

Testimony of Robert P. George

Colleges and universities have three fundamental purposes: the pursuit of knowledge; the preservation of knowledge securely obtained; and the transmission of knowledge. Of course, there are other desirable ends that colleges and universities legitimately seek while also pursuing these purposes, but these three are the fundamental, constitutive, defining purposes of academic institutions. All the other things such institutions legitimately do are founded upon them, and anything they do that undermines these purposes they should not be doing. So, for example, though I support college athletics, I support them only insofar as they do not damage the academic program—the transmission of knowledge. When, or to the extent, that they harm the academic program, they need to be reformed or, if reform isn't feasible, abolished.

There are certainly colleges and universities today, as in the past, which place too much emphasis on athletics, to the detriment of the academic program. But athletics are not the greatest threat to the integrity of our colleges and universities today. A far greater and graver threat is posed by the politicization of the academy. The problem is most vividly manifest in the phenomenon of campus illiberalism. By that, I mean the unwillingness of so many members of college and university communities to entertain, or even listen to, arguments that challenge the opinions they happen to hold, whether the opinions have to do with climate science, affirmative action and racial or ethnic preferences; abortion and the sanctity of human life; welfare policy; marriage and sexual morality; U.S. foreign and defense policy; the international economic order; or the origins of human consciousness. Speaking invitations to dissenters from campus orthodoxies are not often issued. Or, if they are issued, dissenting speakers are sometimes “disinvited” under pressure from opponents of their views. Or, if they

are not disinvited, they may be pressured to withdraw under the threat of disruptive forms of protest. Or, if they do not withdraw, they may be interrupted by abusive protestors and even shouted down. And it is not just visitors to campuses. Faculty and student dissenters within campus communities are subjected to abuse and intimidation. Efforts are made to ensure that they are denied opportunities to speak their minds or are intimidated into silence.

I do not wish to paint with too broad a brush here. The situation is better or worse at different institutions. As it happens, it is not at all bad at my own institution. I am in my 31st happy year at Princeton University, where I have never been subjected to intimidation or abuse. But anyone who is paying attention knows the cases that I have in mind at colleges and universities around the country.

But in referring to these cases of campus illiberalism you may have noticed that I spoke of this illiberalism as the way the problem I am concerned about “is most vividly manifest today.” In other words, the

denial of speaking opportunities, the disinviting of speakers due to their opinions, the disruption of meetings and shouting down of dissenting speakers, are what get the attention of the public. But these are merely some *manifestations*. The core of the problem is this: Many institutions are letting the side down when it comes to the transmission of knowledge by failing to ensure that our students, at every level, are confronted with, and have the opportunity to consider, the best that is to be said on competing sides of all questions that are in dispute among reasonable people of goodwill. They are permitting prevailing opinions on campus to harden into orthodoxies, orthodoxies that go largely unchallenged, leaving students with the false belief that there are in fact *no disputes* on these matters among reasonable people of goodwill. At the core of our problem is the toxic thing that provides an environment in which illiberalism flourishes and can be expected to manifest itself in the ways it manifests itself today, namely the phenomenon of groupthink.

We fail to understand the depth of problem, or appreciate the danger it poses to intellectual life, if we take a static view of knowledge, thinking of it as information that is passed into the mind of the recipient who records it there and draws upon it as needed. This is worse than an oversimplification. The transmission of knowledge very often goes beyond the acquisition of information (or skills) and requires the engagement of the knowledge seeker with competing perspectives and points of view. It also requires certain virtues, including open-mindedness, respect for what Mill called “liberty of thought and discussion,” intellectual humility—humility of the sort one can possess only insofar as one appreciates, and not merely notionally, one’s own fallibility—and love of truth. It is the task of colleges and universities, precisely as institutions of learning, to expose students to competing points of view and to foster in them those virtues. That is necessary not because there are no truths to be attained, but, rather, because the pursuit of truth and the deeper appropriation of truths and their meaning and significance, requires it.

You see, then, that whatever is to be said about claims that the predominance of certain views and their proponents on campuses, and the exclusion of others, the problem I am calling attention to here is less about unfairness than it is about the need to avoid and, where it has set in, overcome groupthink in order to fulfill a constitutive purpose of academic institutions. We owe that to our students—whether they like it or not. It is a scandal when students are graduated from liberal arts colleges and university liberal arts programs with no understanding (or, worse yet, grotesque misunderstandings) of the arguments advanced by serious scholars and thinkers who dissent from campus orthodoxies on issues such as those I mentioned a few minutes ago. Even if the opinions the students happen to have acquired in an environment of “political correctness” happen to be true, students’ ignorance of the arguments of dissenters will prevent them from understanding the truth as deeply as they should and actually appropriating it—that is to say, understanding *why* it is so and why

competing views have nevertheless attracted the attention and even the allegiance of serious thinkers.

I believe it was the great jurist Learned Hand who said that “the spirit of Liberty is the spirit of being not too sure one is right.” In making that point, Hand was not endorsing radical skepticism or relativism or anything of the sort. Rather, he was pointing to the need for the virtue of intellectual humility in light of the inescapable reality of human fallibility. His focus was on the need for that recognition and its corresponding virtue in the project of establishing and maintaining republican government and respect for freedom. But what he says about the spirit of liberty is also true of the spirit of truth seeking—a sense of one’s own fallibility, a sense that one could be wrong, even in one’s basic premises and most fundamental beliefs, an openness of mind, a willingness to entertain criticism and to engage critics, all of these things are essential to the truth seeking project, too. And that

means that they must be cultivated in institutions whose mission includes the pursuit and transmission of knowledge.

That is not to say that we should not be advocates of our points of view, or that we should not be engaged politically. I would be a gross hypocrite, at best, if I were to suggest any such thing. I myself am highly engaged politically. Now there *are* people who see political engagement as incompatible with the scholarly vocation. My friend Harry Frankfurt, the distinguished philosopher, inclines to that view. But he has not persuaded me. So I have no problem with scholars speaking out on political issues and getting involved in political causes. But politically engaged scholars, like all scholars, need to be highly cognizant of their own fallibility—even on matters about which they care deeply, and even when it comes to causes in which they are profoundly emotionally invested. Even as advocates, we must cultivate intellectual humility and a willingness to entertain the other guy's arguments in a serious way. One must never imagine that one cannot

possibly be wrong about this or that cherished conviction, or that one's political adversaries and intellectual critics cannot possibly be right.

That is fatal to the truth-seeking enterprise.

I think the proper attitude for us to hold is the attitude Plato teaches us to adopt, especially in his great dialogue we know as *Gorgias*. Socrates' attitude in that dialogue strikes me as exactly the one we need to emulate if we are to be good scholars and teachers. We must always be on the lookout for, and be open to, the true friend, that is to say, the person who will confer upon us the inestimable benefit of showing us that we are in error, where in fact we are in error. The true friend, in correcting our mistakes, does us the very best service. We need to see that, and we need to help our students to see it. The person who sees his intellectual adversary as an enemy to be defeated, rather than as a friend joined with him dialectically in the pursuit of a common aim, namely, knowledge of the truth, is already off the rails. He is in grave danger of falling into the ditch of sophistry.

So openness to argument, to having one's premises and most fundamental beliefs and values challenged, is vitally important to the knowledge-seeking mission that defines liberal arts institutions (and professional schools that share the knowledge-seeking aspirations of liberal arts institutions) as the kinds of things they are. A spirit of openness to argument and challenge, where it flourishes in an academic culture, is what immunizes academic institutions against groupthink and chases the groupthink away when it comes knocking at the door.

Part of the problem, of course, is that once groupthink has taken hold, folks who are caught up in it don't recognize the problem. When is the last time you met somebody who said, "yeah, you know what, my problem is that I'm caught up in groupthink. I tend to just think like everybody else around me thinks." I've heard someone say that only one time in my life—and she didn't put it quite that starkly. The trouble with groupthink is that when you're in it, you generally don't know

you're in it. You may realize that not everyone shares your views, but you will suppose that those who dissent from them are irrational or ill-motivated. You will imagine that anyone who disagrees with you is a rube or a bigot or a tool of nefarious interests—a fool or a fraud. When someone is in groupthink, he could pass a lie detector test claiming that he is not in groupthink. But that doesn't mean he's not in groupthink. And wherever ideological orthodoxies settle into place and are not subjected to serious questions and challenges, you have to worry about groupthink setting in. And that's true whether or not campus illiberalism manifests itself in the more visible ways we are now seeing so frequently, with dissenting speakers being excluded from campus or being shouted down, or whatever.

Now it seems to me that viewpoint diversity or what we might call in an academic setting intellectual diversity has its value as a kind of vaccine against groupthink, and as an antidote to groupthink when it begins to set in. Diversity of views, approaches, arguments and the like is the

cure for campus illiberalism. People who have the spirit of being not too sure that they are right, people who want to be challenged because they know that challenging and being challenged are integral and indispensable to the process of knowledge-seeking, such people (whatever their own personal views) will want intellectual diversity on campus in order for the institution to accomplish its mission.

Now of course we all know that it's pretty hard to get this intellectual diversity. And I think there are a number of reasons for that. While in my own experience it's true, and some of my more liberal colleagues tell me that in their experience it's true, that there is sometimes blatant, conscious, obviously deliberate discrimination against people who dissent from campus orthodoxies in hiring and promotion, I happen to think that blatant, conscious, deliberate discrimination is not the heart of the problem.

In fact, I think conscious, deliberate discrimination, though plainly it exists and needs to be dealt with, is *comparatively* rare. I believe the more fundamental challenge is something else.

In this vale of tears, we human beings, fallen and frail creatures that we are, have a lot of trouble appreciating meritorious work and even good arguments when they run contrary to our own opinions, especially when we're strongly emotionally attached to those opinions. As I see it, this isn't a liberal problem, or a progressive, or a left wing problem. It's a human nature problem. Anytime an intellectual or political orthodoxy has hardened into place—it doesn't matter whether it's a left wing orthodoxy or a right wing orthodoxy—it's going to be very difficult for a lot of people to draw the distinction between "work I disagree with despite its being really very good and challenging, and interesting, and important," and "work that goes contrary to what I just know to be true on issues that are important and critical to me and bound up with my sense of who I am as a, fill in the blank: [progressive, conservative,

feminist, libertarian, Christian, atheist, or whatever].” People will experience challenges to the dominant opinions as outrageous attacks on truth, indecent assaults on essential values, threats to what is good and true and right and just, intolerable violations of the norms of our community.

Now among my fellow critics of progressivism there are those—perhaps the majority—who disagree with my claim that the problem is a human nature problem, not a problem with the particular ideology that happens to dominate contemporary academic culture. The eminent historian of the Enlightenment Alan Kors of the University of Pennsylvania, with whom I almost always find myself in agreement, and I once debated this question for a few minutes on a radio broadcast on which the two of us were being interviewed. Professor Kors argued that the fundamental problem is, in some essential way, a left-liberal problem—a problem with progressive ideology itself—not a problem rooted in what in other circumstances we might call original sin. He

maintained that the dominant political-cultural perspective on campuses today is inherently illiberal. Perhaps he is right about that. I remain unconvinced. Still, I think that even if Professor Kors is right about the inherently illiberal nature of campus progressivism, it is also true that there is a human nature problem that we need to bear in mind—a problem that can be counted on to arise and to threaten the integrity of intellectual life anytime there is an absence of dissenting opinions against an ideological orthodoxy in an academic institution—especially when it afflicts *most* academic institutions, and most especially when it prevails at the wealthiest, most prestigious, and therefore most influential ones.

So I ask myself the question: Well what should we do? Of course, as a dissenter myself, and a member of a tiny minority, I'm not in a position of having much power to do anything. But I would say something to my friends who are on the more liberal or progressive side of the ideological street, and who perceive the problem as I do, and who think

something needs to be done about it. I would say, well, number one, of course, we need to expose and protest against any *conscious* discrimination based on viewpoint; and number two, by both precept and example, we need strongly to encourage our colleagues and students to be rigorously self-critical.

We need to encourage people to be self-critical in ways that would enable them honestly to say, as I might say about the work of, for example, my colleague at Princeton, Peter Singer. “Well, you know, I’m really scandalized by his defense of the moral permissibility of infanticide, but there’s an argument he makes that’s got to be met. And the burden is on me to make the argument that our dignity as human beings comes by virtue of our humanity—our status as rational creatures, beings possessing, at least in root form, even in the earliest stages of development, the capacities for the types of characteristically human activities that give human beings a special kind of standing and inviolability. The burden is on me in other words to meet his challenge.

I want my colleagues on the other side to take the same position about work by more conservative scholars, especially in these hot button areas. But I acknowledge that it's hard to do. And it's especially hard to do when orthodoxies have hardened into place and one is not even hearing arguments against one's own positions. And when one is not hearing them, and everybody one knows, and everybody in one's circle, tends to think the same thing about that body of issues, no matter how much diversity there is on other stuff, we're likely headed for groupthink.

When one is hearing the same thing from everyone whom one respects—when one is being reinforced in one's own opinions by all one's friends and colleagues, whether one is a student or faculty member—the motivation to think more critically tends to be very hard to work up. It really is. Working it up is so much easier when one is regularly, in the normal course of things, being challenged by thoughtful people who do not always see things just as one does

oneself. So it's best for us not to get ourselves into this fix in the first place by permitting ideological orthodoxies to form on college and university campuses. But if they have formed, then our challenge is to help our colleagues to appreciate work—and be willing to say that they appreciate work—that is meritorious even when they do not agree with the arguments or positions being advanced.

I want to give a couple of examples of the value of viewpoint, or intellectual diversity, again from my own experience. One is the James Madison Program at Princeton University, which I have the honor to direct. The program was founded 15 years ago. Its impact on the intellectual culture of Princeton, precisely by bringing viewpoint diversity into our community in a serious way, has been remarkable. It gives me enormous satisfaction that this opinion of mine is shared by many of my liberal colleagues who share none of my other opinions. They have praised the Madison Program for turning what might have been campus monologues into true dialogues—benefitting everybody

in the process. The presence on campus of an initiative like the Madison Program ensures that there are people around who think different things, even about fundamental issues that everybody cares about, and which many people assume all academics are on one side of.

That's great, because it means that in general discussions across the university, and not just at the Madison Program's own events, people cannot simply suppose that everybody in the room shares the same assumptions or holds the same opinions. People know that they have to defend their premises—because they will be challenged. That makes for a different, and much better, and more serious, kind of engagement—a kind of engagement that profoundly enriches the intellectual life for the entire community.

The second example, again from my own experience, is the experience I've had teaching with my dear friend and colleague Cornel West. Now Cornel and I really are on opposite sides of the ideological street. But

we regularly teach together at Princeton. Our most recent seminar included readings from Sophocles, Plato, St. Augustine, Marx, Mill, Newman, Kierkegaard, Hayek, Solzhenitsyn, John Dewey, C.S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Gabriel Marcel. What happens in our seminars is magical and the impact on our students is amazing. What you have here is a genuine collaboration. Professor West and I collaborate across the lines of ideological and political difference in the common project of truth-seeking, knowledge-seeking, wisdom-seeking, engaging with each other and our students in a serious, respectful, civil manner, striving to understand each other and learn from each other, treating each other not as enemies but as partners in the dialectical process of seeking truth, knowledge, wisdom.

Whether the book for the week is Machiavelli's *Prince*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk*, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, or Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, all of which we have taught in previous seminars, we can't wait for Wednesdays to come

each week so that we can be back in the classroom together. We have a wonderful time together, which is nice, and we learn from each other. Our approach is the very opposite of antiquarian: We look for the timeless meaning and contemporary significance of the texts we assign. We consider existential, moral, religious, and political questions that are important to us and our students in the context of the writings we examine.

And here is the thing that really matters: The students learn, and they learn how to learn. They learn to approach intellectual and political matters dialectically—critically engaging the most compelling points to be adduced in favor of competing ideas and claims. They learn the value and importance of mutual respect and civility. They learn from two guys with some pretty strong opinions, neither of whom is shy about stating them publicly, that the spirit of truth-seeking, like the spirit of liberty, is a spirit open to the possibility that one is in serious error.

Let me be more specific. I want you to understand what I'm saying here because what Cornel and I do really is, I believe, part of the cure for campus illiberalism. Now, I've always prided myself as a teacher on being able to represent, accurately and sympathetically, moral and political views I myself do not share. So if I'm teaching about abortion, or something having to do with affirmative action, or marriage, or religious freedom, or campaign finance and the First Amendment, or the Second Amendment right to bear arms, or whatever it is, in my constitutional interpretation classes or my civil liberties classes, I like to think that if someone came in who happened not to know which side I was on, they wouldn't be able to figure it out from my presentation of the competing positions and the arguments for and against them.

Now, that's not because I think professors should hide their views or anything like that. Outside the classroom, I certainly do not hide my views! It's just that I don't think that classrooms should be used to proselytize or push a moral or political agenda or recruit adherents for one's causes. There is a place for catechism classes and the like, but

that place is not the college or university classroom. The classroom is for exposing students to the best that is to be said for the competing views so that they can learn to think more carefully, critically, and, perhaps above all, for themselves. So, as I say, that is why I always, without fail, regardless of how much I care about an issue, present the very best arguments, not only for my own positions but for positions I strongly reject.

What I have learned in teaching with Cornel, though, is this—as good as I think I am at this, I am not good enough. The evidence for that is simply that time after time in the course of our seminars I have found Cornel saying something, or making a compelling point in response to a point that I or one of the more conservative students has made, that simply would not have occurred to me—a point that needs to be seriously considered and engaged. Had Cornel not been there, even doing my best to represent his side, the point would not have been made, and the benefit to be conferred on all of us in grappling with it

would not have been gained. And Cornel tells me that he has had precisely the same experience, time and time again. He has found me making points or developing lines of argument that, he says, he has never considered and which simply would not have occurred to him, despite the fact that he shares my aspiration to represent as fully and sympathetically as possible positions and arguments from across the spectrum.

Now that, it seems to me, is a very good argument for promoting intellectual diversity. By the way, I think it's a very good argument for team teaching. I think team teaching is a wonderful thing to do, especially if you have people who disagree about things teaching together. And the things in dispute do not have to be political things.

The disagreements might be about the proper interpretation of Shakespeare or the Bible, or any of a range of other subjects, especially (but not exclusively) in the humanities and social sciences. But it's a very valuable thing to do, and more of it should be done. But the truly

important thing is this: A healthy intellectual milieu is one in which students and scholars regularly encounter competing views and arguments, where intelligent dissent from dominant views is common and the value of dissent is understood and appreciated, where beliefs that can be supported by arguments and advanced in a spirit of goodwill are common enough that they do not strike people as reflections of ignorance, bigotry, or bad will, and people who do not share them do not experience them—because they seem so alien—as personal assaults or outrages against the community's values. It's great to have competing views among instructors in the classroom; I realize, however, that such a thing is a luxury that most institutions cannot afford to provide on a regular basis. But diversity among faculty on campus, even if not in the same classroom, helps to cure campus illiberalism. It voids the tendency of people—students and faculty alike—who hold positions that happen to be dominant to suppose that the college or university is theirs, and is for people like them, not for people who disagree with them. It sends a message that all who seek

knowledge of truth and wish to pursue it in a spirit of civility and mutual respect are welcome here as insiders sharing the truly constitutive values and goals of the community, not outsiders who are, at best, merely to be tolerated as if they were present in the community only on sufferance.

Am I advocating “affirmative action” for conservatives? Not at all. I’m advocating attitudes and practices that will cure campus illiberalism without the need to “recruit conservatives” or give conservative scholars preferences in hiring and promotion. If conscious and unconscious prejudice against people who dissent from prevailing orthodoxies were defeated, if intellectual diversity were truly valued for its vital contribution to the cause of learning, the hiring problems would take care of themselves. A historian such as Allen Guelzo would be at Yale or Stanford—hired by vote of a group of people few or none of whom happened to share his conservative politics or evangelical Christian faith. Harvard or the University of Chicago would be offering

to triple Jim Ceaser's salary to induce him to move from Charlottesville to Cambridge or Hyde Park. We would not have departments of sociology or politics or history with forty-three liberals and one conservative (or, more likely, one libertarian). Nor would we have the embarrassments, and the tragedy, of campus illiberalism.