

By Eoin Higgins

From [The Intercept](#) | Original Article

It took less than 48 hours for Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government to [revoke](#) its [fellowship invitation](#) to whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The announcement that Manning would be a visiting fellow at the school's Institute of Politics had been met with resistance from current and former denizens of the national security state — a former CIA director resigned his position as a fellow, and President Donald Trump's CIA Director Mike Pompeo [withdrew](#) from a planned speech at the school.

About 200 miles south of Cambridge, Massachusetts, an inverse but much quieter debate unfolded after a top CIA veteran was named to an elite university fellowship. This much, however, resembled the row at Harvard: The security state is poised to win out in this showdown, too.

On September 4, former CIA Director John Brennan began a two-year stint as a “[distinguished fellow](#)” for global security” at Fordham University's [Center on National Security](#) at Fordham Law, in New York. Brennan, a 1977 Fordham graduate, will participate in discussions at the school, make himself available to students during office hours, and sit in on classes in advance of teaching his own in the future.

Some in the Fordham community — including faculty and alumni who were involved in activism against awarding Brennan a [2012 honorary doctorate of humane letters](#) from the school — believe naming the former top spy to a [fellowship](#) sends the wrong message, especially given Brennan's record of support for controversial policies.

“By making him a fellow, Fordham is clearly endorsing the human rights violations committed under Brennan by the CIA through illegal torture and missile strikes,” said Sapphira Lurie, who graduated from Fordham this year. “Brennan’s status as a public figure is a result of severe violations of human rights.” Lurie noted that the administration has, in the past, distanced itself from Brennan’s actions at the CIA, but questioned whether his record outside of the CIA merited accolades from the university: “Why else would they be giving him an honorary degree and a position as a fellow?”

Brennan’s tenure as head of the CIA and, more broadly, his 25 years at the agency saw their share of controversies. The Obama era was marked by Brennan’s [efforts](#) to concentrate the drone assassination program in the executive branch and, in particular, the CIA. During the George W. Bush era, Brennan went along with the CIA’s institutional propensity for endorsing the use of “enhanced interrogation,” or torture. Brennan’s

[support](#)

of

[the practices](#)

was a point of contention during his

[confirmation hearings](#)

for CIA director in 2013. Brennan denied any involvement and ducked responsibility: “I did not take steps to stop the CIA’s use of those techniques,” he

[said](#)

. “I was not in the chain of command of that program.”

The 2014 publication of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on CIA torture generated more controversy. The Brennan-led CIA [hacked](#) into Senate staffers’ computers as the report was put together; a subsequent investigation suggested that some of the agents responsible for the hack did so [under](#)

[Brennan’s orders](#)

The ordeal led Fordham Faculty Against Torture, a group formed during the 2013-2014 school year, to convince the Fordham board of trustees to [revoke](#) Brennan’s 2012 honorary degree. (Disclosure: I attended graduate school at Fordham.)

Fordham Faculty Against Torture wanted to “respond to the egregious error our university made by granting an honorary degree to John Brennan,” citing his role at the CIA when agents

tortured terrorism suspects and his subsequent defenses of the policies, according to the group's [website](#) .

“FFAT organized a campaign of education, of academic talks, of discussion, and of protest, along with presenting a petition signed by the faculty at Fordham, to rescind the degree,” David Myers, a history professor, said in an email, adding that over 100 of the more than 500 full-time faculty members signed the petition. Other [petitions](#) on [iPetitions](#) and [Change.org](#) garnered over 1,000 signatures in total.

“Fordham is clearly endorsing the human rights violations committed under Brennan by the CIA.”

Brennan’s appointment as a fellow is stirring up emotions from the fight over his honorary degree. The fellowship announcement sparked a “mixture of fury and indignation tempered by profound disappointment,” said sociology professor Jeanne Flavin. Flavin, who was a member of Fordham Faculty Against Torture, also expressed a sense of cynicism over the decision.

Fordham Faculty Against Torture’s [activism](#) culminated in a board vote on whether to revoke the honor bestowed on Brennan years earlier. The board decided unanimously to keep the award on the books, but Fordham President Rev. Joseph McShane told activists [in an email](#) that they should “not for a minute believe that honoring John Brennan is the same as honoring the institution for which he works, nor its checkered history.”

Gunar Olsen, a 2017 graduate who was a student activist with Fordham Faculty Against Torture, told The Intercept that the 2012 honor was offensive because of what it represents. “Awarding an honorary degree to someone contributes nothing of substantive value to a school,” said Olsen. “But it does indicate where a school administration’s politics lie.” Olsen pointed out that an honorary degree awarded to Bill Cosby was [rescinded in 2015](#) .

Olsen said Brennan’s fellowship, which was announced in a school-wide email from Provost Stephen Freedman on September 4, demonstrated the school’s priorities. “If Fordham appointed Brennan because he is a Fordham graduate, Fordham could have also appointed veteran CIA officer Ray McGovern, who’s done some great work after leaving government,” said Olsen, naming the CIA veteran turned progressive activist. “He would be a great contribution to law students’ educational experience. But Fordham won’t do that, because McGovern doesn’t have the prestige that Brennan does, because McGovern consistently

challenges the national security establishment in Washington.”

School officials, meanwhile, are defending the decision. “Director Brennan has a tremendous amount to offer,” said [Karen Greenberg](#), director of the Center on National Security, who made the decision to award the fellowship along with the school’s leadership. “His insights, culled from his experience and knowledge will be valuable here at Fordham and in the larger public national security conversation as well.”

Louie Dean Valencia-García, a Fordham Ph.D. who lectured at Harvard last year and is now an assistant professor of digital history at Texas State University, drew a distinction between Brennan’s honorary degree and the fellowship. “A fellowship is not an honorary degree,” Valencia-García said. “When Brennan received the degree, it was bestowed on him.” Not so for the fellowship, which Valencia-García described as an agreement between Brennan and the school, in which Fordham is making a commitment to fund Brennan’s work.

And that, for Valencia-García, raises two important questions: What kind of work will Brennan do at the school? And what kind of commitment is Fordham making to Brennan and his goals? Greenberg told The Intercept that Brennan’s compensation was “minimal.”

Some of the anti-Brennan activists see an opportunity for Fordham in Chelsea Manning’s summary dismissal from Harvard. “I think one of the few things that could get me to reconsider my position on Brennan’s fellowship would be Fordham extending an invitation to Chelsea Manning,” said Flavin, the professor. “A comparable fellowship, at minimum, should be extended to her.”

Having already lost one battle over Brennan, however, many of the Fordham activists aren’t holding out much hope for Brennan’s fellowship to be rescinded, nor for Manning to be extended her own.

Brennan’s presence at the school will raise an important choice for Fordham, said [Jeannine Hill Fletcher](#), a professor of theology, who was a founding member of the activist group against the CIA director’s honorary degree. “The question is: Do we want a study of national security, which will focus on national security and enhance our sense of common humanity,” said Fletcher, “or

continue to eclipse our sense of shared humanity?”