2026

JONATHAN CHAIT

THE DEBATE OVER Israel's war with Hamas has been unusually vicious in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where pro-Palestine activists have vandalized, spat on, and menaced targets they deemed too Zionist. At the University of Michigan's graduation ceremony on an unseasonably chilly Saturday morning in front of some 70,000 spectators—including me, my wife, and our parents—the historian and Faculty Senate Chair Derek Peterson instructed the crowd that the moral and just position in this dispute belonged entirely to one side. That side, ironically, is the one responsible for nearly all the intimidation in Ann Arbor.

“The greatness of this university rests also on the courage and the conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path towards justice,” Peterson said, citing “the pro-Palestinian student activists, who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza.”

Whether the activists have opened hearts to their position or had the opposite effect (a possibility for which there is at least some

evidence), is a matter of debate.¹ But debate is the very thing Peterson wishes to preclude. In his brief speech, he recounted how women, Jews, and African Americans pushed for needed social change at the university, and he described today's Palestinian activists as a continuation of this virtuous history. The theme was that progressive activists inherently occupy the right side of history.

This is a common view on the Left, one that sometimes leads progressives who recoil from activists' specific positions or actions to withhold disapproval. The Left's reverence for activism is a pathology that can enable the movement's worst ideas and instincts to escape scrutiny.

Despite that, Peterson walked the Michigan Stadium crowd through a narrative that is familiar to any liberal and to nearly any recent graduate of a prestigious university. Equality was not handed down by benevolent leaders, he suggested, but demanded by brave activists who defied social condemnation. Their critics may have disparaged their causes and perhaps their methods at the time, but history has proved them correct. It

follows, therefore, that their modern heirs will eventually be seen as equally just. I've had versions of this argument thrown back at me nearly every time I've criticized any progressive activist group.

One flaw with this account is that it is selective. Over the past two years, many Michigan students have marched or chanted in support of Israel, but Peterson excluded them from his litany of activists blessed by the legacy of righteous protest. The actual argument made by Peterson and others is for deference not to student activists in general but specifically to *progressive* student activists. And even this one-sided deference suffers from a survivorship bias of sorts. Progressives believe that activists are on the right side of history because they choose to remember the causes that fared well. But activists on the Left have not always acted with wisdom and foresight: left-wing demonstrators also marched against aid to the Allies in the 1940s, to block nuclear power in the 1970s, and in defense of totalitarian regimes during the Cold War.

The assumption that progressive activists are inherently on the side of justice elevates them

above the category of mere political actors into a kind of priestly class whom others can only learn from and can never criticize. It redirects any scrutiny of their positions to general admiration for their idealism and passion.

Concern and empathy for Palestinian suffering and anger at Israel's excessive counterattack are admirable, but the movement's ambition is not limited to that. Michigan's pro-Palestine activism is primarily organized by Students Allied for Freedom and Equality, which is the local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, a national network. Both the national group and its Michigan chapter have endorsed the October 7, 2023, attacks.² Adult progressives' insistence on viewing their activities as mere youthful idealism makes it impossible to question those positions.

The activists themselves have absorbed the historical-justice narrative, concluding that they are entitled to take whatever steps they see fit to advance their cause. Many campus chapters have seized common space for themselves, an action that no group is allowed. If the crew team, a fraternity, or some local MAGA fans occupied a

chunk of grass that belongs to the whole community, they would be evicted quickly. Michigan's activists did this, and also repeatedly intimidated targets at their homes, including throwing a jar filled with urine through the window of the Democratic regent Jordan Acker's house in the middle of the night.

Most causes have adherents who get carried away. But not every cause does so with the encouragement of professors who cast them as angels of justice by mere dint of the category of action they are taking. Peterson was lecturing an audience of graduates and their families. Much like the activists he praised, he was commandeering a common space intended to belong to the entire university community on behalf of a narrower, contested segment of it. In so doing, he demonstrated how a belief in the immutable righteousness of one's own side can be a license to abuse power.

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FREE SPEECH DOES NOT END AT COMMENCEMENT

MAY 8, 2026

JOHN K. WILSON

THE MAY 15 commencement ceremony at Rutgers University's School of Engineering will have a missing voice—ironically, the voice of alum Rami Elghandour, the tech entrepreneur who was executive producer of the Oscar-nominated film *The Voice of Hind Rajab*. The administration disinvited Elghandour because “some graduating students would not attend their graduation ceremony due to concerns about the invited speaker’s social media posts” criticizing Israel.¹

Elghandour said his cancellation sent a “dangerous” message to students: “Don’t you dare speak up and say anything that you believe.”

Rutgers claimed that the ban “honors the celebratory spirit of the event to ensure that no graduate feels forced to choose between their personal convictions and a convocation ceremony”—unless, of course, a student has any personal convictions supporting free speech.

At the University of Michigan last week, brief praise of pro-Palestinian student activists in a graduation speech by history professor Derek Peterson resulted in global condemnation, a denunciation from the university president for

his “hurtful and insensitive” comments, and a declaration by Republican senator Rick Scott of Florida about Michigan’s government funding: “it’s time to cut them off COMPLETELY.”^{2,3}

Beth Kuhel wrote in *The Times of Israel*, “When a tenured professor, acting in an official institutional capacity at a university-sponsored event, uses a platform of this magnitude in a way that is widely perceived as discriminatory toward a protected group, it raises not only institutional concerns but also civil rights implications.”⁴

This is absolutely wrong, and we must completely reject these terrible, repressive theories of censorship. Political opinions are not acts of discrimination. Speeches at university-sponsored events are not official actions. Colleges must never be investigated by the government for allowing free expression.

One especially bad take came from *The Atlantic*’s Jonathan Chait, who normally pretends to support free speech: “Much like the activists he praised, he was commandeering a common space intended to belong to the entire university community on behalf of a narrower, contested

segment of it.” No, an invited speaker expressing opinions is not “commandeering a common space.” Words are not violence, and they are definitely not an occupation.

The “entire university community” is not entitled to silence anyone who disagrees with it. Should the audience at a commencement get to vote on what words and viewpoints will be banned at the event?

Some people wrongly imagine there is a commencement exception to the principles of free expression, believing that graduation ceremonies and similar events must be a safe space free from hearing controversial ideas. But universities committed to intellectual liberty do not impose safe spaces where ideas are banned. The commencement ceremony represents what is best about a college and its commitment to knowledge, and that includes the freedom of speakers to express themselves and challenge the audience.

Instead of demanding censorship by commencement speakers, we should be discussing how universities can use commencement events

to bring more diverse voices to campus and encourage speakers to express more controversial ideas that challenge the audience rather than lobbing clichés at them. Ideally, colleges should have dueling commencement speakers who give contradictory advice to graduates, make the best arguments for their positions and then meet members of the audience afterward to continue the debate. But even if that's unlikely, colleges must at least maintain their core commitment to refuse to censor speech. No prior review, no disinvitations, no punishments, no apologies for allowing free speech.

If you embrace censorship at commencement, there's no logical stopping point after that. Almost any event has the money or the imprimatur of some part of the university behind it.

One consequence is the trend toward recording student graduation speeches in order to ban any crimethink. The next step is banning speakers entirely to avoid the threat that anyone might be offended. And those who dare utter the wrong word will suffer the consequences. George

Washington University banned alum Cecilia Culver from campus after she criticized Israel in her graduation speech last year.⁵

It's time to reject this regime of censorship and to declare that repression has no place at a university, not even at its dumbest ceremonies full of vapid phrases. We need to speak out for free expression at every event at every college.

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WE NEED MORE RADICAL EMPATHY IN ACADEMIA

MAY 11, 2026

ROGÉRIO M. PINTO

WE NEED MORE RADICAL empathy—a community practice facilitating better communication and trust—in the wake of Professor Derek Peterson’s historic speech at U-M’s 2026 commencement. We do not need the pedantic discourse that took place, obfuscating the truth of the speech.

Praising our students for their activism, Derek invited us to “Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists, who have ... opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel’s war in Gaza.”

Shortly, U-M President Domenico Grasso issued an apology for those inspirational, factual words. He declared Derek’s comments “inappropriate” and not representative of “views across our entire faculty.”

Then came vitriolic responses from hate groups and some disgruntled regents and faculty: Punish Peterson! Demand his resignation! Strip him of his tenure! Derek’s life, family and livelihood were threatened.

A week later, the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs still had not defended Derek,

tacitly validating Grasso's craven, partisan apology.

By contrast, an open letter was created by faculty members to express outrage at Grasso's statement. The letter has been signed by over 1,600 U-M faculty, staff, and students. The letter praises Derek's accomplishments as researcher, teacher, and chair of U-M's Faculty Senate and SACUA. I am proud to have worked alongside Derek as Faculty Senate Secretary.

I was one of the first faculty to sign the letter. Our activism was meant to comfort our colleague and protect him from harm. We engaged in radical empathy in response to the university's craven behavior. Our community shared feelings toward a colleague who had been attacked. We used prosocial behavior to build social compassion. Grasso and those who support him would do well to use cognitive and affective empathy to appreciate Derek's humane perspective.

Lately, empathy has been counted as a weakness for political gain. This may explain why Grasso supporters suggested that Derek's words

will harm our ability to secure private and federal money, instead of focusing on the real threat: an authoritarian government randomly menacing institutions of higher education.

History suggests that a humanistic approach of empathy and positive action is warranted here. U-M is a venerable, powerful institution. The funding we command—more than any public university in the country—should allow us to celebrate those individuals, like Derek, responsible for our excellence, rather than undermining their academic freedom. Most of our funding comes from tuition and grants obtained by faculty, not from the efforts of administrators or regents. But time and again, those last two groups have displayed an authoritarian style, placing the institution before people, which contributes to the cancellation of my colleagues.

I wonder how safe those who critique the status quo really are here. Marginalized social identities may trigger negative reactions from funders and the government. What happens now when one of us uses words deemed “inappropriate” to express

evidence-based research, research that might reveal truths that some wish to hide? Should I be the one in question, I hope my community will treat me with empathy and curiosity. If it is you, I promise to do the same.

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