

**Middle
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Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

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October 19, 2006

His Excellency Christopher Kastryzk
Consul-General
Republic of Poland
233 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
Fax: 646 237 2105
Your Excellency,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA). We wish to convey to you our distress regarding your decision on the afternoon of October 3 to cancel abruptly a talk that Professor Tony Judt was scheduled to give a few hours later that evening. This action on your part constitutes a serious affront to the principles of free expression and the free exchange of ideas. We urge you to invite Dr. Judt to speak at the Consulate at a mutually convenient time in the near future and on a subject of his choosing. It is important to rectify the chilling effect that your cancellation on October 3 has had on the free exchange of ideas.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has more than 2600 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Dr. Judt's October 3 talk had been arranged by Network 20/20, an independent New York City-based membership organization that sponsors lectures and discussion panels on issues relating to United States foreign policy. According to Network 20/20, many of its events are held at the Polish Consulate, and the Consulate had been generous and supportive of their efforts over the years. Dr. Judt's cancelled talk was to be on U.S. foreign policy and the role of the pro-Israel lobby. Approximately 100 persons had been expected to attend. The president of Network 20/20, Patricia Huntington, told our committee that the Consulate had never before cancelled any of its programs there.

According to Ms. Huntington, a member of your staff telephoned her at 4:15 p.m. on the day of the event to tell her that it was cancelled. When she asked to speak with you, your staff member said that this was not possible because you were on the telephone with Abraham Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and that you had been on this call "a long time." After notifying Dr. Judt of your sudden cancellation, she and other Network staff members, who had planned to arrive at the Consulate at 5 p.m. as usual to set up refreshments and deal with other logistics of the event, instead tried to notify meeting participants of the cancellation. In a subsequent press release, Network 20/20 said, "the consulate informed us that they were canceling the event because it was 'too controversial.' We regret that the Polish Consulate felt compelled to cancel Tony Judt's talk."

You have told the press that "maybe four" groups had called you on October 3 to express concern about Dr. Judt's talk, but you declined to identify them. It now appears that the ADL person you were then speaking with was someone calling on Mr. Foxman's behalf. Mr. Foxman has publicly denied allegations that the ADL put any pressure on you to cancel the event, but also said, "I think they made the right decision."

David Harris, executive vice president of the American Jewish Committee, has said that he was one of the callers. “We didn’t want [the Consul General] to get blind-sided by any criticism that may emerge,” he said, according to an account in the Jewish Week of October 13. “It was natural to pick up the phone and say, ‘We want to be sure you know Tony Judt is a controversial figure in the Jewish community, and we want to understand whether you’re aware of it, because otherwise there could be misunderstandings.’” Harris said he “didn’t go to the extent of menacing or threatening, or any such thing,” and “I certainly didn’t ask the consul general to take any particular action.” According to press accounts, Mr. Harris has also commended the Consulate for doing “the right thing.”

From a perspective of protecting academic freedom and the core democratic principles of free speech and the free exchange of ideas, it is our view that you did the wrong thing.

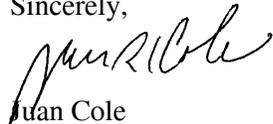
In an interview with the Jewish Week, you said, “It’s not true that they threatened or made any pressure. They simply expressed concern.” Elsewhere you said, “The phone calls were very elegant but may be interpreted as exercising a delicate pressure. That’s obvious – we are adults and our IQs are high enough to understand that.”

You have also said, “I don’t have to subscribe to the first Amendment,” and that you took your decision “for my state’s interests.” Of course, as Consul General you and your government have every right to determine what takes place at the consulate. In this case, however, Network 20/20 has used your premises regularly for several years, at your invitation. Your decision to cancel Dr. Judt’s talk at literally the last minute, following these telephone calls, reflects a disturbing disregard for freedom of expression, a principle that the governments of Poland and the United States have pledged to respect. It is difficult to avoid concluding that pressure was indeed exerted on you by various pro-Israel organizations, however elegantly it may have been conveyed. We regret that you chose to succumb to that pressure, thereby conveying a message that you do not consider the free exchange of ideas to be worthy of your support when those ideas are “controversial.”

We strongly urge you to reconsider your decision of October 3, and in the process affirm your support for free expression and the free exchange of ideas, by inviting Professor Judt to give a talk at the Consulate at a mutually convenient time and on a subject of his choosing.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Juan Cole
President

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