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MSU, Condoleezza Rice and shades of Vietnam

By DANIEL STURM

The only criterion for commencement speakers at MSU, according to the university Web site that invites students to submit candidates, is that a speaker should “enhance the ceremonies without deflecting due attention from the graduates, whose academic achievements are being recognized.”

It’s hard to see how this year’s choice of a undergraduate graduation speaker, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, is going to meet that criterion.

The appearance of Rice, one of the architects of the Iraq invasion, is likely to draw large protests during the afternoon of the May 7 commencement. Rice will address approximately 8,000 spring and summer graduates at the Jack Breslin Student Events Center.

Of course, the criterion for selecting the speaker in this case was irrelevant, since according to MSU spokesman Terry Denbow, President Peter McPherson contacted Rice about the appearance soon after he returned from Iraq last year.

In April 2003, McPherson, the former chief administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development was appointed by the White House to be the financial coordinator for the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in Iraq. Upon returning to East Lansing last September McPherson reported that he’d been able to successfully open Iraq’s economy to private enterprises. His team laid out a plan to make Iraq’s economy more open to free trade than any other country in the Middle East. Not to be forgotten, McPherson also bragged of being responsible for taking steps to remove Saddam Hussein’s face from the national currency.

Tom Wolff, a member of the MSU Commencement Committee that oversees 14 ceremonies each year, said the committee had no influence in the decision. The associate dean of engineering said he didn’t even know who the speaker would be until reading about it in the paper. “That [decision] is held

very closely by the president and the provost, and maybe a couple of other people in the administration building.”

Sarah McDonald, a graduating senior in interdisciplinary humanities, said that she’s already decided to skip her own commencement ceremony and protest instead. “Rice helped to involve us in an unjust, undemocratic, dishonest war, [...] and it makes me sick to know that my university is sponsoring her to speak at my commencement ceremony.”

Ann Francis, a community outreach consultant and Lansing resident, said she thinks Rice isn’t a positive role model. A graduation ceremony should celebrate the positive accomplishments of young people, who’ve worked hard, Francis said. “Rice does not represent that.” Added Francis: “It’s almost tragic. If I were graduating, I’d find it extremely disrespectful to invite somebody from the Bush administration who’s engaged in a war of genocide.”

Another senior, James Madison international relations major Jeffrey Wilson, criticized the fact that McPherson chose Rice without first seeking the opinion of students, faculty, staff or the trustees. To him it seemed undemocratic that the MSU president, who was “buddy-buddy” with influential Republican politicians, could simply make a call, and then “Rice comes here.”

‘A dedicated and articulate public servant’

When asked why student opinions weren’t solicited in the selection process, Terry Denbow, the vice president of university relations, said the decision is never based “on a poll.” He said students often submit the names of entertainers, whose fees are too high and who don’t match MSU’s ideal of acquiring a reputable speaker. Denbow said that he knows from his conversations with students that they enjoy hearing figures who are prominent on national and world stages.

Tim Phelps, first vice chairman of the MSU College Republicans, told The State News, the student newspaper, last week that he doesn’t understand why there would be any controversy about Rice’s appearance. “Politics aside, she’s going to have a lot of important things to say,” he said. “I’m proud that she’s coming here.”

But some scathing criticism expressed by faculty opposed to the decision shows just how controversial McPherson’s choice of a commencement speaker is.

When asked about his opinion, History Department chairman Lewis Siegelbaum said he was appalled. The history professor said it was all right to have a controversial speaker, but inviting Rice only two years after Vice President Richard Cheney created the appearance that MSU endorsed the government’s “misguided” war policy. Siegelbaum said he perceived Rice as

being liable to be prosecuted as a war criminal, after taking part in the initiation of a war that was in violation of international laws.

“Inviting the primary architect of the war to speak on campus is the worst symbol of what this MSU administration is all about,” said Ben Burgis, a candidate for the open Board of Trustees seat this November.

In his recent book, “Against All Enemies,” Richard Clarke, President Bush’s former counterterrorism chief, wrote that Rice went out of her way to create the false impression that Saddam and Iraq were somehow involved in the Sept. 11 attacks and that he was an imminent threat to the United States, despite clear evidence the attacks were the work of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

Philosophy Professor Richard Peterson said it disturbs him that Rice, a former Stanford University provost and professor of political science, is involved in the policies of an administration that “consistently fails to be truthful with the American people.” Added Peterson: “She comes to us as a representative of an administration that has created a disastrous policy, and then refuses to be honest or self-critical in its statements to the American people and world community. In this respect she provides the university with a bad example of an intellectual who has involved herself in public affairs.”

In a recent news release McPherson described Rice as a “dedicated and articulate public servant” with a “distinguished academic career that included service as provost at Stanford University.”

Denbow said McPherson contacted Rice at around the time of his return from Iraq, but that his choice had nothing itself to do with the war.

When asked whether he was concerned that MSU might be violating its political neutrality, Denbow argued they were inviting Rice because of her public role, and not for her to express a partisan point of view. “I would be very upset if someone thinks we’re trying to send a political message,” Denbow said. To show that the administration tries to achieve balance and diversity in its choice of speakers over time, he made reference to the former commencement speeches of Bill Clinton, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, and Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, as representing the other side of the political spectrum.

But a James Madison international relations professor, Michael Rubner, said he believes the university is making a big mistake by inviting a politician so closely identified with an incumbent administration, in the midst of an election year. He said the selection of Clinton as commencement speaker in 1995 was different. “1995 was not an election year. Had it been a little bit closer to election, I would have made the same point.”

'It compromises the integrity of a university'

Siegelbaum thinks there is more at stake by inviting Rice than the question of the university's political neutrality. The history Department chairman said by choosing the Bush administration's "No. 1 cheerleader," the MSU administration was needlessly antagonizing a large segment of the university community, which already felt alienated by virtue of McPherson's "gambit."

Siegelbaum said he was concerned that Michigan State might revive its Vietnam era reputation of compromising its academic integrity by linking the university to a war that's divided the campus community and the country, rather than remaining neutral.

Between 1955 and 1962, MSU provided academic cover to CIA agents in southern Vietnam, who were operating under a \$25 million contract with the federal government to bolster the dictatorial regime of president Diem. On May 15, 1957, in East Lansing, the South Vietnam president addressed some 4,000 MSU faculty and students, during a campus-wide "Ngo Dinh Diem Day."

The involvement of MSU and other universities in the Vietnam War effort led to scholarly debates on the role of institutions of higher education in wartime politics. As MSU project coordinator Stanley K. Sheinbaum wrote in a 1966 Ramparts magazine article: "I am appalled at how supposed intellectuals could have been so uncritical about what they were doing. This is the tragedy of Michigan State professors: we were all automatic cold warriors."

Siegelbaum sees a clear parallel between the university leadership's role in Vietnam and in Iraq. "What's similar is the sort of misguided sense of service that these efforts seem to be couched in, without any critical examination of what the service is used for, or how it compromises the integrity of a university."

MSU's involvement in Vietnam earned the university a national reputation. Recently, Morehead State University Professor John Ernst wrote about it in his 1998 book, "Forging a Fateful Alliance, Michigan State University and the Vietnam War." Until I spoke with Ernst during a telephone interview, he hadn't heard about McPherson's appointment as President Bush's financial envoy. "It surprises me, considering MSU's past. You would think they would consider this a little bit more carefully," he said.

The history professor from Kentucky said one of the lessons to be learned by researching MSU's involvement, was that "nation-building," a notion used by Rice and other senior White House officials to justify their Iraq invasion, was "dicey stuff."

Nation-building didn't work then, and it probably won't work now, said

Ernst. And the mistakes being made were essentially the same. Just as before, the U.S. government sent scholars, bureaucrats and armed forces into a foreign country, without knowing much about the landscape, or the people. “Michigan State, in particular, was trying to impose a model that was not going to fit a country that was experiencing a counter-revolution and insurgency.”

Ernst was quite cynical about the prospects of policy-makers currently involved in Iraq to learn from past experiences: “I wonder if our policy-makers actually read history.”

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