

Lee Bollinger Whitewashes Elite-University Decay

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On May 7, police arrested at least 44 Columbia University students and 13 Barnard College students – many were masked – for taking over the university library. “Once inside the agitators passed out pamphlets that endorsed Hamas’s violence and chanted ‘There is only one solution, intifada revolution,’ ‘We want divestment now,’ and ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,’ using megaphones and bangin on drums,” according to the Washington Free Beacon. “They renamed the library after Basel al-Araj, a Palestinian terrorist killed in a 2017 shootout with the Israel Defense Forces.”

Columbia’s admission of students disposed to break the law to endorse Hamas’ genocidal intentions against Israel and to call for extending the jihadists’ violent revolution beyond the Middle East is only the most conspicuous of the university’s many problems.

FIRE’s 2025 College Free Speech Rankings assessed the “speech climate” at Columbia as “Abysmal” and placed the university second to last, 250 out of 251 schools. Only Harvard scored lower. The results might have turned out differently if, following Iran-backed Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, massacre and kidnapping of mostly civilians in southern Israel, the rankings had focused on universities’ handling of anti-Israel protesters who erected illegal encampments on campus, harassed and intimidated Jews, and otherwise disrupted academic activities. In that case, Columbia might well have beaten Harvard for last place in the nation.

Before the encampments, according to the FIRE rankings, approximately 30% of Columbia students said they self-censored “very” or “fairly” often in conversation with other students, and 20% said they self-censored in conversation with professors and during classroom discussion. The encampments worsened the dismal condition of free speech at Columbia. After they were erected, almost 40% of Columbia students said they self-censored “very” or “fairly” often in conversation with other students, and around 30% said they self-censored in conversation with professors and during classroom discussion.

With Columbia a poster child for dysfunctional university governance and the erosion of free and robust speech, it is jolting to read Lee Bollinger’s recent Atlantic essay, “Universities Deserve Special Standing.” President emeritus of Columbia, a prominent First Amendment scholar, and holder of a prestigious university-professor chair at Columbia, Bollinger contends that American universities should receive “special solicitude under the Constitution” because they advance the public interest by pursuing the truth.

If only our universities were worthy of the deference Bollinger insists they are owed. However, universities' betrayal of their mission – along with the former Columbia president's failure to tell the truth about their betrayal – undermines his plea for bestowing on them privileged constitutional status.

A graduate of Columbia Law School, Bollinger occupied powerful positions at major universities for almost 35 years, serving not only as Columbia's president (2002-2023) but also as University of Michigan Law School dean (1987-1994), and University of Michigan president (1996-2002). His three-and-a-half decades guiding an elite law school and two elite universities coincided with the precipitous decline of higher education into an industry for the reproduction of progressive orthodoxy.

"Universities," Bollinger warns, "are most certainly under assault, and the risks appear likely to grow." He sees only external threats, though. "The nation's leading universities are locked in an unprecedented battle with a president and an administration that have chosen to withhold billions of dollars in vital federal research funding in order to take control of institutions for which freedom of thought and expression are among their most essential values."

Here, and throughout his essay, Bollinger confuses *is* and *ought*. Freedom of thought and expression *ought* to be among our universities' most essential values. Yet it *is* universities' propensity to censor and indoctrinate – along with their protracted violation of civil rights – that spurred the Trump administration, however much it may have overreached, to leverage federal funding to impel them to practice free speech and respect the law.

Despite shirking personal responsibility and turning a blind eye to the origins of the crisis of higher education in universities' dereliction of their educational duties, Bollinger performs in his essay a valuable service. His account of universities as they ought to be provides a devastating indictment of what our elite universities have become, not least Columbia under his 21 years of stewardship.

Bollinger rightly emphasizes that American constitutional government presupposes education's centrality to the formation of citizens who responsibly exercise their rights, discharge their duties, and engage in self-government. Accordingly, he argues, universities "are every bit as vital to our society as the political branches of government or quasi-official institutions such as the press (often even referred to as the 'fourth branch' of government)." Furthermore, he maintains, universities advance the goal "of the First Amendment, which affirms our nation's commitment to a never-ending search for truth." And "like the press but even more so," universities "explore every facet of existence, including questions of justice, fairness, and the character of our political and social life."

Would that it were so.

Bollinger describes universities that America needs but obscures the character of the universities that we have. Long ago, many classes and whole concentrations and majors in the humanities and social sciences set aside the search for truth in favor of promoting progressive social change. These days, moreover, our universities barely teach constitutional, diplomatic, military, and religious history; literary classics; the principles of economic freedom; and the history of political philosophy. And they frown on students drawn to such studies.

Nevertheless, Bollinger would have readers believe that there is little new and little true in current criticisms, especially those coming from conservatives, of American higher education. “There is a long tradition of populist disdain for the unconventional thought and progressive values of many university campuses and college towns,” he writes. That, though, is a smokescreen since today’s criticism revolves around elite universities’ *illiberal* practices: intolerance, antisemitism and race-based discrimination, curtailment of due process, politicization of courses, contempt for reasoned debate, and autocratic governance.

Nevertheless, Bollinger insists that the “political right” makes a mountain out of molehill. It “has, as in earlier eras of our history, skillfully elevated and made an easy target of the most extreme picture of the academic world,” he contends. But since a good portion of scholarship and teaching matches the critics’ dire depictions, it is Bollinger who tries to make a molehill out of a mountain.

Bollinger admits that “the academic world has undoubtedly provided fodder for” critics, “especially in not responding more forcefully to the anti-Semitism that too often manifested on campus after October 7, well beyond constitutionally protected political debate and public protest of Israel’s government.” This, his single acknowledgement that conservatives are not simply making things up about university misconduct, is a stylish understatement. Not least, it suggests that the upsurge in campus antisemitism and universities’ feckless response occurred mysteriously, independent of their other pathologies.

Columbia has issued not fewer than three reports on antisemitism – [Report #1: Task Force on Antisemitism](#), [Report #2: Task Force on Antisemitism](#), and [The Sundial Report](#) (sharply criticized for myriad inadequacies by [The Sunlight Report](#), produced by the [Stand Columbia Society](#)). The university’s reports document persistent harassment, intimidation, ostracism, and physical violence directed at Jews on campus. But, among other deficiencies, these reports, like Bollinger, fail to connect antisemitism at Columbia to the university’s manifold betrayals of liberal education.

These betrayals – as at elite universities throughout the land – provide fertile breeding ground for antisemitism. America’s most selective institutions of higher education have encouraged students to believe that expressing opinions that challenge progressive orthodoxy and failing to affirm progressive orthodoxy are both forms of violence. They have eroded due process in cases concerning allegations of sexual assault. They have fashioned

a curriculum that features courses – focusing on narrow areas of expertise or advocacy for popular causes – that professors prefer to teach instead of courses on basic subjects that equip students for citizenship in a free and democratic nation. They have infused the curriculum with a settler-colonialism ideology that condemns the United States as a unique source of international instability and injustice and that scorns Israel as an outpost in the Middle East of Western oppression. They have accepted substantial sums of money from abroad, often without proper disclosure, that compromise their intellectual independence. They have instituted diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and other identity-conscious initiatives that encourage students to understand themselves as belonging to either the oppressed class or the oppressor class while generally placing Jews in the latter. And they have populated the undergraduate body with students and the faculty with professors who embrace, or at least know how to go along and get along with, debased educational standards.

The age-old scourge of antisemitism thrives in such illiberal environments.

America needs universities like those Lee Bollinger evokes. America, however, will not get them if progressive elites persist in suppressing the truth about the decay of the nation's universities over which they have long maintained an iron grip. Or, it also should be said, if conservatives take a sledgehammer to the universities. Lasting reform depends on left and right in America cooperating based on an education for freedom that transcends partisan differences.

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