

From [Revolution Newspaper](#) | Original Article

On May 2, Condoleezza Rice released a statement that she was bowing out of an invitation she had received to give the commencement speech at Rutgers University on May 18. This is a major victory for students at Rutgers University who had been organizing escalating protests to demand that the university rescind her invitation. Fifty students staged a sit-in outside the Rutgers University president's office, and 100 students had confronted him with sharp questions and chanted their opposition when he appeared publicly a few days later. News of the students' protests spread around the world. Condoleezza Rice was the Secretary of State under President George W. Bush and she is guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity for her role in the U.S.'s immoral, unjust, and illegitimate wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the systematic use of torture. Her decision not to attend the Rutgers graduation reveals just how much the rulers of this country fear the truth of their crimes coming to light and how much they fear the potential for even greater political resistance and opposition. The courageous actions of these students won a victory for the people all over the world and *Revolution* newspaper was happy to speak to one of the students involved in these protests. The following interview was conducted the evening before Condoleezza Rice made her announcement, so the student does not comment on this development.

~~~~~

**Revolution:** I am very happy to be talking to you. Monday was the first time I heard about what was brewing at Rutgers because you and about 50 other students took over the president's office for a day. Why don't you go ahead and tell us what you were a part of and why.

**Student:** OK, Monday we went into the administration building where President Robert Barchi's office is. We did this in protest of Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State, coming to be commencement speaker at this year's graduation. She was invited to come almost a year ago but it was only released that she was coming a month ago. This invitation was put out without any form of consensus or consultation or any of the above to any faculty members, student groups, any Rutgers community except for the president himself with the Board of Governors. And the reason why this is such a big issue is because no one was consulted and Rice is someone not just controversial but someone who should be convicted as a war criminal because of all the things that she has endorsed, signed papers to allow, and instigated.

**Revolution:** OK, I want to talk more about what you did, but I think it is important, calling somebody a war criminal is a very big statement and I wonder if you could just explain in a little bit more detail and depth as to what you're referring to for people who maybe don't remember or never knew what she was involved in.

**Student:** Yes, that is very important because a lot of people in the Rutgers community seem to be confused because it is not something that is necessarily out there. So during the Bush administration Rice promoted the war on Iraq, she promoted the war in Afghanistan; I am not sure if she directly signed papers or was just OK with this, but either way she actively promoted drone surveillance in Iran and different countries in the Middle East that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths. Also a lot of U.S. military deaths a lot of people here care about, although there have been a lot more civilians in these countries dead. There have been over 2.8 million people displaced in Iraq alone; people whose homes have been destroyed, families wrenched apart, daily attacks, people who simply can't lead their daily lives. It has created more negative consequences in these countries; Islamic fundamentalism has fired up since these attacks started. Rice has actively promoted torture in facilities like Guantanamo Bay. She actively signed a paper allowing waterboarding. She has done other things other Republicans do, like not accept or allow anything about gay rights. She has actively said that the civil rights movement wasn't necessarily as good as promoting education would have been, so she obviously doesn't look at people having access to opportunities even though she herself was living it. It is just an accumulation of things that if this were years ago at the Nuremburg Trials [1](#)

she would not have gotten off free and now she is coming and she is being honored. I forgot to mention that not only is she coming to be the commencement speaker, she is also being awarded \$35,000 and an honorary doctorate degree of law, and she is giving this speech that no one will be able to ask questions about and will not be open to debate; there will be no other speaker, she will be simply giving a speech.

**Revolution:** So based on that, the students at Rutgers decided they had to speak out against this, and faculty did as well. Why don't you tell us what came together on Monday, April 28, what went into that, why people took over the president's office, what it was like. Give us a sense of what went down and what has been happening since.

**Student:** I personally got involved very recently in what has been going on and have been active in the movement since then. Over 350 faculty members signed a petition to have Rice's invitation rescinded. Students have been sending letters to the president himself, there have been a lot of editorials, and students from all different student groups organized on Monday to have a rally and then stage a sit-in at the president's office. We were demanding initially to have a meeting with him because what we want is to have her invitation rescinded; we want to have this on the table; we want to have this talked about. So on Monday we gathered and headed

over to Old Queens, that is the name of the [administration] building, and we took it over. We were chanting, it was 12:30 pm when we got in, we were chanting for about half an hour when the vice-chancellor of student affairs, Felicia McGinty, she talked to us. She addressed the entire group, she said that she would answer any questions and she would address our concerns. So then we started back and forth with her. A lot of students raised concerns about the issue of the way this process took place and who Condoleezza Rice is and what she does. McGinty was very contradictory in some of her statements. She, for example, said that it was great that students were mobilizing but then she was saying that forming a riot and not letting people do their jobs wasn't going to get us anywhere. She offered to maybe try to set up a meeting with the president if, and only if, we left the building, not otherwise. She is supposed to be the vice chancellor of *student* affairs; she obviously did not care at all about student concerns because these have been concerns that have been vocalized for a while now but no one in the administration has actually done anything about it. It has only been faculty members and groups of alumni. There are groups of alumni that have been backing this cause but no one in the administration has actually done anything about it, and because students were tired of being ignored and this is an issue that is very meaningful to a lot of people that literally affects lives and conditions of people who live in other parts of the world, students decided to take a stand. Felicia McGinty was also very patronizing, she kept saying things like "we're all adults here," which by saying that put us in the position that we are not really acting like adults even though we technically are adults, we're in college. So that conversation ended [and] even though it was respectful on both sides, we weren't getting anywhere, she wasn't actually listening to us. So she went back to President Barchi's office, she went back down to the main lobby area and she was just sitting there, some students had to trickle out to go to class and exams and stuff like that. They wouldn't let food in, they weren't giving us access to bathrooms, they took away our megaphone that we had but we took up chants again and we were again chanting for a while, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Condi Rice has got to go," "What's the price of Condi Rice, one million dead," and a bunch of different chants. And we were constantly tweeting under the hashtag #NoRice. After a while, we took up chants and they died down off and on and we were just kind of there. We were especially looking forward to what was going to happen when the building closes at 5 pm, and that was the time that we thought there would be more contention with the police officers. At 5 pm nothing happened, but around 6 one of the police officers basically gave us the ultimatum that either we leave or we risked getting arrested or suspended from the university. At this point there were almost 50 students inside, there were about 15 of us left staging this sit-in but there were a lot of people rallying outside, you could hear them from inside and it felt really good to have that support from the outside, they had signs, they were chanting, because we had done so much Twitter outreach there was some media there that were recording the whole thing. And from the inside one of the faculty members here contacted an attorney that does a lot of advocacy for student groups and this kind of thing and for other students in general.

**Revolution:** So then what happened?

**Student:** We focused, so we all decided, we spoke with a lawyer, and those of us who were still inside we discussed would we stay and possibly get arrested. We decided we should all do it as a group together, and more people wanted to leave than wanted to stay so we all left. We all marched out of the building with our left fists in the air and outside we kept chanting for a little bit and started talking to some media outlets and decided when our next meeting was going to be. So that is what happened there. It was a great feeling to be inside. It was really hot inside the building... we got tired at a certain point but despite that people kept chanting, kept yelling, there was a lot of energy, really positive energy. We were really happy to be protesting. For me personally people could tell that I had protested before, a lot of people kind of approached me. I hadn't met a lot of these people before I was protesting [with them], but it created a huge bond between us, and a lot of people approached me and asked me and talked to me about how great it felt to be protesting, to all be chanting and have one voice and feel like you're not alone and seeing how unjust something is and how great it felt to be raising voices with everyone else and feel like something was actually moving forward, could actually happen, that we had to be heard and things could change.

**Revolution:** Just to build on what you're talking about, I know that during the student takeover you made a statement, I guess it was in response to people saying that you were disrupting class; you said yes, classes were being disrupted but the Iraq war caused the disruption of people's lives and I wondered if you could talk more about... to me it wasn't just a disruption, a physical disruption, although it was. It was also a disruption of the typical morality—head down, me first, do my studies, get to my job, do this, do that and not think about the world, and I wonder if you can kind of concentrate in that statement that there is a big ideological challenge to what is normal in America and I wonder if you can speak to that.

**Student:** It is a huge ideological challenge and one of the biggest issues that we are facing right now as a group. We've been having daily meetings with the group and it takes us a long time because we are trying to strategize on the long term not just on the short term and trying to build on this movement and how we want to approach things. And what keeps coming up in the meetings is that a lot of people don't fully understand this term "war criminal" and why we are calling Rice particularly this. There have been a lot of comments about us being racist and not wanting free speech, and that is not at all what is at stake right now. Right now we are trying to inform people of this. I think it is really great and I was almost surprised, unfortunately, that this could really happen. It is great and amazing to be a part of it. I was surprised that in a public university in New Jersey in the United States we could actually get enough students mad enough to actually take this form of action, and it is great that so many students are so passionate about this. Finals are right around the corner for us and a lot of people have papers due and even so the people in this group want to do as much as possible. We posted on Facebook, we emailed professors, we're talking to people on the streets, we're publishing fliers, we're going to start putting up stickers, we're putting up banners, we're doing demonstrations. We're trying to get the word out and we're trying to get people as passionate about this as they should be and as we are. One of the ways to do this is demonstrating to people that something

like this that is giving our stamp of approval, all our collective stamp of approval as students who go to this university, against someone who has committed atrocities in the world, who has allowed and promoted torture and who hasn't let people live, we are not going to let her be invited here uncontested, that this isn't OK. I do think that this is more important than class and to a certain extent more important than papers. A lot of people, including myself, have to keep our grades up to even stay here because college costs money and people need their scholarships and people need to be thinking about the future but this is happening here and this is happening now and it is a lot more important than these other things because it is going to shape what our future looks like. Right now, just because we are doing this so many people are questioning who she is and what she's done and what the administration did and what they have done and what kind of society we want to live in, and that is a great thing and it is so much more valuable than them trying to shut us down because class is happening. I am not sure if that fully answered your question.

**Revolution:** That extremely answered my question. That was a very good answer. I am very moved by it myself. I wanted to ask you, and you actually led right up to it, what you think it says not only about Rutgers but about the society we live in that somebody like Condoleezza Rice is not only walking free but is actually being honored or there is a proposal for her to be honored and giving speeches and honors around the country including at institutions that are supposed to be turning out the leaders of tomorrow, and what it says about the society that, not just what it says about her, but what it says about this country and society.

**Student:** This is my personal stance. I have met some very radical-minded people in the group but there are a lot of people who are outraged on the basis of what she has done in other societies. I think what it means is that we absolutely need to radically change society. To me that means a revolution, for other people it doesn't mean that. I don't see how you could fundamentally change this kind of thinking, this kind of stagnant, backwards thinking without changing society in a way that revolution would bring but that is not necessarily the idea of the whole group. What I will say, however... I am trying to think of how best to say this. It shows how, I can't think of any other way to say this, but how backwards and corrupt the system is. I am glad you asked this question because I wanted to raise another issue. What was going to happen today [May 2] was there was a meeting; it was going to be the first official event to kind of promote The Big Ten [2](#). Rutgers this year joined this coalition of universities into athletics that is very prestigious, that we have spent millions and millions of dollars upgrading and promoting and publicity to get in, and this morning was going to be the first big event for that. President Barchi was going to speak there and what we decided to do was stage a silent protest there and we decided it was going to be very public and it wasn't only going to be the 100 or so of the core group of organizers for all the movements going on, so we decided we were going to make this very public. So it was all over Facebook, at least 1.7 million people saw it, and last night at our meeting we all received an email from Felicia McGinty saying the event had been cancelled. What we did find out, however, at the same meeting was that today there was going to be a meeting of the senators of Rutgers and that President Barchi would be

present. So we decided to shift our focus from going to a meeting of the Big Ten to the senators meeting.

We decided we were going to go there, we were going to put tape over our mouths with the hashtag #NoRice, and that three or four of us wouldn't wear the tape on our mouths and that we were going to ask the president questions. If he didn't answer our questions, we were going to do a mic check, disrupt the meeting and then leave as a group. One of the things we found out about the Board of Governors is that the current Chair of the Board of Governors is way up there in the financial world and actually has direct ties with Condoleezza Rice. Not only does, not only do we find out that on the Board of Governors there's someone with direct ties with Condoleezza Rice who might actually have a direct stake in this, we also find out that Chris Christie [governor of New Jersey] is going to be the commencement speaker at Rowan University which is now affiliated with Rutgers. So there's kind of a whole series of things that are leading us to believe that this isn't just coincidence that she's coming, that there are higher political issues at stake here, and this has made us even more outraged. This morning when President Barchi actually did decide to answer our questions, which we were frankly surprised about because he has been very, very shy, he hasn't confronted us at all, he's basically pretended that nothing's been going on. This morning he told us that he couldn't rescind an invitation, he couldn't do anything, so as president of Rutgers University he couldn't rescind the invitation to the commencement speaker, he was telling us that it was exclusively an issue related with the Board of Governors and that he couldn't actually do anything about this. So all of this is just the entire culture of politics in this country and that right now is affecting us directly as the State University of New Jersey. It's frankly disgusting and we are not about to stand for it...

Another one of the questions we asked was about moral atrocities and crimes against humanity, and he chose not to answer this question. He directly chose not to answer this question, and he answered other related questions to war and torture with the exact same responses that Condoleezza still uses to this day. About how at that time people actually did believe there were weapons of mass destruction. He referenced the United Nations, he referenced the whole issue of 9/11, I mean he started talking about how his wife was in Manhattan that same day and how she hadn't been able to come home for a week. And as students we were absolutely outraged by this kind of response, we were absolutely outraged at how he dodged the fundamental issue that we were trying to grapple with him here. He dodged it and was basically OK with Rice having done all of these things.

**Revolution:** Let me ask you one further question, and I understand that you are speaking for yourself here and not for the whole group that was involved, but you say you think it's going to take a revolution and I wonder in your opinion, thinking about what you've been through, the kinds of changes that have happened even for you, maybe you can describe some of the

changes that people have been through when they take part in something like this. The kinds of questions that poses and the ideas that brings up to people, how do you see what you guys have been a part of? I know it's not the same as a revolution, but how do you see that in terms of building a movement for revolution. I guess I would ask you this: Do you see any relationship between the kinds of things that students are doing there and that you're a part of and the kinds of things that need to happen to really change society in a more fundamental way through revolution?

**Student:** Right. I absolutely see a relation. People, I mean all over the world to a certain extent, but I feel like especially people in this country, and especially in suburban areas, people are raised to believe their entire life that a revolution isn't possible, that it's not going to actually change things. People have it ingrained in their minds that the only form of any type of change is through politics, through that kind of advocacy. People don't think that protesting in the streets, that this kind of thing is valuable in any way because people are told that's not the way things work, that it's too radical, it's too violent, that it's just bad. A lot of people quite frankly don't even question this, and then people participate in something like this and people realize how energizing it is, how good it feels because, I mean, people are repressed from these feelings their entire lives. Like people have to simply lay back and expect that they're going to have to wait 'til the next election to maybe change things and then live between election and election frustrated because they see that what they want to see changed isn't actually changing. Be on a larger scale, be on a smaller scale, people get frustrated with this kind of thing. But yet revolution never crossed their minds because that's just "bad," like it's not even reason, that's just "bad." And then to kind of link it back to this, when people find out that there's going to be some sort of protest that they agree with, that they want to be a part of and they go... it's just, I mean I can only assume, that's eye-opening in the sense that suddenly you feel very powerful and you feel that you can actually move forward.

I was talking with a couple of friends of mine just yesterday and I asked them, I was like, wait, have you ever been to a protest? Because they were, the way they were saying things was very much taking the stance of this was too much and this wasn't, and there was no way that we were actually going to rescind the invitation and that we should be trying to just like meet more peacefully with the president of the Board of Governors, with whoever we could basically. So I had to ask them have you ever been to a protest, and they were like "no." And that moment just, I mean, for me it was kind of, my initial reaction was shock and that I realized that if I had fully thought about it I wouldn't have been shocked because the entire culture in this country is built around people not actually standing up for themselves and not actually learning about how to really change things, to actually question the administration that runs this country or that runs whatever it is that is affecting their lives. People are taught that. And I think that it's this kind of action that when people participate it's one of the main things that actually get people to question what else is going on in the world and what else can and should be changed. I think that it's mind-opening in a sense that probably a lot of the people who are participating in this now or who participate in protests similar to this in the future or in different parts of the country

or what-have-you will have a different take on other forms of protest and will know what it feels like and will understand more what kind of support is needed. Because it's also true that people didn't get emotional but were borderline emotional when we were quiet inside the building and we could hear the people rallying outside. So I think that this also gives a sense of solidarity for other forms of rallies and for understanding that, yes, your voice and your action counts and I think that that is valuable towards changing society, even if it's not enough, if it's just one isolated action like this one.

**Revolution:** Well, I wanted to also ask you what has been, and you sort of again touched on it in your last answer, but I wanted to ask you more fully, what's been the reaction in the last few days as you've gone out more broadly on campus? What's been the reaction among students and faculty, as well as off-campus, but especially I want to start with on-campus.

**Student:** A lot of faculty have been very supportive. Faculty who have found out, my professors and other people in the group's professors, have let us make announcements in class, let us use our email website to send out emails. When we talk to people there's a lot who are supportive, but honestly there's a lot of people who just don't understand. Another huge issue is that a lot of people have never been told that she's a war criminal. People haven't fully thought about what the war has meant and people don't even know that things like torture and drones have gone on at all. So a lot of people are very surprised when we first tell them. I'm just hoping that we can get this word out to enough people with enough time that people get fully engaged and riled up. Or get informed and spread our message or just get more informed themselves, and get more informed as to what kind of society they're living in.

**Revolution:** Do you feel like there's any difference in how much people are interested or curious?

**Student:** I think yes, definitely.

**Revolution:** Before or after Monday?

**Student:** I mean, Monday got huge coverage in the media and the people now have heard. At least even if people haven't been doing the research that we wish they had been doing or have done, right now people at the very least know that there was a sit-in at President Barchi's office,

that there is a movement going on, so at the very least people do know that this is an issue. And now with our further actions what we're trying to do is get the people that know about what we did on Monday to actually get involved and actually protest if they agree with us, or if they don't, at least engage with us in discussion about why they don't agree with us, and keep spreading the word to get more people informed and involved and more people angry at what's happening and more people wanting to take a stance. Right now we're also trying to get a lot of people to come out to the teach-in that's happening May 6th, next Tuesday. We're really pushing for absolutely everyone to come out and we hope to get as many people as possible out there.

**Revolution:** Let me ask you this, are people fighting still to get her invitation rescinded? Is that something you're still fighting for?

**Student:** That's a good question. We also found out that Brandeis University recently rescinded their invitation to their commencement speaker, I forget who it was, I forget if it was this year but it was in the last couple of years, Brandeis University was able to rescind the invitation to their commencement speaker very shortly before the commencement ceremony actually was. So we are still fighting to get her invitation rescinded, or at the very least not honor her with the \$35,000 and an honorary doctorate's degree. Right now what we want to negotiate, we are still fighting for her not to come and we still absolutely want her not to come, we do not want her here, we do not want her endorsed by this university, we don't want the graduating seniors who have put effort and lots and lots of money into getting their degree, we do not want to have her present for their final ceremony at this university. However, if the Board of Governors, President Barchi, whoever can actually change this, were to sit down and fully negotiate with us, and would tell us that, and were to tell us that they're not willing to rescind their invitation, even though we know that it's possible—it's happened before, we'd be willing for an *additional* speaker to come. So if she were to come and have her 15 minutes speech, we would be willing for her to have that and have someone who has countered that war, who comes from a different, probably more liberal perspective, have another equally long speech at the same ceremony. I mean, that's what we're staging right now. So like now we're still pushing for her not to come, but are kind of like that's a leverage point.

**Revolution:** OK, I know you guys have more things planned and I want to make sure that we keep in touch and share that with our readers as things develop. But for now my last question. Are there any things that you're calling on people, any ways that people around the country or around the world could support, could relate to this, could lend their voices to really give backing and strength to what you guys are doing to keep a war criminal from being honored at your campus?

**Student:** Well, what we really want right now is to get as much information about her out there. So I think this taps into something much deeper than simply getting people informed. This is, the fact that she is being honored, goes much deeper than her simply speaking at commencement and simply what she has done. It goes into an entire basis for what this society stands for right now, and the reason for why we would like as many people retweeting, as many people watching the videos, as many people getting informed, as many people in tune with exactly what is going on—the reason why we want this happening is for people to start to question what she did. So not just the fact that she's coming to Rutgers as an individual, but what she did with the power that she had and what the people around her did with the power that they had when they had power, and the people who have inherited that power today. I think that is extremely important, that we're causing this much discussion, or this much debate, because that way people are looking at why we're so outraged and wondering why. And the why goes so much deeper and I think that if we're able to actually get our message out there all over different, all over this university, all over other universities, all over the country, it'll really show that people don't agree with where she stands, what she did, what went on and what still goes on currently. And I think that this raises awareness with a lot of other issues as well. It's extremely important people continue to get informed, taking a look at the hashtag #NoRice where we're continuing to post updates, to post videos and post photos of what's been happening. Just read and get informed as to what she's done, as to what's going on in the world. I think that what's almost most important here is to actually get people aware, and get people reading and get people questioning and get people talking with each other, get people arguing. Create a culture where people are actually grappling with these issues instead, as you mentioned before, just bowing their heads down and keep going with their daily lives. People are taught since the time when they're little that their goal in life is to try to go through college, get their college degree, come out, get a steady job and form a family and that's that. And there's a lot more at stake here and people need to realize that and people need to act upon that.

**Revolution:** Well, thank you for taking the time. I know you guys are in the midst of many meetings and planning and finals, so thanks for taking the time to do all this and to talk with us about it.

**Student:** Alright, well, thank you for writing about us, for talking about our causes. It's valuable to reach out as much as you possibly can.