

A 2019 conversation with some highly degreed Ivy Leaguers still rings in my ears. A number of white academic advocates of the term *Latinx* told me, when I still represented Nebraska in the Senate, that it would be “racist” not to teach newly arrived El Salvadoran immigrants to rural Nebraska to refer to themselves by this newly invented word. To recall the aphorism attributed—probably apocryphally—to George Orwell: “Some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe them.”

Harvard, Princeton, and Yale were originally founded as seminaries. They are seminaries once again. The doctrine they embrace is both insecure and oppressive in its prohibition of insiders and outsiders from pursuing free inquiry. Rather than wrestle with hard questions about human dignity, individual agency, and speech, many in the Ivy League seem poised to double down on fanaticism.

Cults tend to excuse their failures: The world is ending, but our mystic math was a little off. As this crisis unfolds, America’s elite academics are tinkering with their doctrinal formulas. Rather than abandon their theology, they’re attempting to rejigger the charts and reweight the numerology.

We cannot heal these declining institutions simply by recalculating the grid so that Jewish people are moved from the “powerful” square to a “powerless” slot. The problem is the tyranny of the power grid itself, and its disinterest in both ideas and universal human dignity.

Changing one president here or there isn’t enough. Intersectionality is a religious cult that’s dominated higher education for nearly a decade with the shallow but certain idea that power structures are everything, the Neanderthal view that blunt force trumps human dignity.

The nonsense we’ve seen seeping off campuses this fall is jarring but not surprising, given that the absurdities inside this worldview have not been pressure-tested. This is because its adherents, those who wield the power of some of our society’s most prominent institutions, have prohibited anyone from asking questions, demanding that their religion remain immune to challenge.

Rebellion against this arrogant worldview was inevitable. Many of us have long expected a correction against the certainties of this campus creed, and I suspect that the public’s They can’t say what? reaction to Kornbluth, Gay, and Magill might prove to be a breaking point. While populists have always found the bashing of elites fashionable, this moment calls for something more constructive. It also calls for something deeper than free speech for free speech’s sake.

We ought to dispense with the laughably absurd notion that these university presidents are somehow steadfast champions of free speech. Where was this commitment when MIT canceled a speech from a climate scientist who voiced opposition to affirmative action? Where was this obligation when a lecturer said she felt pushed out of Harvard for suggesting that sex is a biological fact? Where was this duty when Penn tried to fire a law-school professor who made odious comments about minority groups and immigration policy? These elite institutions make the rules up as they go and stack the deck against disfavored groups. Ask conservative students how many loopholes they have to jump through to reserve spaces or invite speakers. Ask the students who report holding back their views in class or paper—topic selection for fear of facing consequences. For that matter, ask anyone who has been paying attention for the past 20 years. These universities aren’t doggedly committed to free speech; they’re desperately trying to

find some cover. The expensive public-relations firms they’ve hired for crisis management are grasping at straws.

This is not merely—or primarily—a free-speech issue. Yes, of course, universities ought to be informed by speech. At the University of Florida—where, despite the Ivy League’s hegemony of the national conversation, we award twice as many bachelor’s degrees each year to extraordinary students as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton combined—we are proud to uphold the First Amendment rights of all our students. America’s First Amendment gives everyone the right to make an abject idiot of themselves, and we will defend that right as we also defend our students from violence, vandalism, and harassment. But this is deeper than those speech issues. What’s at stake is nothing less than the mission of a university. Our campuses are meant to be communities of scholars pursuing truth together, in a community built to discover, teach, share, and refine. A foundational commitment to human dignity is essential to the very purpose of education. Unfortunately, the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and Penn abandoned that commitment in front of Congress last week. At a perilous moment, they failed the test.

Higher education is facing a crisis of public trust. The simple fact of the matter is, fewer and fewer Americans believe that universities are committed to the pursuit of truth. Understanding why isn’t hard at a time when elite institutions make excuses for illiberal mobs. The perception that ideologues and fanatics are running the show on campus is, sadly, based in reality. The public sees it. Donors see it. Boards see it. Alumni see it. We recognize callousness and indifference—we saw it from Big Tobacco in 1994 and we’re seeing it from the Ivy League now. The public is not about to forget it.

As administrators, donors, faculty, and trustees of institutions around the country, this is our moment. It is up to us to rebuild trust in higher education. It is our responsibility to speak plainly, defend our students, defend pluralism, and tend to the high calling of educating.

The only way forward is for universities to embrace classical liberalism—with its values of freedom, tolerance, and pluralism, all grounded in human dignity. Recasting oppressors and oppressed is a dead end. As the cult of intersectionality implodes before our eyes, it is time for higher education to commit itself to earnestly engaging new ideas and respectfully participating in big debates on a whole host of issues. Universities must reject victimology, celebrate individual agency, and engage the truth with epistemological modesty. Institutions ought to embrace open inquiry. Education done rightly should be defined by big-hearted debates about important issues.

More curiosity, less orthodoxy. Explore everything with humility, including views of sex and gender that were standard until the previous decade, classical traditions, America’s promise and progress, and the concept of universal human dignity—the very thing that Hamas and its apologists reject. Engage the ideas. Pull apart the best arguments with the best questions. Do it again and again and again. Build communities that take ideas seriously, so that scholars and students can grow in both understanding and empathy.

Self-government makes high demands of its citizens. Today’s students will be called to lead in a complicated world where not everyone will agree, where trade-offs will be necessary, where basic values inform the work of navigating complex realities. The current illiberal climate on campuses is the kind of tragedy that could doom a republic. We cannot let that happen.

To keep America’s universities the envy of the world, we need to make our institutions welcoming homes for those who are passionate about the glorious mission of education and the communities of free thought it requires. If you entered academia because you share that joy, find institutions that are serious about renewing higher education and are serious about stewarding this incredible calling. Those of us—left, right, or center—who value human dignity, pluralism, and genuine progress and who want to make sure that we pass these blessings to the next generation cannot abandon institutions to post-liberals on the left who would destroy them from within or post-liberals on the right who would tear them to the ground. At our best, the academy promotes human flourishing in ways that no other sector can. If we commit ourselves to the work of creating, discovering, and serving—not enforcing impersonal hierarchies of power or stifling inquiry—we’ll rebuild public trust.

Those of us called to higher education—members of boards, presidents, administrators, professors, and donors—owe it to future generations to build something better.

Mr. McCONNELL. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. OSSOFF). Without objection, it is so ordered.

The majority whip.

ISRAEL

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, it has been 2 months since the horrific Hamas attack that killed 1,200 innocent Israelis and saw another 240 people taken hostage—some of them Americans, including Hersh Goldberg-Polin with family in my State of Illinois.

For anyone who watched 60 Minutes this past weekend, the ordeal shared by one of the released hostages was harrowing and almost unimaginable. These hostages have been subjected to brutal physical and psychological torture. Some 115 hostages are believed to still be held, and I have long called for a humanitarian pause by both sides that includes the release of all the hostages as quickly as possible.

I believe this remains the right path forward, and I hope our government will pursue this goal. But make no mistake, this Hamas attack was a reminder that there are still those who do not recognize Israel’s right to exist. I do; and I understand their right to self-defense.

But what has happened since October 7 raises larger questions about how Israel should defend itself, how it should retaliate and address the long-term need for two neighboring people to learn to live in peace.

Early in this conflict, I urged Israel to learn from our mistakes in the United States after the deadly attacks on September 11, to not make the mistakes in the fog of their rage and pain that we made. I fear some of the important lessons we learned the hard way may not have been heeded by this Israeli Government.

While Israel has every right to defend itself, the humanitarian toll inflicted on the people of Gaza has been of historic magnitude and increasingly becomes counterproductive to Israel's long-term security.

We are nearing an estimated 20,000 deaths in Gaza. A significant majority of those are not Hamas fighters—they are innocent women and children.

Last week, the leaders of some of the world's top relief organizations wrote in the *New York Times*:

More children have been reported killed in this conflict than in all major global conflicts combined last year.

Hospitals have had to try to treat civilians without the most basic medicines, using only Tylenol for pain management—even in amputations—and vinegar as a disinfectant of last resort.

There are growing fears that disease outbreaks will soon replace the war as the primary cause of death in Gaza. This is simply not an acceptable strategy.

Over the last few weeks, I have spoken to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths, and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry about reopening hospitals under third-party monitoring.

I have also raised the humanitarian toll directly with Israeli officials. Basic medical needs, beyond treating the wounded, are staggering and include curbing a potential infectious disease outbreak and caring for thousands of expectant mothers.

As such, I again call on Hamas and Israel to stand down from all military actions around Gaza's hospital and allow them to function and be resupplied under a credible, third-party monitor.

I also continue to remind our Israeli allies that any U.S. military assistance must be used in accordance with the laws of war; and, as such, I have joined Senator CHRIS VAN HOLLEN of Maryland on an amendment to the proposed National Security Supplemental reinforcing this basic point.

The burden is higher in times of war for democracies, but adherence to such norms is what makes democracy distinct.

This horrible conflict has caused so much suffering and is a wake-up call to the need for a two-State solution that allows for a viable Palestinian State living in peace side by side with a secure Israel.

For years, I have warned that despite heroic efforts at such an agreement, spoilers on both sides have repeatedly undermined progress. So we have two challenges, one very immediate: End the suffering and release the remaining hostages immediately; and the second, finally commit to finding a two-State peace agreement.

This will take leadership from both Palestinians and Israelis. And let me be blunt: I do not see the current leadership of either having the vision or political will to take this desperately needed step.

But it is the only way forward. It is the only way that the region and international community will fully commit to helping rebuild Gaza and support a unified Palestinian leadership. It is the only way to end the threat of violence and bring a future of hope to both Israel and the Palestinian people.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BROWN. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HICKENLOOPER). Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Ohio.

CONFIRMATION OF MARTIN O'MALLEY

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, everything we do here should come back to the dignity of work, the idea that hard work should pay off for everyone, no matter who you are, no matter where you live, no matter what kind of work you do. When work has dignity, people have good jobs, a secure retirement. They can count on Medicare. They can count on Social Security to be there for them.

That is why we, 2 years ago, saved the pension of 100,000 Ohioans who worked their whole lives to earn a pension and peace of mind in retirement. That is why we are still fighting for Delphi retirees who lost their pensions through no fault of their own. That is why we will always—always—fight back against attacks on Social Security. Making sure that all Americans have a secure retirement shouldn't be a partisan issue.

Social Security and Medicare are two of the most popular and unifying institutions in the country. Social Security is our government's promise to working men and women—a promise that they will, in fact, be able to retire with dignity.

Support for Social Security cuts across party lines, geographic lines, and racial lines. Americans want not only to protect Social Security and Medicare, they want to make it stronger. Martin O'Malley, whom we confirmed last night, understands this. As Commissioner, he will make sure that the Social Security Administration is accessible and responsive. He will ensure we are keeping this bedrock promise to the American people.

We need to do our part in this body too. It means passing my Social Security Fairness Act to repeal restrictions from two old laws that are preventing more than 3 million Americans—about 250,000 people in my State alone, including Ohio law enforcement—from receiving the Social Security benefits they have earned.

Ohio first responders put their lives on the line to protect our communities. They paid into Social Security just like everyone else. All these Ohio workers are asking for is what they

have earned; that is, the dignity of a secure retirement.

We need to pass my bill to reform the supplemental security income—so-called SSI—program's outdated restrictions that punish people for working and saving, preventing 8 million Americans with disabilities from building a better life for themselves. It hasn't changed in 40 years. We should update it.

If these Americans have even \$1 more than \$2,000 in their savings account or \$3,000 for married couples—not very high, frankly—all their SSI benefits are taken away. With these outdated rules, there is no way to save for an emergency or plan for the future or, in essence, have agency over your own life.

There is broad support for this; it is not partisan; it is not ideological. At the committee I chair, the Banking and Housing Committee, I asked the CEOs of the eight largest banks if they supported this change, and every single one of them said yes. Every single one endorsed my bill. The big banks and I don't agree on much of anything, but we do agree on this.

By passing our bipartisan bill to update this outdated program, we also can fix the root cause of the SSI overpayments and clawbacks that have been hitting too many Ohioans. This has gone on for far too long and has hurt too many Ohioans, who—again, through no fault of their own—have been forced to deal with the issue of overpayments because of the SSA's outdated policies. Ohioans shouldn't be paying for the government's mistakes.

Martin O'Malley, our new Commissioner, made it clear to me in a one-on-one meeting that he is committed to working with us to finally address the root causes of these overpayments; and by increasing the asset limit, we are addressing what the SSA calls the leading cause of overpayments—stopping them before they ever go out in the first place.

These bills are bipartisan. They provide real fixes to real problems for hard-working Ohioans. People who don't have special interests are speaking out on their behalf. They have us, and it is what we should be—those who are speaking out for them. For years, they have watched politicians give corporate tax cuts; they have watched Wall Street bailouts, in many cases in this body while plotting to cut their Social Security.

In the end, it is about whose side you are on. I will always fight to protect Social Security and to make sure Americans get the retirements that they have earned.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

CONFIRMATION OF JULIE A. SU

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, as 2023 comes to a close, I rise to mark a year of historic progress for working people in our country.

Since President Biden took office, we have created more than 14 million jobs,