

On Saturday May 16, 2009, the Fire John Yoo protest at the UC Berkeley Law School Commencement furthered a visible resistance against torture in the Bay Area. With super-pickets (large backpack-like signs) displaying the messages “Silence + Torture equals Complicity,” “Fire and Dis-Bar John Yoo,” and “John Yoo is A War Criminal,” Bay Area members of World Can’t Wait along with community members, lawyers, activists, and students engaged the Berkeley Law Class of 2009 graduates and their family and friends to wear an orange ribbon and resist the continuance of torture in our names. World Can’t Wait also originated the following string of messages on signs and placed them so they could be read one after the other, emphasizing a torture apparatus and the presence in the Bay Area of five war criminals and what actions they took to make torture state policy:

Crimes Against Humanity

Haynes Requested It

Yoo Wrote It

Judge Bybee Upholds It

Rice Authorized It

Pelosi Protects It

Bring Them To Justice.

As graduates and their guests proceeded to the entrance of the graduation ceremony, they passed World Can't Wait activists dressed in orange jumpsuits, silently posed, representing those who have been tortured around the world by the U.S. government. Between one-third to one-half of the graduates, faculty, and their guests took ribbons, and perhaps 20% wore them and supported the World Can't Wait call for the release of the torture photos and the prosecution of the war criminals. A few graduates ran back to ask for a handful more to give to others.

In a clear ploy to prevent the graduation procession from encountering the protest at the main entrance – where the procession traditionally enters the Greek Theater – without public announcement, law school officials routed them in the back way instead. Alerted, the large group of protesters, jumpsuit groups and all, sprinted to the other entrance and re-set up, just in time to still greet the hundreds of graduates as they arrived.

I myself am a law student, and while we were going up and down the line of graduates waiting to be led into the Greek Theater for the ceremony, I sought to further draw out students' thinking. Some students said they completely supported and agreed with World Can't Wait's advocacy against torture -- yet they did not want to wear an orange ribbon. I asked them: What would it take for you to wear an orange ribbon opposing torture right here, right now? How many more people have to be tortured for you to find taking this action as necessary? How many more crimes have to be committed by the legal profession for which you will soon be a part? At that point, more of the graduates did take the orange ribbon to visibly stand against torture.

The well-known image of an Abu Ghraib detainee robed in black was evoked as a professor from another California university dressed in a black shroud with the bright yellow "Cal" logo clearly visible across his chest, and stood by the sign guiding people into the reception. As the law school's Dean Christopher Edley walked out of the stadium, he passed a waterboarding reenactment -- with the activist playing the torturer pouring the water wearing a John Yoo mask.

As Dean Edley passed, the "victim" lying on the waterboard called out to him: "Dean Edley! Dean Edley! Make them stop!"

[NOTE: Edley has very publicly defended and protected "Torture Professor" Yoo's presence on the law school faculty as a matter of "academic freedom."]

During the graduation ceremony, 60 people called together by World Can't Wait gathered in front of the Greek Theatre, where people talked about why they were there. We discussed the latest revelations emphasizing the widespread use of torture under the Bush Regime continuing under the Obama Administration, and the need for our presence on the streets showing visible resistance.

The torture protesters then moved a mile away for the graduates' reception, where they asked the graduates and their guests whether torture will be accepted by the people in the U.S. How will the graduates oppose torture in a legal profession that authorized it? More ribbons and flyers were accepted, and here more conversations were possible.

The police attempted to bar the World Can't Wait protesters from the reception grounds, but when people demanded to stand on our rights to public speech in a public space, the police retreated and the protest unfolded all over the entry pathways and parking lot.

The protest visibly raised the demand "Torture Is A War Crime! Prosecute!" and showed the importance of those who do understand this getting out on the streets and in many other realms of society struggling with others to not become complicit and that when this is done, there is a basis to win others to this.