

Summers's End | Washington Examiner

 [washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/summerss-end](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/summerss-end)

Peter Berkowitz

March 6, 2006

The significance of Lawrence Summers's resignation under fire as president of Harvard University has been widely misunderstood. Oozing sympathy for a beleaguered and aggrieved Harvard faculty, the *Boston Globe* editorial page argued that because he was "arrogant" and "brusque," in short a "bully," Summers was "losing the ability to be effective" and so it was "sensible," and in the interests of all, for him to step down. A sympathetic editorial in the Washington Post portrayed Summers as a martyr, a foe of "complacencies and prejudices" who was forced to fall on his sword by a "loud and unreasonable" minority. An angry Wall Street Journal editorial, which colorfully decried "a largely left-wing faculty that has about as much intellectual diversity as the Pyongyang parliament," portrayed Summers as a victim whose apology, "in the wake of his 'gender' comments," failed "to placate his liberal critics."

Summers's ouster certainly demonstrates--as Harvard professor Ruth Wisse observed in a Wall Street Journal op-ed and as another Harvard dissenter, Alan Dershowitz, argued in the *Boston Globe*--the power at Harvard of a faction within the faculty of arts and sciences for whom scholarship is politics by other means and who aggressively practice the politics of resentment that they loudly preach. Yet they could not on their own have brought down Summers, whose intellectual credentials as a brilliant economist and whose political credentials as former secretary of the treasury in the Clinton administration are impeccable.

Summers's vociferous faculty critics--those who voted no confidence in him last year represent only about 25 percent of the arts and sciences faculty--needed, in the face of their scurrilous attacks, the silence of the vast majority of the rest of the Harvard arts and science faculty as well as the silence of the eight other faculties at Harvard.

Those attacks, and the deafening silence with which the vast majority of Harvard greeted them, followed Summers's comments in January 2005 to a closed-door, off-the-record session of a National Bureau of Economic Research conference on diversifying the science and engineering workforce. Summers suggested that one of three "broad hypotheses" that need to be considered to explain and correct the relative dearth of women in science and engineering was the possibility of innate differences in the sexes in their aptitudes for highly abstract thought. Summers's faculty critics demanded that he publicly recant and confess his transgression. Regrettably, Summers obliged by offering public apologies not once, not twice, but no fewer than three times--a fact that some of his supporters regret, and that even his critics could not bring themselves to praise. A certain graciousness he displayed under fire--perhaps he was not such a bully after all--went unnoticed.

It must be emphasized that Summers had no good reason, none whatsoever, for apologizing, and that those of his advisers and members of the Corporation--the small body of seven movers and shakers who run Harvard and who alone have power to hire and fire the university president--who counseled him to do so ill-served him and the university over which he presides. Apologies are appropriate when you have said something inconsiderate, vulgar, or ignorant. Summers's remark was none of these.

It was part of a talk (available [here](#)) in which he displayed a subtle appreciation of the problem, a clear sense of his own fallibility, and an eagerness to be corrected by better arguments and more refined data. Summers contended that the most likely reason talented women were underrepresented in sciences and engineering faculties was the choices they made against a career option that involved up to 80 hours a week in the laboratory while in their twenties and thirties, low pay, and the probability of not obtaining job security until age 40. The least likely reason, he thought, was overt discrimination against women. And in the middle were questions about the natural aptitudes of the sexes and about the ways in which girls are socialized differently than boys. He related these questions to data showing that "on many, many different human attributes--height, weight, propensity for criminality, overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability--there is relatively clear evidence that whatever the difference in means--which can be debated--there is a difference in the standard deviation, and variability of a male and a female population."

In 2005, almost 40 years after Harvard College began admitting women, after women have risen to head several Ivy League universities, to lead major corporations, to serve as governors and as secretary of state, understanding why women continue to be represented less well in some fields than others, and generally underrepresented at the top of many fields, is a complicated project. In undertaking it, any sensible person would inquire, as did Summers, into the actual choices women make, the sexes' natural aptitudes and socialized differences, and overt discrimination. To denounce the very outlining of the essential features of such an inquiry is anti-intellectual in the extreme. Alas, Summers's decision to acquiesce in the denunciation and to serve up one apology after another not only legitimated but also emboldened the forces of darkness and reaction. And to earmark \$50 million (as Summers subsequently did) for the creation of two more task forces to nurture and promote women at Harvard in advance of the very inquiry Summers himself insisted was necessary to determine the roots of the problem rewards intellectual thuggery and provides fabulous incentives for further intimidation of freedom of speech and thought on campus.

Some seasoned observers, both inside and outside Harvard, while distancing themselves from those who attacked Summers for the content of his comments, condemned his lack of prudence in making them. Just as federal judges are prohibited from speaking about pending cases, and CEOs try not to take controversial stands that might anger customers or discomfit employees, so too, it was said, a university president has an obligation to hold his tongue on

controversial subjects to avoid offending important constituencies within the university. Or put more simply, a prudent university president would have better understood the limits on speech imposed by the self-appointed enforcers of political correctness.

Prudence indeed must be given its due. And wise men and women understand the limits of propriety and what their audience can bear. But a university president has special responsibilities not shared by federal judges and corporate CEOs. The aim of a university is not impartial interpretation of the law or the making of profit for shareholders but transmitting knowledge and pursuing truth. For Summers, who is also a professor in the economics department, to have accepted the NBER invitation and not mention the possibility of the relevance of natural differences between the sexes, or to have declined the invitation for fear of the fallout from mentioning it, would also have betrayed the principle of free intellectual inquiry.

Other observers maintained that the problem was that Summers spoke beyond his field of scholarly expertise: After all, he is an economist and his comments dealt with the biological bases of behavior. This is even less persuasive. The very idea of a liberal arts college presupposes the possibility and the desirability of scholars and students reaching out across disciplines to integrate knowledge.

In addition, some have denied that Summers's comments were at the center of the storm that ended his presidency. Count Summers among them. After his resignation, he told reporters that the causes of his rift with faculty were complex and they should not be reduced to a single incident. No doubt. But one of his leading critics, sociology professor Mary Waters, maintains the comments provided a strategic opportunity, and she would know. As she told the *Boston Globe*: "When the news about his speech on women broke, people began talking to each other, and they began to realize how widespread his behavior was. Sharing information increased everyone's disapproval."

It was never a secret that Summers is socially clumsy and does not suffer fools gladly. And it was clear that he had alienated various parts of the faculty by telling star African-American studies professor Cornel West in a private conversation that West should devote more time to scholarship and should cooperate in the faculty-wide effort to combat grade inflation; by expressing his support for ROTC; by speaking in favor of patriotism; and by defending Israel against selective and one-sided criticism. But it was his comments about women in the sciences he delivered in a collegial setting, in an effort to explore ways to improve women's representation at the university, that became the public symbol of the rift between Summers and the faculty. And it is his handling of that affair that will be longest remembered and have the largest impact.

What should Summers have done? From the beginning he should have stuck to his guns, and failing that, he should have come to his senses after summer vacation last year and uttered words similar to those supplied by attorney Harvey Silverglate, writing in the *Boston*

Phoenix two days after Summers's resignation:

This was about more than whether I speculated in an area in which I am not a recognized expert. It was about whether the modern American academy is any longer a safe haven for true diversity of thought and opinion, and whether some subjects are so toxic to a subsection of the academic left that they are taboo. We extol the virtues of diversity in a wide variety of programs--including mandatory freshman orientation and "sensitivity training" programs that come perilously close to being exercises in thought-reform--but we penalize diversity of knowledge and opinion. I was not immune to these forces, as exhibited in my shameful attempt to buy off my critics with a \$50 million bribe for a laundry list of senseless initiatives compiled by two women's task forces that will do little more than further expand an already bloated administrative structure. I hereby declare that initiative dissolved. The unspent money will go to endow a much-needed and long-overdue chair in academic freedom at Harvard Law School.

The utterance of these or some such words might not have been the height of prudence. But Summers could have made himself a hero. Public opinion was with him last year when the story first broke after MIT biologist Nancy Hopkins told the *Boston Globe* that she walked out of the private, invitation-only session because, if she hadn't, "I would've either blacked out or thrown up." Imagine a no-nonsense Summers tactfully refraining from pointing out the 19th-century Victorian female stereotypes in which Hopkins was trafficking, while remarking on the oddity of a biologist protesting the consideration of biological factors as part of an explanation of human behavior.

Alas, the Harvard establishment already seems to be drawing the wrong lesson from Summers's resignation. Summers critic Peter T. Ellison, a professor of anthropology and former dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, told the New York Times: "I think the repair will be virtually instantaneous. I think the problem has been essentially President Summers himself."

In fact, the problem was that Summers was untrue to his sound instincts about the university's mission and unable or unwilling to articulate the principles that should organize and refine those instincts. Despite his considerable gifts, the bright promise when he was appointed in 2001, his evident joy in Harvard's remarkable students and his varied achievements during his five years at the helm, Summers's failure to stand up for himself and for the principle of free inquiry when both were under assault--indeed, his collaboration by means of public acts of abasement and contrition before those who would cut off speech and research in order to protect their own tender sensibilities and political agendas--leaves Harvard more enfeebled and more confused about its mission than when he arrived.

Peter Berkowitz teaches at George Mason University School of Law and is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. Before Summers's presidency, Berkowitz was denied tenure at Harvard, which he litigated unsuccessfully on procedural

grounds, losing his case in the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in September 2003.