

SIPA

School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University

Statement by SIPA Dean John H. Coatsworth September 20, 2007

The invitation extended by Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) to President Ahmadinejad of Iran has aroused understandable concern within the Columbia community and well beyond. Many have expressed opposition to the policies of the Iranian government or to views President Ahmadinejad is widely reported to hold. As one writer put it, "Why would you invite such a person and give him a platform...?"

The mission of the University is to educate citizens, train professionals, and foster research of the highest quality. This mission can only be served by providing students and faculty with untrammelled access to a diversity of views and opinions in an environment where every statement can be challenged and debated freely.

SIPA is charged with a special responsibility to train leaders in international and public affairs who understand the challenges and dangers of the world we live in. Exposing our students to people and views they will face after they graduate is essential to fulfilling that responsibility. SIPA graduates serve as diplomats, intelligence analysts, security experts, business leaders, human rights activists, and NGO leaders throughout the world.

One of the many ways SIPA helps them to succeed in these tough jobs is by inviting foreign leaders to speak and debate with them.

President Ahmadinejad is the leader of a powerful country. He has no trouble finding platforms for presenting his views to the world. What Columbia is providing at its World Leaders Forum is not a platform but a classroom -- an arena for debate in which his success will not depend on the power of his office but the logic and evidence he can muster to support his opinions and the policies of his government.

The principle of academic freedom in our universities forces us to hear views we oppose, but it also obliges us to debate, confront, and challenge those views in an atmosphere of patient civility. To paraphrase Winston Churchill's famous remark about democracy itself, academic freedom is a terrible thing; the problem is that all the alternatives are much worse.

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