

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 9, 2024

VADM Yvette M. Davids  
Superintendent  
United States Naval Academy  
121 Blake Road  
Annapolis, MD 21402

Dear VADM Davids,

We write to you regarding our concern over the United States Naval Academy's (USNA) previous decision to select Dr. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a partisan historian at New York University, as the speaker of its Bancroft Lecture this academic year. While we are pleased to hear that the USNA cancelled her appearance and postponed the lecture series, we still have questions as to why a partisan individual like Dr. Ben-Ghiat was selected in the first place.

Prior to the cancellation of her appearance, Dr. Ben-Ghiat stated that she was planning to "speak about what happens to militaries under authoritarian rule." While on the surface this lecture would seem to be academically significant for our naval midshipmen, Dr. Ben-Ghiat's own statements provided clear concern that she would have used this highly-respected platform to make unsubstantiated politicized claims against one of the presidential nominees just 25 days before the 2024 election.

In the same social media post where Dr. Ben-Ghiat announced her upcoming lecture at the USNA, she repeatedly painted former President Donald Trump as an authoritarian. In one such example, Ben-Ghiat falsely claimed that what motivates the former President is his "authoritarian character, desire to destroy democratic values and ideals, and loyalty to autocrats" such as Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Ben-Ghiat is entitled to her opinions about former President Trump and our great nation's Constitution ensures she has the right to voice them. However, the United States Naval Academy - a federal service academy - is not the appropriate venue for speakers like this as Department of Defense Directive No. 1344.10 bans active members of the military, including administrators and teachers at the academy, from engaging in "partisan political activities."<sup>23</sup>

Our military service academies, as publicly funded and government-operated institutions, are intended to train future military leaders to serve the United States with honor and distinction, regardless of who holds the position of Commander in Chief. The partisan politics that Dr. Ben-Ghiat espouses has absolutely no place in our military, and we applaud your decision to cancel her appearance.

While we support your decision, we have the following questions regarding the initial decision to select Dr. Ben-Ghiat as a speaker:

1. What was the process for vetting speakers for this academic year's Bancroft Lecture?
2. Were there alternative speakers considered for this event who could provide a less partisan perspective on this topic?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lucid.substack.com/p/the-real-reason-donald-trump-insults>

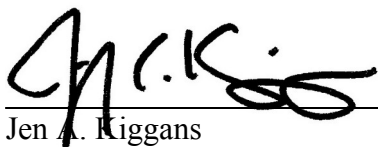
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/134410p.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailysignal.com/2024/10/02/naval-academy-is-engaging-election-interference/>

3. What steps will the USNA take to ensure that future speakers at the Bancroft Lecture series reflect the Academy's commitment to impartiality and intellectual rigor, particularly on politically sensitive topics?
4. How does the USNA define "academic freedom" within the context of its obligations to remain politically neutral, and how is that standard applied when selecting speakers for official events?

Thank you for your attention to this issue and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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Jen A. Kiggans  
Member of Congress



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Nick LaLota  
Member of Congress



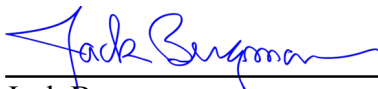
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Guy Reschenthaler  
Member of Congress



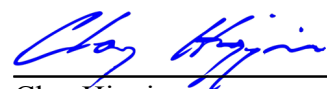
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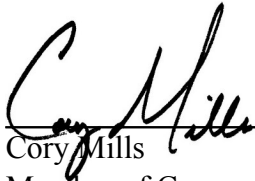
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