

# 'Socially Responsible' War Profiteering at Bard College

By Jacqueline Merrill

In Alice Gregory's recent profile of Leon Botstein in *The New Yorker*, the President of Bard College was quoted saying, "There's only so much you can do against the grain, but you can't survive without money. You cannot be a first-class place without money. It's just not possible."

Bard College's reputation rests on its commitment to going against the grain. While most colleges and universities in this country tend to avoid politically contentious issues, Bard has a history of placing itself in the middle of them. The most salient example of this is Bard's partnership with Al-Quds University in the West Bank.

But, as Botstein points out, being a "first-class place" requires money. In this case, it means investing in several corporations that profit from the subjugation of our peers in occupied Palestine. Martin Sosnoff, a Bard trustee, is the CEO of the multibillion-dollar investment firm that manages Bard's investments in corporations such as Boeing, Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, Halliburton, and Lockheed Martin. Sosnoff's firm invests Bard's money in a plethora of multibillion-dollar corporations that profit from warfare, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the destruction of our environment. It appears as though Bard, the only American college with a program in Palestine, is willing to forego its commitments when it comes to money.

Two of the corporations that Bard has invested in, Boeing and Lockheed Martin, manufacture the military weapons and surveillance technology that Israel uses in the Palestinian territories. Boeing produces and sells military aircrafts, weapons, and "unmanned airborne system programs", a euphemism for drones. Boeing has been profiting from the Israeli Defense Forces for more than sixty years. Lockheed Martin produces similar prod-

ucts for Israel, including missiles, munitions, radars, and satellites. Both of these corporations provided Israel with the weapons used during Operation Protective Edge, the 2014 Israeli bombardment of Gaza that killed more than two thousand Palestinians.

Bard is also invested in Halliburton, one of the world's largest oil field companies. Halliburton has infamously been implicated in a wide array of scandals, including profiting off the 2003 invasion of Iraq, mismanaging funds, and destroying evidence after oil spills. Former CEO of Halliburton, Dick Cheney, has been at the center of most of the controversies surrounding this multinational corporation. In the time leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Halliburton was given a \$7 billion contract from the US government. In a BBC investigation, it was estimated that around \$23 billion may have been lost, stolen, or not properly accounted for during the invasion of Iraq, much of which has been attributed to Halliburton's corruption and financial mismanagement. In addition to profiting off the US invasion of Iraq, Halliburton also pled guilty to destroying evidence after BP's 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Caterpillar and Hewlett Packard, two corporations which profit from the Israeli apartheid in Palestine, are also on Bard's investment list. In 2005, Palestinian activists issued a campaign of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, known as BDS, against Israel. This on-going campaign is designed to mobilize the international community and pressure the Israeli regime to fully recognize Palestinian rights in accordance with international law and human rights norms. BDS's divestment list includes Caterpillar, a company that manufactures and sells construction equipment, as well as Hewlett-Packard, a technology, computing, and IT company. Hewlett-Packard is one of the top defense

contractors for the Pentagon and it provides identification and technology services to the Israeli occupation forces and the Israeli prison services. Caterpillar contributes to the subjugation of Palestinians in a different way, by selling bulldozers to the Israeli government for the systematic destruction of Palestinian homes and livelihoods. According to research conducted by Whoprofits.org, Caterpillar machinery has been used to demolish thousands of Palestinian homes, construct the Separation Wall, and build Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.

The Socially Responsible Investment Committee, a group of Bard College faculty members and students, has taken measures to ensure that a partial record of Bard's investments is kept in the Stevenson Library. The SRI Committee, comprised of four faculty members and four elected student representatives, is designed to improve the transparency and social responsibility of the College's endowment. However, most of the Bard's investment records prior to 2006 are not available in the library. The SRIC Committee does not focus on divestment, but rather tries to use shareholder resolutions and letters to facilitate a dialogue between the College and these corporations.

In an opinion article submitted to the Free Press, Taun Toay, the Associate Vice President of Bard College and a member of the SRI Committee, writes, "While a widespread divestment effort may force a dialogue (a point on which I am very skeptical), that dialogue is terminated with the sale of the security. There are formal ways to engage a company (protected and outlined by U.S. Security and Exchange Commission law) for investors: proxy voting; attending annual meetings; and filing shareholder resolutions, which is a very powerful catalyst for change". In the article, Toay asserts that the most effective way to change a corporation is through shareholder privileges. Conveniently, his argument provides a justification for Bard to continue to profit off of corporations with long histories of egregious actions.

Toay drastically underestimates the political power of divestment while simultaneously overestimating the influence of shareholder resolutions. When it comes to hegemonic corporations such as Halliburton, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, and Hewlett Packard, Bard's shareholder power is not strong enough to persuade these corporations to end war profiteering from US military invasions and Israel's occupation of Palestine.

Severing our financial ties with these corrupt corporations is the simplest and most powerful way for Bard to take a stance against their practices. Divestment, when part of a wider movement, has the ability to bolster social awareness, generate negative media for targeted corporations, and put pressure on governments to comply with the demands of civil society. The BDS movement, similar to the boycott and sanctions campaign initiated against apartheid South Africa, aims to put financial and political pressure on corporations involved in the Israeli occupation. If Bard joins the movement and divests from Caterpillar and Hewlett Packard, it could potentially influence other colleges and universities to do the same.

Bard cannot call itself a socially responsible institution while simultaneously profiting from corporations such as Halliburton, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, and Hewlett Packard. If any college should stand up corporate power, it should be the one that is bold enough to have a college in the West Bank. Bard's greatness lies in its ability to go against the grain and do what everyone else should have been doing a decade ago. In Gregory's piece of The New Yorker, Botstein was also quoted saying, "Poverty made us great, we had to invent a reason to command people's respect." If anything commands respect, it is standing up to some of the most politically powerful corporations in the world, especially if that means losing some money in the process. If, after all, poverty is what makes us great.