

Condoleezza Rice at Boston College? I quit

By Steve Almond | May 12, 2006

An open letter to William P. Leahy, SJ, president of Boston College.

DEAR Father Leahy,

I am writing to resign my post as an adjunct professor of English at Boston College.

I am doing so -- after five years at BC, and with tremendous regret -- as a direct result of your decision to invite Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to be the commencement speaker at this year's graduation.

Many members of the faculty and student body already have voiced their objection to the invitation, arguing that Rice's actions as secretary of state are inconsistent with the broader humanistic values of the university and the Catholic and Jesuit traditions from which those values derive.

But I am not writing this letter simply because of an objection to the war against Iraq. My concern is more fundamental. Simply put, Rice is a liar.

She has lied to the American people knowingly, repeatedly, often extravagantly over the past five years, in an effort to justify a pathologically misguided foreign policy.

The public record of her deceits is extensive. During the ramp-up to the Iraq war, she made 29 false or misleading public statements concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Qaeda, according to a congressional investigation by the House Committee on Government Reform.

To cite one example:

In an effort to build the case for war, then-National Security Adviser Rice repeatedly asserted that Iraq was pursuing a nuclear weapon, and specifically seeking uranium in Africa.

In July of 2003, after these claims were disproved, Rice said: "Now if there were doubts about the underlying intelligence . . . those doubts were not communicated to the president, the vice president, or to me."

Rice's own deputy, Stephen Hadley, later admitted that the CIA had sent her a memo eight months earlier warning against the use of this claim.

In the three years since the war began, Rice has continued to misrepresent or simply ignore the truth about our deadly adventure in Iraq.

Like the president whom she serves so faithfully, she refuses to recognize her errors or the tragic consequences of those errors to the young soldiers and civilians dying in Iraq. She is a diplomat whose central allegiance is not to the democratic cause of this nation, but absolute power.

This is the woman to whom you will be bestowing an honorary degree, along with the privilege of addressing the graduating class of 2006.

It is this last notion I find most reprehensible: that Boston College would entrust to Rice the role of moral exemplar.

To be clear: I am not questioning her intellectual gifts or academic accomplishments. Nor her potentially inspiring role as a powerful woman of color.

But these are not the factors by which a commencement speaker should be judged. It is the content of one's character that matters here -- the reverence for truth and knowledge that Boston College purports to champion.

Rice does not personify these values; she repudiates them. Whatever inspiring rhetoric she might present to the graduating class, her actions as a citizen and politician tell a different story.

Honestly, Father Leahy, what lessons do you expect her to impart to impressionable seniors?

That hard work in the corporate sector might gain them a spot on the board of Chevron? That they, too, might someday have an oil tanker named after them? That it is acceptable to lie to the American people for political gain?

Given the widespread objection to inviting Rice, I would like to think you will rescind the offer. But that is clearly not going to happen.

Like the administration in Washington, you appear too proud to admit to your mistake. Instead, you will mouth a bunch of platitudes, all of which boil down to: You don't want to lose face.

In this sense, you leave me no choice.

I cannot, in good conscience, exhort my students to pursue truth and knowledge, then collect a paycheck from an institution that displays such flagrant disregard for both.

I would like to apologize to my students and prospective students. I would also urge them to investigate the words and actions of Rice, and to exercise their own First Amendment rights at her speech.

Steve Almond is the author of the story collections "The Evil B. B. Chow" and "My Life in Heavy Metal." ■