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## Rice Determined Not to Strike in NJ



By Marty Kaplan

Forget whether former *New York Times* executive editor Jill Abramson was paid more or less than her predecessor, Bill Keller. I want to know why Condoleezza Rice was paid more than Condoleezza Rice.

Rutgers University offered \$35,000 to George W. Bush's national security advisor and secretary of state to speak at its commencement exercises on Sunday. But just a few weeks ago, Rice got \$150,000 for giving a speech at the University of Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

As it turned out, pushback from some Rutgers faculty and students caused Rice to bow out, saying she didn't want to be a "distraction." Still, she accepted their lowball offer in the first place. Why the deep discount? Was she planning to be 80 percent more platitudinous in New Jersey than in Minnesota? Or maybe it was a *pro rata* deal, and she going to speak for 14 minutes in New Brunswick instead of the hour she talked in Minneapolis.

It couldn't be that she was embarrassed to have had such a good payday at the Humphrey School. Her 150 bills is apparently what the graduation market will bear. As Inside Higher Ed has recounted, Katie Couric got \$110K to give the University of Oklahoma commencement speech, and that was back in 2006. Three years ago, Rudy Giuliani's fee was \$100,000 plus the cost of a private jet to get him to the podium. (No word on whether Giuliani's contract, like Van Halen's standard one, contains an only-brown-M&Ms rider.) Of course, the commencement circuit is just one part of the speaker industry. Robert Gibbs and Karl Rove do a Punch-and-Judy show that nets them \$100K per appearance; as Ana Marie Cox points out, at one of them Rove recently theorized — to Gibson's thundering silence — that Hillary Clinton suffered traumatic brain damage.

Rice's Minnesota tab was picked up by the Carlson Foundation, so no tuition dollars were harmed in putting on the event, though money is money, and arguably the dough that went to her might instead have gone to student scholarships, faculty salaries or a century's supply of Cremora for the U of M's lounges. But her Rutgers fee — which her replacement, former New Jersey governor Tom Kean, has waived — would have come from a public university's revenue, not from a benefactor, which means that anyone who paid for a parking pass or a student fee this year might have been able to claim some pride of ownership if she'd shown up.

But the controversy over Rice's Rutgers gig hasn't so much been about money. Instead, it's turned on free speech (intolerant liberals won't let conservatives speak truth to them), academic integrity (bubble-dwelling lefties should welcome an intellectual challenge) and pre-emptive nostalgia (don't spoil my family's graduation memories with politics). A respectable case against inviting her in the first place is that honoring Rice, as Siva Vaidhyanathan [put it](#),

*"is unacceptable because she dishonored herself and her country. She looked in our eyes and lied to us. Repeatedly. So 4,400 American service people and 174,000 Iraqis died in an illegal and unjustified war. She also ignored clear warnings that Al Qaeda was planning to attack the United States. So 3,000 civilians died. Congratulations to Rutgers students for refusing to forget. Shame on those who think she is just conservative or just a Republican. She's a disgrace."*

A sore point for some of Barack Obama's 2008 supporters was his articulation of the Don't Look Back doctrine. When it comes to national security, he told George Stephanopoulos a few days before his inauguration, "what we have to focus on is getting things

right in the future as opposed to looking at what we got wrong in the past.” Turn the page. Which meant no accountability for W, nor for Vice President Cheney, nor for Karl Rove, nor for Donald Rumsfeld, nor for Condoleezza Rice.

When she testified before the 9/11 commission, co-chaired by her Rutgers understudy Tom Kean, former Watergate prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste asked her about the Aug. 6, 2001 PDB — the president’s daily briefing — headlined, “Bin Laden Determined To Strike in US.” Why didn’t she act on this threat? Oh, no, “This was not a ‘threat report,’” she replied. The PDB “did not *warn* of any coming attack inside the United States.” It’s just “historical information,” she said. You know: “Bin Laden Determined” doesn’t mean “Bin Laden *Is* Determined”; it means “Bin Laden *Was* Determined.” That’s the best she could do. That’s all she’s ever been asked to do. Why should that get in the way of a fine American university’s laundering an insult like that to the nation’s intelligence and its dead?

I may be guilty of idealizing the meaning of being a commencement speaker. Comedians and performers have long been imported to add star power to cap-and-gown day. Sometimes the choice is intended more to legitimize the institution — Wow, if someone this famous has come to *our* campus, *we* must be a big deal — than to put a stamp of approval on the speaker’s record and values. And sometimes a university gets more than it bargained for. When Wake Forest University invited Jill Abramson to speak at today’s graduation, they didn’t know they’d tacitly be taking sides in her punching match with *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. But I bet Rutgers’ powers-that-be knew what they were doing when they invited Rice to commencement. The only thing they didn’t know was how big a bargain they turned out not to get.

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*This is a cross-post of my column in the Jewish Journal. You can reach me there at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com)*

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