

Responding to Recent Criticism

BY BILL AIKEN

Director, SGI-USA Office of Public Affairs

The Sept. 6 *Forbes* magazine features an article, “Sensei’s World,” maligning the SGI and SGI President Ikeda, as well as Soka University of America. This sort of article has appeared in the past due to misunderstandings and biases about the SGI’s movement, but this is the first time in recent years that a major publication has gone to such lengths to negatively portray the organization. While the SGI-USA does not hold itself above fair and accurate criticism, the *Forbes* article is neither. The following perspective provides background on how the *Forbes* article came to be.

In September 2002, Benjamin Fulford, the Asia Pacific Bureau chief for *Forbes* magazine, contacted the SGI’s public information office in Tokyo stating that he wanted to write an article about Soka Gakkai, the SGI and Soka University of America. In his letter dated Sept. 18, 2002, he stated that he would be approaching the article “with an open mind” and that he sought to “write a factually correct, objective story.”

In the nearly two years since then, we cooperated extensively, researching and answering more than 100 questions and providing interviews and extensive access to the organization.

In late 2003, Mr. Fulford contacted the SGI-USA. I responded to his questions and requests for information, providing information about our facilities and organizational activities. From my first conversation with him, it was clear both from his caustic tone and his line of questioning — which seemed to be taken right out of the Japanese tabloid headlines — that this would be a hostile story. Nonetheless, it is SGI-USA policy to cooperate with legitimate press inquiries, and we continued to do so.

We arranged for Mr. Fulford to visit Soka University of America on Jan. 28 and later to tour the SGI-USA Headquarters and interview SGI-USA Advisor Guy McCloskey on Jan. 29.

On his tour of SUA, it was clear that this reporter was both very misinformed and determined to uncover some scandal. When he saw the statue of Mohandas Gandhi, he wanted to know where the statue of Daisaku Ikeda was (there is no statue of President Ikeda on the campus, just a modest portrait in the library’s reading room). He seemed convinced that SUA could not be a bona fide university, but must just be an indoctrination center to teach Daisaku Ikeda’s writings. He questioned us in a very suspicious tone about accreditation and about who taught the religion and philosophy classes. The SUA representative responded that none of the faculty in these subject areas are SGI members.

He said he understood that SUA's library carried books mainly from Ikeda. So we took him on a tour of the library stacks where it was clear that the library's collection was first-rate, extensive and mainly academic, covering a broad range of subjects and authors. There was only one small portable bookcase near the elevators with a paper sign that read "SGI Publications." This shows up in his story as "Soka Gakkai newspapers and other publications, filling a prominent shelf in the Soka University library — named for Ikeda — all feature Ikeda's interpretations of Buddhism."

The next day at the SGI-USA Headquarters was more of the same. In his interview with Mr. McCloskey, Mr. Fulford was at times emotional and belligerent, at one point jumping out of his chair and yelling that he knew "for a fact" that the Soka Gakkai in Japan was behind the death of Councilwoman Akiyo Asaki (see "The Asaki Case Resurfaces," right), and that he was certain that the authorities charged with investigating her apparent suicide were all Soka Gakkai members. Neither of these outrageous allegations is supported by the facts.

Mr. Fulford's behavior and obvious pre-judgment, coupled with the fact that he was poorly informed, caused us serious concern and prompted Mr. McCloskey to write to the Forbes editor to express his concern. In response, Stewart Pinkerton, a deputy managing editor, disregarded our concerns, saying, "Please be assured that any resulting story will be fair, balanced, and accurate." In hindsight, these are cynical words indeed.

I'm still not sure what the purpose of their article is. Is it to bash the lack of oversight of non-profits in the United States? Did they intend to make their case by creating this sinister portrayal of a lesser-known Buddhist organization, thus not risking the backlash that would surely come if they chose a more popular U.S. religious institution as their subject? Or is the issue of non-profit oversight a thin veil to cover their basic intention to bash the Soka Gakkai? In either case, the result is — in my opinion — a disjointed, mean-spirited article that does not even effectively make their case, but only succeeds in maligning President Ikeda and the SGI. I suspect that even they recognized this and that is why they buried it in the back of their magazine.

In the eight years I have been working in the area of media relations for the SGI-USA, I have dealt with a wide variety of journalists with varying levels of understanding and willingness to understand. Some have displayed an honest appreciation and admiration for President Ikeda and the SGI. Some have been more critical. But I have never before met a reporter with such a clearly hostile and biased agenda as demonstrated by Mr. Benjamin Fulford. I also noted that he had already written an anti-Soka Gakkai screed for one of the Japanese tabloids.

In the end, I'm not overly concerned. President Ikeda has repeatedly encouraged us to continue to advance with equanimity even amidst storms of unjust criticism. I am determined to use my voice to speak up for truth to the best of my ability.

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