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The smarter way to protest college speakers

By **Sally Kohn**, CNN Political Commentator

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Sally Kohn: Students protesting views of commencement speakers are well-intentioned
- Condoleezza Rice, Christine Lagarde canceled their appearances after outcry
- Kohn: Don't stop speakers from coming to campus, but protest if you object to their views
- She says students can silently show their disapproval, but don't be rude

Editor's note: *Sally Kohn is a CNN political commentator, progressive activist and columnist. Follow her on Twitter [@sallykohn](#). The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.*

(CNN) -- Kudos to the rabble rousers in the Class of 2014 making waves across the country protesting the political views of commencement speakers. Your intentions are entirely in the right place, but you're going about it all wrong.

It's understandable to want to protest the views and actions of [Condoleezza Rice](#), a leading war monger in the Bush administration who backed policies that led to so many needless American and Iraqi deaths.

There's a valid critique of how the International Monetary Fund and its leader, Christine Lagarde, actually [harm poor nations](#) with the economic conditions IMF loans impose.

And the University of California at Berkeley was arguably extremely violent in its [handling](#) of Occupy protesters under the leadership of Chancellor Robert Birgeneau.

All three leaders have [canceled](#) planned commencement addresses after protests by students at Rutgers University, Smith College and Haverford College respectively.



Sally Kohn

Which doesn't accomplish very much, I'm afraid. The [media story](#) -- and thus the public discussion generally -- is now about [free speech](#) and the marketplace of ideas and whether today's college students are so intolerant of different viewpoints that they try and banish them altogether.

We're discussing whether the Class of 2014 is too entitled when we should be talking about the failures of foreign policy in the Bush administration and appropriate police powers in a post-9/11 security state.

Is the Class of 2014 too entitled? Not necessarily. But you might not be good organizers.



Rice: Putin won't 'take on' the U.S.



Free speech lost at commencements



Protests cancel commencement speeches

So to those of you who haven't raised objections to commencement speakers yet, or who are getting a jump on 2015, here's some advice: Let them come.

The most objectionable speaker you can imagine with a public policy reputation you find utterly detestable? Roll out the red mortar board and gown. Allow them to come. Nay, lure them. And then protest.

Then the story will be about your message, not just your miff. And in the age of social media, that message will spread. Everyone's already futzing with their smartphones under their gowns anyway.

How can you stage an effective protest at your graduation? Here are a few ideas.

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Spell out a message: Use masking tape to put a letter on each mortar cap, be sure to sit in the right order with your compatriots and at the right moment, send your message without saying a single word.

Alternatively, you can achieve a similar effect by writing each letter on a manila file folder, folding each up and hiding it under your gown until the right moment. A great thing about this tactic is it forces you to get your critique down to its essence, which makes your message clear and easily shared by others.

In a variation on this, students at Columbia University are planning a graduation [protest](#) placing pieces of red tape on their mortar boards to voice displeasure with the university failing to take certain steps to prevent sexual assault on campus.

Stand up and turn around: Sometimes the most powerful speech comes in the form of silence. At the start of the commencement address, stand up and turn around. Ideally make sure you're not the only one -- that there are 20 or 200 people scattered throughout the graduating class who will start popping up one by one and stand silently, back to the speaker, in quiet but powerful protest. Especially if a large number of students oppose the speaker, this is a great way to put that on display.

On the other hand, this doesn't work well with a small handful of protesters. Students at the University of Michigan organized [such a protest](#) in 2011 when Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder was their commencement speaker. Snyder had proposed more than \$200 million in higher education budget cuts. Unfortunately, though, out of 5,500 graduates, only a few dozen stood in protest.

Organize a picket: Sure it's old-fashioned, but it works: A few dozen students and allies with picket signs voicing their disapproval with the chosen commencement speaker. It helps if you have fliers to hand out to the audience attending the commencement, so you can at least inform them of why you're protesting even if they're not going to join you.

In 2012, when George Washington University (my alma mater) gave an honorary degree to Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, a group of students protested Slim's business practices, which they argue have trampled on poor people and developing nations. The protest was small, but large enough to [get covered](#) by The Washington Post.

Get creative: I'm not going to encourage anything illegal or even questionably immoral, but I will say that from [streaking](#) to well-timed [releases of doves](#), there are plenty of ways to get attention for your protest. You're college students. You're a creative, think-outside-the-box bunch. Get some balloons and duct tape and tarantulas and do something inventive and attention getting.

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Effective protests aren't about anger. They're about spectacle. Make a spectacle.

Bonus: Even the well-known folks often give boring commencement speeches, so if you can make your protest entertaining, your fellow students will be even more grateful.

Booing and heckling are so 2004: And they're rude. I don't mean to sound condescending or anything, but one of the things you learn as you grow up in your political activist life is that cathartic isn't a synonym for strategic.

In fact, they're often diametrically opposed. You might feel damn proud of yourself as you're being hauled off by campus security after screaming at some neoconservative commencement speaker but at least a third of the audience thinks you're an obnoxious jerk. And a third don't know why you were protesting and/or forgot that you even protested a second after it happened.

The third who support you? They'll support you no matter what, so try a different tactic and see if you can broaden your support and engage and inform a wider swath of the audience. Activism isn't about self-expression. It's about changing hearts and minds and engaging more and more people in the fight for change. But you can't change those hearts and minds and get more people engaged if you aren't even heard in the first place.

Invite those different opinions onto your campus, instead of dismissing them. We need to engage more with ideas we disagree with, that's what sharpens our own views and ideas. And if you do disagree, if you want to protest and do so visibly, make it count.

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