

**Prepared Testimony and Statement for the Record of**

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**At the  
Hearing on “Challenges to Freedom of Speech on College Campuses, Part II”**

**Before the  
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
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You have invited me to testify about my own personal experiences with free speech issues on college campuses and what I have learned from them. It is an honor and a privilege to share some thoughts with you here today.

Many see a leftward ideological tilt among university professors and programs, as compared with the general population. While it is undeniably true that the overwhelming majority of American professors does not identify as conservative, the academy is not tilting leftward. Rather, it is defining college community in opposition to the life of the mind. This is no trivial reorientation. Nothing less than free inquiry and the civil discourse upon which American constitutional democracy depends is at stake.

**How Tribalism Trumps Truth**

As many of you I believe know, several of my students asked me to moderate a talk last year with the libertarian scholar Charles Murray. Dr. Murray was drowned out by shouting students who never let him speak, we were forced to retreat to another location to live stream our conversation, and he and I were intimidated and physically assaulted while trying to leave campus.<sup>1</sup>

Student protestors objected to Charles Murray being invited into “their home.” Their choice of words was revealing. Having a home is important, because home is a safe space that energizes and empowers. Having a home and feeling at home are something the privileged and powerful are likely to take for granted and the dominated envy and crave. Everybody needs a home, yet that is precisely what was taken from me.

The dialogue on campus that emerged thereafter was one that surprised me greatly. Everyone condemned the violence, but few saw a connection between the shutdown efforts and what happened to me. The inconvenient truth of my serious injuries was instead portrayed as unfortunate collateral damage unconnected to the censorship of speech—essentially, my

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/understanding-the-angry-mob-that-gave-me-a-concussion.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/education/edlife/middlebury-divided-campus-charles-murray-free-speech.html>; and <https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Stanger.pdf>

whiplash and concussion were beside the point. Fifteen months later, I am still being treated for my injuries.

The ensuing debates on campus presented the choice as one of freedom of expression versus college community. To my mind, the community's values were a shared commitment to the life of the mind and the pursuit of truth. To some of the protestors, however, freedom of speech was a weapon designed to inflict harm on traumatized students and perpetuate white supremacy. They saw me as an extremist devoid of empathy who was rightfully combatted with extremism. In the weeks that followed, a majority of faculty viewed the dispute that had emerged as akin to a bad divorce, where there are two competing narratives with no common ground. They kept their heads down, finding it prudent not to take sides between what they perceived to be warring factions.

When you feel like a victim of injustice, and you witness colleagues in what was once your home avoiding conflict and ducking difficult questions, as we humans are prone to do, a lot of things that you never quite understood before begin to make sense. I had never previously understood how Thomas Jefferson could draft the Declaration of Independence and simultaneously own slaves. Now I do. I had never previously understood how a man as brilliant as Martin Heidegger could join the Nazi Party. Now I do. When everyone around you is mindlessly repeating the same thing, evil becomes normalized through thoughtlessness fueled by self-interest. When people stop thinking for themselves, it is easier to treat other humans as a means to an alleged higher end, rather than as ends in themselves.

It is because human beings are instinctively tribal and prone to groupthink that freedom of speech is so important for civility, both in the polis and in the ivory tower. The simple fact that great minds like Jefferson could turn a blind eye to noxious racism needs to be owned if we are to confront inequality in contemporary America with requisite force. For that we need reason and free inquiry, however, not militant ideology. We need reason to combat the excesses of the extreme right and the extreme left. Brute force or fire-with-fire tactics only fan extremism's flames. We need free inquiry to expose and battle injustice. The academy must take the lead in educating our students and the public on the dangerous consequences of believing you can build a better world through the dehumanization of other human beings.

Much is at stake in defending freedom of expression in our universities, because democracy cannot function when ideology trumps truth. In a 1974 interview, Hannah Arendt explained, "If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer... And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."<sup>2</sup>

With an eye to the future, in a big data world, where computer algorithms function like ideology, thinking for yourself will become only all the more important for defending individuality and civil liberties. Confronted with group-based statistical patterns, the challenge will be to continue to remember the individual. Just as human beings should not be reduced to algorithms, partisan convictions should not be permitted to censor the ideas of others.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/> .

## What is to be Done?

While understandable, calls for viewpoint diversity in the academy will not entirely address the problem, because they simply further politicize a realm that should make every effort to transcend politics and give every scholarly argument its proper due, regardless of its origins and regardless of what majority opinion might be. Balancing left and right (a political agenda) is thus of lesser importance than allowing reason and logic to reign supreme.

The university must insist on the unfettered pursuit of truth or lose its *raison d'être*. College presidents must stand firm on the importance of freedom of expression for the life of the mind and insist that their institutions uphold the ground rules for the pursuit of truth. Here it is important to remember that young student radicals are not likely to be compromisers by definition, and because they are still developing, they may not know as much about how the world operates as they think they do (that is why they are getting an education). College administrators must therefore have the strength of character to listen empathetically, but also to safeguard the evidence-based world when activists challenge the university's core mission, even when students of color, who have earned the right to be angry, believe they are defending their very humanity.

Department Chairs would do well to recall that the university should be a place where one department may find something worthwhile that another despises. The aim should not be the creation of universal codes of acceptable speech but instead the freedom for individuals and departments to exchange ideas without being ostracized by others. Embracing interdisciplinarity and actively seeking to engage with the views of those with whom we might disagree are also important rules of the road.

Professors must model the behavior we want to see from our students, which means that we must all strive to be better listeners who are also open to learning ourselves. We must learn from the emotions we encounter, while at the same time affirming that liberal education ends when emotion is valued more than reason. Saying that something is true simply because it's how people feel is what allows community to be defined in opposition to free inquiry. Our celebration of the life of the mind, however, should not blind us to the work that still needs to be done in this country, as James Baldwin wrote, to "end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."<sup>3</sup>

With respect to our students, we must equip them with the tools to fight injustice and unfairness in all its manifestations. We must deliver an education that allows them to realize that reason and logic, so often used against them, can in reality be weapons of the weak against the powerful. This is not to deny the place of emotion in education, which can be harnessed for improvement of both ourselves and the university. The voices of the marginalized must be amplified and heard, while remembering, always, that extremism in all its permutations is ultimately the denial of empathy's importance for human flourishing.

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<sup>3</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* in James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1998), pp. 346-347.

Finally, there is a role for every American citizen to play, especially distinguished members of Congress. Each and every one of us can model the behavior we would like to see from others. Our political discourse would improve immeasurably if all of us would simply renounce lies and ad hominem attacks masquerading as arguments and instead call them out for what they are: threats to the civil discourse on which free inquiry, democracy, and the rule of law depend.

On this simple truth, reasonable Democrats and Republicans alike can agree. One need look no further for evidence than former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's commencement speech at the Virginia Military Institute last week. "If our leaders seek to conceal the truth, or we as people become accepting of alternative realities that are no longer grounded in facts, then we as American citizens are on a pathway to relinquishing our freedom," Tillerson said. "This is the life of nondemocratic societies, comprised of people who are not free to seek the truth... A responsibility of every American citizen to each other is to preserve and protect our freedom by recognizing what truth is and is not, what a fact is and is not. We begin by holding ourselves accountable to truthfulness and demand that our pursuit of America's future be fact-based."<sup>4</sup>

While breaking with our own tribe for the sake of the truth may be uncomfortable, we as Americans are indisputably free to do it. We owe it to ourselves and to our children, who are watching us, to avoid taking the path of least resistance and instead do what is right, both to defend truth and the Republic.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.vmi.edu/cadet-life/life-on-post/corps-events/livestream/>. Tillerson's speech begins at 53:29.