

# The bomb threats against Howard University affect far more than a single university

Historically Black colleges and universities are being attacked as their success becomes more visible

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On Monday, Howard University issued an all-clear after telling students and faculty to stay indoors because of a bomb threat — the fourth that the university has received since early January. Nor is Howard alone. The leaders of some 16 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and nearly a dozen D.C. high schools are scrambling to protect their campus communities amid similar threats.

These threats are reminiscent of historic efforts to attack African Americans in vulnerable communal spaces, such as the 1963 bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church that killed four little girls. They also represent a specific attack on core institutions of Black communities.

For generations, when Black people suffered the daily threat of violence and were denied the full rights of citizenship, HBCUs provided a refuge in which students and thinkers could foster alternative ideas and demand that U.S. democracy live up to its promises. Now, these institutions themselves are being threatened with violence. Such threats may roll back the protections that HBCUs provided, stifling their contribution to American democracy.

## Black colleges and universities played a crucial political role

In his pioneering book, “Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism,” historian Jelani M. Favors explains how the very creation of HBCUs was an act of resistance against views of African Americans that limited their place in U.S. society. The vast majority of HBCUs formed in the South sought to serve the needs of newly freed men and women. These institutions had the goal of providing students of African American, African and Caribbean descent with a safe opportunity to further their education beyond high school. Additionally, HBCUs are sites of political, social and economic development in Black society.

These institutions were more than just sites of learning. They were also spaces of refuge from the violent clashes happening across the United States in the post-Reconstruction era that sought to narrow Black people’s access to democracy or exclude them altogether. This legacy continued throughout the social uprisings associated with the anti-Vietnam War, civil rights and Black power movements that sought to realize the promises of America’s professed commitment to democracy.

HBCUs had the goal of educating Black people. But unlike their White counterparts, these schools were never racially exclusive. Instead, they provided educational opportunity to all. That legacy of racial affirmation helped provide students with the intellectual and social tools to understand and challenge the systemic racism in U.S. politics and society. It also meant these schools did not just have to navigate the ordinary difficulties of higher education in the United States, but also a specific hostility to schools that were seen as threatening the existing racial order.

Today, HBCUs make up only 3 percent of U.S. colleges, yet they produce almost 20 percent of all African American graduates as well as significant numbers of Black professionals in law, medicine, technology and education. HBCUs forged their ethos in the centuries-long struggle for an abolitionist democracy that would benefit everyone. This led them to emphasize graduating young people with lifelong commitments to the larger social good as their core mission. The visibility of HBCUs has increased in recent years, thanks to the achievements of high-profile alumni such as Vice President Harris, Sen. Raphael G. Warnock (D-Ga.), and Stacey Abrams and staff like Deon Sanders, as well recent philanthropic donations from wealthy donors, who have sought to alleviate their long-standing and chronic underfunding.

## Increased visibility means increased vulnerability

As HBCUs have become more visible while U.S. racial tensions abound, the schools have become more obvious targets, as demonstrated by the new campaign of bomb hoaxes. These hoax calls have exerted a significant toll on the health and safety of students, faculty and staff of these anchor institutions. Their costs are compounded by the increased surveillance necessary to protect community members.

The FBI has identified a half-dozen “tech savvy” juveniles as possible culprits behind the bomb threats. Margaret Huang, president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center, argues that secondary school education on racial justice and race would help counter the racist extremism, which has allegedly led some young people to target students their own age.

Huang may well be correct, but there is no political consensus to provide this kind of education. Even mentioning the issue of racial equity has led to book bannings, campaigns against teaching what some inaccurately call “critical race theory” and hostility in many U.S. school systems.

The bomb threats, like violence and defacement against synagogues, mark an increased willingness to attack the cultural and educational institutions of groups that have traditionally been discriminated against. HBCUs have provided freedom, education and safety to those whose citizenship was historically limited or denied. Now, this historical bulwark of American democracy is itself being attacked through violent threats.

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