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Campus Antisemitism, Free Speech and Double Standards

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The presidents of Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania testified before a House committee on Tuesday about the state of antisemitism on their campuses. It did not go well for them.

Representative Elise Stefanik, a New York Republican, asked the presidents whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” violated the schools’ codes of conduct or constituted “bullying or harassment.” None of them could answer with a yes. M.I.T.’s Sally Kornbluth said it could be, “if targeted at individuals, not making public statements.” Penn’s Elizabeth Magill called it “a context-dependent decision.” Harvard’s Claudine Gay agreed with Magill and added that it depended on whether “it crosses into conduct.”

By the next day, those answers were drawing rebukes not only from Republicans and wealthy donors like Bill Ackman and Marc Rowan, but also from prominent Democrats. The Harvard law professor emeritus Laurence Tribe reproached Gay for “hesitant, formulaic and bizarrely evasive answers.” Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania, who is a nonvoting board member at Penn, called Magill’s answer “unacceptable.” The White House also weighed in: “It’s unbelievable that this needs to be said,” a spokesman, Andrew Bates, said. “Calls for genocide are monstrous and antithetical to everything we represent as a country.”

I have some sympathy for the three presidents following their stumbling performance. None have been in their jobs for long. They all expressed abhorrence for antisemitism during more than three hours of testimony. And they are clearly struggling with how to balance respect for free expression on campus with opposition to hate speech. When Magill later posted a video trying to clarify her remarks, she had the broken look of someone who thought she was about to be sacked.

But the deep problem with their testimonies was not fundamentally about calls for genocide or free speech. It was about double standards — itself a form of antisemitism, but one that can be harder to detect.

The double standard is this: Colleges and universities that for years have been notably censorious when it comes to free speech seem to have suddenly discovered its virtues only now, when the speech in question tends to be especially hurtful to Jews.

From left, Dr. Claudine Gay, the president of Harvard University; Liz Magill, the president of University of Pennsylvania; Dr. Pamela Nadell, a professor of history and Jewish studies at American University; and Dr. Sally Kornbluth, the president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, testifying on Wednesday. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

The point came across at different moments in the hearing. Representative Tim Walberg, a Michigan Republican, observed that Carole Hooven, an evolutionary biologist, had been hounded out of Harvard (though not fired outright) for her views on sex categories. “In what world,” Walberg asked, “is a call for violence against Jews protected speech but a belief that sex is biological and binary isn’t?” Gay offered no real answer. Representative Donald Norcross, a New Jersey Democrat, asked Magill if she would permit a hypothetical conference of 25 racists to go forward at Penn — given that in September, under the banner of free expression, she had allowed a conference that included speakers she herself had condemned as antisemitic to take place at the school. She could not bring herself to answer yes.

Other examples abound. M.I.T.’s alleged commitment to viewpoint diversity, which Kornbluth extolled at the House hearing, was hardly evident two years ago, when one of its departments canceled a scientific talk by the University of Chicago geophysicist Dorian Abbot because he had questioned the wisdom of some diversity initiatives.

At Stanford, the university issued a statement after the attacks of Oct. 7 saying it “does not take positions on geopolitical issues and news events.” Yet Stanford was outspoken on the subject of George Floyd’s murder.

At Yale, the law professor Amy Chua was relieved of some teaching duties and ostracized by students and the administration on blatantly pretextual grounds while her original sin, as The Times reported in 2021, was her praise for Brett Kavanaugh. Yet when Zareena Grewal, an associate professor of American studies at Yale, posted on X on Oct. 7 that Israel “is a murderous, genocidal settler state and Palestinians have every right to resist through armed struggle,” Yale defended her by saying Grewal’s comments “represent her own views.”

The word for all this is hypocrisy. Gay, Kornbluth and Magill may not be personally to blame for it, because they only recently took over the helm of their schools. But there’s an institutional hypocrisy that they at least have a duty to acknowledge.

They also must decide: If they are seriously committed to free speech — as I believe they should be — then that has to go for *all* controversial views, including when it comes to incendiary issues about race and gender, as well as when it comes to hiring or recruiting an ideologically diverse faculty and student body. If, on the other hand, they want to continue to forbid and punish speech they find offensive, then the rule must apply for *all* offensive speech, including calls to wipe out Israel or support homicidal resistance.

If Tuesday’s hearing made anything clear, it’s that the time for having it both ways, at the expense of Jews, must come to an end now.

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