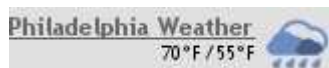


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## Experts say critics ignore the obvious: free speech

### Halloween inspires controversial outfits, some think, and debate needs to lighten up

**Tali Yahalom**

Engineering senior Saad Saadi may have offended a lot of people with his suicide-bomber costume last week-but that's his prerogative, free speech experts say.

Saadi, a Daily Pennsylvanian photographer, wore the costume to Penn President Amy Gutmann's annual Halloween party last Tuesday.

By strapping fake dynamite to his body, pointing guns at students' heads and pretending to recite Muslim prayers, Saadi provoked various student leaders and administrators to issue formal statements criticizing his costume choice. Letters of condemnation have poured into Gutmann's office, many of which say she shouldn't have allowed Saadi into her party at all.

But free speech experts across the country are speaking up in his defense. Saadi, they say, is entitled to dress up as whatever he wants - regardless of political implications and others' sensitivities. The debate over his right to wear it is moot, they say.

"There's no question that someone has the right to wear that kind of costume," said Penn History professor Ben Nathans, who teaches a course called "Human Rights and History."

"Possible offense to people ? should [not] result in a prohibition on such a costume," Nathans added.

And for pundits who debate freedom of expression, to focus on the costume's evocative - and, to some, offensive - quality is to miss the point of Halloween fun entirely.

"On Halloween what we do is put on the identities that ? frighten us," said Communication professor Carolyn Marvin, who chairs the University Committee on Open Expression, which monitors on-campus conflicts.

"Little kids are frightened by witches and ghosts, and adults are frightened by, among other things, suicide bombers," she said.

Gutmann - who posed with Saadi at her party and has said that she did not realize he was dressed as a suicide bomber at the time - issued a two-pronged statement in which she called Saadi's costume "offensive" while still recognizing his "right to wear" it.

Since then, some have criticized Gutmann's decision to broach the free speech topic at all.

The Scholars for Peace in the Middle East released a statement saying that they "regret" Gutmann's decision to focus "on the question of free speech that appears to justify the student's choice."

Instead, they called for a clearer denunciation of Saadi's costume.

The group - made up of administrators and academics from universities around the world - is a resource center that informs academics about Middle Eastern affairs.

Though Gutmann issued a more detailed public statement on Sunday, she would not make any further comments on the issue.

"There's really nothing else to say," a spokesperson for Gutmann said yesterday.

The spokesperson would not say whether the costume controversy will affect next year's Halloween party.

Still, some say that these negative responses are one big overreaction.

For example, bloggers at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education - a group that advocates for free speech on college campuses - have weighed in on the topic, encouraging those involved to take a step back and calm down.

FIRE's blog, The Torch, said that "people need to recognize that Halloween is a good time for satire, and that sometimes a costume is just a costume."

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### Karl

posted 11/08/06 @ 7:29 AM EST

Step back and calm down? Not THESE rabidly irrational alumni. Penn won't see another cent of their filthy money until they sacrifice this student to the bloodthirsty bush-mongers. ([Continued...](#))

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## **feudi pandola**

**posted 11/08/06 @ 8:52 AM EST**

Dr. Gutmann handled this mess as best as can be expected given that she was sort of bushwhacked at the Halloween Party into posing with this student.

I looked at Saad Saadi's website and this young man appears to have "issues". ([Continued...](#))

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