

# Campus Backing of Hamas Condemns U.S. Higher Education

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## COMMENTARY

It is not university administrators' job to opine on behalf of their institutions on the great issues of the day. However, after decades of taking sides, usually supporting decidedly progressive causes and priorities, it is grotesque for university presidents and deans to only discover the virtue of institutional neutrality following Hamas jihadists' massacre of at least 1,400 Israelis, mostly civilians.

Nor is it university administrators' responsibility to police speech and prosecute thought crimes. Yet it took student and faculty expressions of enthusiasm for Hamas' 10/7 attacks and a rush to defend the jihadists' crimes against humanity for university administrators to find their voices and come to free speech's defense. Those crimes included mass murder of young Israelis at a music festival and of citizens of all ages in their homes near Israel's Gaza border (Americans and others were also executed in cold blood), rape, desecration of corpses, and abduction of approximately 200 mostly Israeli civilians but including Americans and other nation's citizens.

Some questions are not hard. University administrators should condemn a savage onslaught on civilian populations designed to wipe out a nation. Individual rights, toleration, and the rule of law are of no account to Hamas, which seeks Israel's destruction. But they are the lifeblood of American constitutional government and liberal education.

Moreover, apart from a few established exceptions such as the incitement to imminent violence, outside the classroom faculty may spew venom and students may express despicable sentiments, offer grossly ignorant opinions, and utter outright lies. Most of the appalling speech on campus since October 7 in defense of Hamas' ghastly brutality is protected, both as a matter of constitutional law and as a requirement of liberal education.

The hard question is, how have our colleges and universities come to shelter so many individuals – students and professors – who cheer on monstrous acts?

As news emerged of Hamas' 10/7 attacks, students at America's leading universities, presuming to have mastered geopolitics' harsh realities, confidently affirmed the jihadists' righteousness. The Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee stated in a letter supported by more than 30 student organizations that it held "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence." On Oct. 9 at Swarthmore College (my alma mater), "Students for Justice in Palestine called the Hamas terrorists 'martyrs' and affirmed the 'right of Palestinian people

to resist.” At Columbia University Law School, “15 student groups, led by Columbia’s chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, issued a statement blaming Israel for the weekend’s atrocities and asserting that the Jewish state had no right to defend itself.”

More egregious were the professors who championed the killers of families, the rapists, the torturers, and the abductors of civilians. In the wake of Hamas’ atrocities, Yale University’s Zareena Grewal – associate professor of American Studies, Ethnicity, Race & Migration, and Religious Studies – tweeted, “Prayers for Palestinians. Israel is a murderous, genocidal settler state and Palestinians have every right to resist through armed struggle, solidarity #FreePalestine.” Writing at the Electronic Intifada, Columbia University’s Joseph Massad, a professor of *modern Arab politics and intellectual history*, exulted in Hamas’ massacre of civilians. At a pro-Palestine rally in Ithaca, Russell Rickford, a Cornell University professor of history, called the attacks “exhilarating.” Meanwhile, a Stanford University instructor – whom the university has since removed from teaching duties – “told the Jewish students to take their belongings, stand in a corner, and said, ‘This is what Israel does to the Palestinians.’”

Campus sympathy for the Hamas jihadists and indifference to the Israeli civilian victims provoked outrage among alumni and wealthy donors. University presidents and deans were compelled to respond. Some exacerbated the outrage.

After a poorly received first effort and an improved second try, Harvard University President Claudine Gay managed in her third public attempt to forcefully denounce Hamas’ atrocities. She also rightly affirmed that Harvard’s commitment to free speech “extends even to views that many of us find objectionable, even outrageous.” And she properly added that Harvard does not “punish or sanction people for expressing such views, but that is a far cry from endorsing them.” But where has Gay been – along with Harvard deans, faculty, and previous Harvard presidents – as the university has sunk to the very bottom of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression’s college free speech rankings?

In an open letter entitled “Violence in the Middle East,” Swarthmore College President Valerie Smith stated, “As a liberal arts institution, we embrace the free exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives. That means sometimes engaging with views we may find offensive, if not abhorrent. But let me be clear: Hateful rhetoric and calls for violence have no place at Swarthmore.” Fair enough. But doesn’t Swarthmore college students’ endorsement of Hamas’ butchery of Israeli civilians count as hateful rhetoric and a call for violence?

To restore calm, Columbia University Law School Dean Gillian Lester asked students to “treat each other with respect, civility, and generosity, even when we disagree.” Such treatment is, as Dean Lester insists, essential to legal education. But where were the law school deans’ requests for respect, civility, and generosity over recent decades as administrators and professors encouraged or silently acquiesced in elite law students’ efforts around the nation to curtail dissent from progressive orthodoxy and ostracize those who deviate from reigning left-wing narratives?

Not all the news from the academy is grim. In a succinct Oct. 9 letter addressed to the “Members of the Jewish Community at Purdue,” President Mung Chiang wrote, “Since October 7, terrorist attacks on Israel by Hamas have inflicted unspeakable atrocities to Israeli civilians, with a tragic death toll and a horrendous hostage crisis. As we mourn with you, we will also stay alert to acts of anti-Semitic violence.” He closed his letter, “With deepest grief and sorrow,”

University of Florida President Ben Sasse also set the proper tone and found fitting words. In an email to “Jewish Gator Alums,” he stated, “I will not tiptoe around this simple fact: What Hamas did is evil and there is no defense for terrorism. This shouldn’t be hard. Sadly, too many people in elite academia have been so weakened by their moral confusion that, when they see videos of raped women, hear of a beheaded baby, or learn of a grandmother murdered in her home, the first reaction of some is to ‘provide context’ and try to blame the raped women, beheaded baby, or the murdered grandmother.” (I serve on the advisory board of the University of Florida’s Hamilton Center.)

In addition, 67 members of the Northwestern University Law School faculty signed a forthright letter: “As faculty members dedicated to the rule of law, we choose to make clear that we unequivocally condemn Hamas’s wanton acts of terrorism, which have made the establishment of a just peace, recognizing the human rights of every community, all the more difficult to achieve. Some have claimed that the Hamas atrocities must be blamed on Israel. What Hamas perpetrated was unspeakably evil. It is dehumanizing to blame the murders on the victims. We absolutely reject such acceptance, and near-endorsement, of terrorism.”

But how is it that these sterling statements by university presidents Chiang and Sasse and by Northwestern University law professors represent exceptions in the precincts of higher education?

Since Hamas’ 10/7 attacks, the poisonous fruits that our colleges and universities have been reaping for decades owing to their politicization of higher education have come into full public view. University administrators and professors have presided over the hollowing out of the curriculum and its harnessing to a partisan vision of social justice that supposes that the United States is composed of oppressors and oppressed. Our institutions of higher education have built a diversity, equity, and inclusion industry the fine words of which conceal the divisive ambition to vilify the supposed oppressors and exalt the supposed oppressed. Our campuses have pushed to the periphery the serious study of literature, of history – diplomatic, military, and religious, of political and economic ideas and institutions, and of America’s founding principles and constitutional traditions when they haven’t altogether banished them.

The costs of the transformation of American higher education into boot camp for extreme progressive social transformation were thrown into sharp relief by students’ and professors’ obscene apologetics for Hamas’ 10/7 atrocities. Instead of fostering the habits of freedom,

our colleges and universities seem to select students and faculty for their authoritarian proclivities. Instead of transmitting knowledge and cultivating independent thought, elite higher education stunts the moral imagination, degrades the critical faculties, rewards historical ignorance, celebrates partisan posturing, and nurtures cowardly self-righteousness. Instead of teaching appreciation of the American experiment in ordered liberty, our colleges and universities cultivate scorn for the United States and for Israel because the Jewish state proudly aligns with America.

When confronted by Hamas' barbaric cruelty, many students, professors, and university administrators failed to call evil by its name, and even welcomed it. That staggering indictment of our colleges and universities demands urgent rededication and unstinting devotion to the reform of higher education.

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