

Steven Pinker's Damning Defense of Harvard

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2025/06/08/steven_pinkers_damning_defense_of_harvard_152895.html

Peter Berkowitz

June 8, 2025

Talk may be cheap, and actions may speak louder than words. Nevertheless, rhetoric matters. It arouses passions, noble and base. It frames issues, clarifies stakes, defines missions, and directs activity to its proper ends; it also obscures consequences, sows confusion, and leads astray. A statesman's rhetoric unites free and democratic citizens by connecting short-term exigencies to the nation's enduring principles. A demagogue's rhetoric undercuts a constitutional republic's long-term interests by fomenting grievances and legitimating the thirst for retribution.

In late May in "[Harvard Derangement Syndrome](#)," a 4000-word New York Times essay criticizing the university's right-wing critics, Steven Pinker argues "that the invective now being aimed at Harvard has become unhinged." The prolific Harvard psychology professor and bestselling author admirably acknowledges that Harvard is alarmingly flawed, but he insists that his university deserves to be preserved and improved rather than destroyed. Still, his defense of Harvard is damning.

Pinker furnishes a sampling of the scorn that the right has been heaping on his university. Recently, mostly right-wing critics have denounced Harvard as "a '[national disgrace](#),' a '[woke madrasa](#),' a '[Maoist indoctrination camp](#),' a '[ship of fools](#),' a '[bastion of rampant anti-Jewish hatred and harassment](#),' a '[cesspool of extremist riots](#)' and an '[Islamist outpost](#)' in which the '[dominant view on campus](#)' is 'destroy the Jews, and you've destroyed the root of Western civilization.'"

Not to be outdone, President Trump has opined that Harvard is, writes Pinker, "'[an Anti-Semitic, Far Left Institution](#),' a 'Liberal mess' and a 'threat to Democracy,' which has been '[hiring almost all woke](#), Radical Left, idiots and "birdbrains" who are only capable of teaching FAILURE to students and so-called future leaders.'"

Harsh rhetoric, indeed. What is the reality?

Rare among his colleagues, Pinker has an honorable decade-long record of criticizing and seeking to correct Harvard from within. He has called on the university to admit students based on merit, protect free speech, rein in DEI, and, a year after Hamas' Oct. 7 massacres in southern Israel, "teach our students to grapple with moral and historical complexity." In 2023 – late in the day it must be noted – he co-founded the [Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard](#).

These are earnest and commendable efforts. But Pinker underestimates the cumulative damage Harvard has inflicted on itself over many years by sidelining merit, censoring speech, admitting students unprepared to grapple with moral and historical complexity, and hiring and retaining faculty and administrators indifferent or ill-disposed to academic freedom.

To counter the right-wing critics who want to crush Harvard, Pinker invokes characteristically conservative concerns. He espouses incremental reform and appreciation of the services – such as scientific research – rendered by Harvard. He warns against the common tendency to view institutions, like people, as either all good or all bad rather than as a mix of strengths and weaknesses. He urges “proportionality” in dealing with Harvard’s “serious ailments.” And he advises that “[t]he appropriate treatment (as with other imperfect institutions) is to diagnose which parts need which remedies, not to cut its carotid and watch it bleed out.”

These are sound prescriptions. Still, Pinker might have come closer to grasping the roots of right-wing ire by recognizing that Harvard would have avoided transforming itself into a haven for illiberalism if university administrators and faculty had exercised the moderation that he calls upon the university’s right-wing critics to practice.

Instead, Pinker maintains that a significant portion of right-wing ire is misplaced. Harvard has become a “tempting target” for the right, he thinks, because among its 25,000 students and 2,400 faculty “eccentrics and troublemakers” are inevitable “and today their antics can go viral.” Well-meaning inquirers, moreover, will sometimes get carried away in debate over weighty and consequential issues. And “global networks” shape Harvard faculty and graduate students more than does Harvard while “peer cultures” influence students more than “indoctrination by professors.”

These routine considerations and commonplace effects would explain occasional lapses on Harvard’s part from its educational mission. They do not begin to capture the magnitude and perdurance of the pathologies that plague Harvard and higher education more generally. Since the 1951 publication of William F. Buckley’s “God and Man at Yale,” mostly conservatives have diagnosed those pathologies. Allan Bloom’s “The Closing of the American Mind” (1987), Roger Kimball’s “Tenured Radicals” (1990), and Allan Charles Kors and Harvey Silverglate’s “The Shadow University” (1998) remain timely.

Pinker acknowledges that “some of the enmity against Harvard has been earned.” Yet contrary to his assurances, his examples suggest that the problem stems not from “eccentrics and troublemakers” and occasional departures from decorum by otherwise upstanding members of the academic community, but rather from a dominant intellectual culture that subordinates free inquiry to the enforcement of progressive dogma:

In 2021 the biologist Carole Hooven was demonized and ostracized, effectively driving her out of Harvard, for explaining in an interview how biology defines male and female. Her cancellation was the last straw that led us to create the academic freedom council, but it was neither the first nor the last. The epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele was forced to grovel in “restorative justice” sessions when someone discovered that he had co-signed an amicus brief in the 2015 Supreme Court case arguing against same-sex marriage. A class by the bioengineer Kit Parker on evaluating crime prevention programs was quashed after students found it disturbing.” The legal scholar Ronald Sullivan was dismissed as faculty dean of a residential house when his legal representation of Harvey Weinstein made students feel “unsafe.”

These gross violations of academic freedom, Pinker suggests, are the exception. But the counterexamples that he offers to demonstrate that the rule at Harvard is to tolerate a diversity of opinions reinforce the conviction that the university has lost its way.

Across more than two decades at Harvard, Pinker states, he has “taught many controversial ideas including the reality of sex differences, the heritability of intelligence and the evolutionary roots of violence.” He fails to note that the typical objections on campus to these ideas are rooted not in empirical evidence but rather in moral and political outrage.

His assertion that most of his colleagues also “follow the data and report what their findings indicate or show, however politically incorrect” also has the opposite effect of that which he intends. That’s because “politically incorrect” research findings at Harvard turn out to consist in confirming the fairly obvious and mostly mundane:

Race has some biological reality. Marriage reduces crime. So does hot-spot policing. Racism has been in decline. Phonics is essential to reading instruction. Trigger warnings can do more harm than good. Africans were active in the slave trade. Educational attainment is partly in the genes. Cracking down on drugs has benefits, and legalizing them has harms. Markets can make people fairer and more generous.

Pinker, though, contends that the conduct of such research shows that “[f]or all the headlines, day-to-day life at Harvard consists of publishing ideas without fear or favor.” It doesn’t. That an enlightened liberal of Pinker’s stature believes that Harvard scholarship involving for the most part the confirmation of readily observable phenomena warrants praise for standing against the crowd dramatizes just how far gone is the university’s intellectual life.

Determined to see Harvard as open and pluralistic, Pinker asserts that the faculty contains “dozens of prominent conservatives, like the legal scholar Adrian Vermeule and the economist Greg Mankiw.” If, however, there were, say, five dozen conservative faculty members on campus, that would amount to less than 3% of the university’s 2,400 faculty members, and it would underscore that Harvard is a one-party operation.

Harvard Law School Professor Jack Goldsmith, a former assistant attorney general in the George W. Bush administration, suggests the situation is much worse than Pinker realizes. “I have been at the university for 21 years,” he told me, “and have no idea who the dozens of prominent conservatives are.”

Goldsmith’s HLS colleague, Professor Vermeule, one of Pinker’s two examples of conservatives on campus, went further in a reply to Pinker on “X”: “With all due respect, out of these two (2) examples of ‘conservative’ faculty, one supported Harris in 2024. The other doesn’t call himself a ‘conservative,’ because he thinks there is little left to conserve.” In an email exchange, Vermeule – the one who doesn’t call himself a conservative – elaborated: “Now that Harvey Mansfield has retired, it’s extremely difficult to name any ‘prominent conservatives’ at Harvard, let alone ‘dozens.’ Although I suppose there may be a few natural scientists flying under the radar.”

Pinker briefly defends Harvard’s undergraduate curriculum. He reports that the university’s introduction to economics remains very popular and is routinely taught by conservatives or neoliberals, most courses are mainstream, and typical woke classes are small boutique offerings. He overlooks, however, the progressive orthodoxy that permeates the mainstream classes. And he disregards Harvard’s impoverishment of its undergraduate curriculum – similar to other elite universities – in areas that constitute liberal education’s core: American political ideas and institutions; constitutional, diplomatic, economic, religious, and military history; the great books of Western civilization; and serious study – rooted in knowledge of language, culture, and history – of other peoples and nations.

While Pinker is correct that the right would do well to rein in its invective, his Harvard-is-not-as-bad-as-it-seems rhetoric could use some fine tuning as well. His lengthy New York Times assessment corroborates the suspicion that for those concerned about the plight of liberal education, Harvard is at least as bad as it seems.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.