

By Charlie McIntosh

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While students and residents gathered inside the Elam Center for Alberto Gonzales' speech Thursday evening, others huddled outside with signs in hand demanding that the former U.S. attorney general be tried as a war criminal.

Concerned students and citizens gathered to stage a protest at about 6:30 p.m. Oct. 22 in an attempt to call attention to Gonzales' controversial association with wiretapping, water-boarding and a series of attorney dismissals in 2006.

"We're just making sure Gonzales knows that he's not welcome here," said Corbin Gibson, a Senior Political Science major at UTM. "We don't welcome war criminals into our city and much less our university. We want to call into account his actions regarding the Bill of Rights and also his actions regarding torture."

Gibson played a large part in organizing the protest before the UTM fall break upon hearing that Gonzales would be speaking at the university. Many protesters joined a Facebook group telling them where to be and when to arrive the night of Gonzales' speech.

"Under the UN declaration against torture - signed by Ronald Reagan - it mandates that all countries investigate or prosecute torture," Gibson said. "Not doing so is a violation of international law."

Gibson referred to a number of controversies regarding wiretapping and prisoner treatment at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which led to Gonzales' political resignation in 2007.

While Gibson doesn't expect Gonzales to be arrested because of a student-organized protest, he does believe it will raise awareness for the issue. As far as an actual arrest within U.S. borders, Gibson places that issue into the hands of President Obama.

"Obama has said many times that he doesn't want to look in the past, he wants to look into the future," Gibson said. "I disagree with this. I think it's our responsibility to prosecute such people, but we'll see how it goes. I hope something happens."

One UTM student attended the protest garbed in trash bags, a nod to the leaked Abu Ghraib prison photographs released earlier this decade.

Others are outraged that the high-profile Gonzales was invited to UTM in the midst of a bleak financial situation. Dr. Charles Hammond, assistant professor of English and Modern Foreign Languages and German instructor, said campus money is better spent elsewhere.

"I think it is outrageous that in a time of extreme budget constraints the university is paying this man who resigned in disgrace tens of thousands of dollars to come here and try to whitewash his name," said Hammond. "I don't use the term criminal lightly. From approving warrantless wiretaps on millions of Americans to justifying torture, this man used his position not as a means of enforcing but of circumventing the law, especially for his friend George W. Bush."

According to the contract with Greater Talent Network - the firm representing Gonzales - the university agreed to pay \$14,500 per engagement with the former attorney general on July 29 of this year, with a maximum liability of \$15,500. It is unclear as to whether the contract considers Gonzales' individual meetings with the press as a separate engagement.

"There's a reason [Gonzales] is not being invited to speak at his alma mater, Harvard, or any reputable larger research institution," Hammond said. "At those institutions, most of the faculty and students know about his past and want nothing to do with him. And rightly so."

Another student, Sean Boers, a freshman Nursing major, held an opposing viewpoint to the protesters. Boers said that the allegations associated with Mr. Gonzales are unwarranted because those actions occurred outside his realm of responsibility.

"Mr. Gonzales: yes, he's done some good stuff and yes, he's done some bad stuff. Is he responsible for torture? No. It's not his role," Boers said. "[The protesters] are obviously making reference to the Abu Ghraib incident. That's not his responsibility. It's not."

Boers was referring to the Abu Ghraib prison incident that occurred during the early half of the decade, where several prisoners were subjected to physical and psychological torture. The investigation into the prison resulted in 11 Army soldiers being convicted of various charges related to the incidents and the formation of the Army 201st Military Intelligence Battalion in 2006.

"I personally believe that to be the negligence of military commanders and military individuals who did that," Boers said. "I don't believe that federal government policy was the extent that those things happened. Yes, government policy may hold harsher interrogation standards or whatever you want to call it. But in general, no, that's not Mr. Gonzales' ballpark."

Another protester, Elbon Kilpatrick from Jackson, Tenn., was a federal corrections chaplain and spiritual adviser to now-deceased Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. Kilpatrick believes Gonzales' presence raises theological and moral issues, not just political ones.

"I protest Christian involvement in the war, or any form of homicide, whether it's abortion, death penalty, euthanasia but specifically tonight in regards to the war," Kilpatrick said. "Christians should not be involved in any state-supported killing. Christians should be consistently following Jesus' command to love their enemies."

Kilpatrick also said Christians should not be involved in government. He cites Gonzales' involvement with the Bush administration and the Iraq war as a direct conflict with Christian teachings, which originally forbid Christian involvement in any war before the Roman Emperor

Constantine changed these laws in the 4th century.

Kilpatrick protested by holding a sign that read: "Love your enemies - Jesus; Kill your enemies - Military."

"I believe Jesus is anti-military," Kilpatrick said. "The powers that be were threatened by him because he was introducing something new into religious thinking: the love of enemies."

Gonzales said during his speech that the success of Obama's presidency relies more on the U.S. engagement with Afghanistan and Iraq than anything else.

The University of Florida in Gainesville, Fla. made national news two years ago when a protester dressed as a detainee walked onto the stage during Gonzales' speech.

In 2008, a Spanish court announced it would begin an investigation into whether Gonzales broke international law by providing the Bush administration a legal framework and basis for the torture of thwarted detainees at Guantanamo Bay.