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Opinion

Why I Stood Up: The Case Against Summers

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"The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable" could serve as the epitaph for the presidency of University President Lawrence H. Summers. While his supporters might defend this infamous phrase in the name of "freedom of expression" or excuse it as an unfortunate slip, critics find it typical of a carelessness of expression that mocks both logic and human decency—a carelessness that pursued him into his presidency.

There is much public confusion over why Summers resigned, and the speculations are a Rorschach of the right's views on what's wrong with America. The consensus circles around two allegations. Some judge that elite university academics are lazy and complacent, while others have blamed the Faculty's "political correctness"—which one alumnus defined as "exquisite sensitivity to minority issues." Those who know that neither allegation is true leap to the conclusion that Summers was ousted by some tiny "cabal."

As the sponsor of the resolution that led to the 218-185 "no-confidence" vote in March 2005, I offer one perspective from the heart of the rather large cabal called the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), which functions, or suffers, under the president's authority far more than the schools of law, business, and medicine. Yet I was also goaded by complaints from the schools of education and public health, University Health Services staff, and minority students generally. Summers' selective respect for disciplines, persons, and the truth itself inspired mistrust far and wide.

Harvard professors are hardly, as a rule, sticklers for "exquisite sensitivity to minority issues." In 1988, Yiddish literature professor Ruth R. Wisse described the Palestinians as "people who breed and bleed and advertise their misery." In 1994, the late psychology professor Richard J. Herrnstein argued in "The Bell Curve" that African-Americans and Hispanics are inherently less intelligent than whites. In 2001, government professor Harvey C. Mansfield '53 speculated that the presence of black students was the cause of grade inflation at Harvard, and in 2002 law professor Alan M. Dershowitz conditionally endorsed torture by the Israeli and U.S. governments.

Those who detect laziness and complacency in the Harvard Faculty willfully ignore the rigor of the University's hiring process. Harvard assembles a staggering array of data and specialists' opinions before conferring tenure, making it the most sought-after and demanding appointment in the academic world. It is therefore difficult to imagine a human population more compulsive in its work ethic than Harvard professors. Fallible as we are, we are people trained by decades of education, and we believe that the best thinking is a collective process in which civility, fairness, respect for critical feedback, and the scrupulous avoidance of conflicts of interest are indispensable.

Enter Larry Summers. The 1991 "toxic waste" memo that Summers signed while World Bank chief economist was worrisome enough. But Summers' muscular display at Harvard's bully pulpit replaced our worry with fear. Soon after 9/11, Summers delivered a speech urging the University to be more patriotic and directing the Kennedy School to give its next public service award to a military official. Such a demand smacks of McCarthyism and threatens the indispensable principle of scholarship: that evidence, logic, and self-scrutiny must prevail over any test of group loyalty.

Better publicized was Summers' spat with world-renowned African-American philosopher Cornel R. West '74, who, as a University Professor, occupied the most selective rank of tenured professorship. Summers, according to West, instructed West to change his writings, discontinue his support of certain political candidates, and make regular compliance reports to Summers. When West complained, Summers reportedly made unsubstantiated insinuations about West's personal life at a New York Times editorial board meeting, according to Richard Bradley's "Harvard Rules."

Why didn't Summers attack any of a half-dozen other Harvard professors who published in similar venues and who, unlike West, had published intellectually unsound and morally reprehensible positions on, for example, torture? Was it racist or merely callous when, in 2004, Summers stated that the massive suffering of America's indigenous people was largely unintentional?

West was not, however, the only victim of Summers' silverback leadership style. For lack of space here, one example of Summers' administrative style will have to stand in for dozens of experiences by professors, deans, and administrators. When an untenured female law professor asked a question during a faculty meeting about Summers' proposal to move the Law School to Allston, Summers publicly embarrassed her by calling her question stupid.

Summers also clamped down on faculty and student criticism of Israel. When, in 2002, professors and students at Harvard and MIT petitioned for divestment from companies doing business with Israel until the country ended its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, Summers called the petition's signers "anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent." His conviction lay not in any evidence of the petitioners' personal anti-Semitism, or of their inaction against racism in Sudan and South Africa, or in any disproof that Israel was committing illegal acts of occupation or violence against its indigenous people—all with extraordinary

financial, military, and diplomatic support from our government. Summers' inference rested merely on the fact that the petition was being circulated at the same time that innocent Jews were being assaulted and Jewish cemeteries being vandalized in Europe.

Summers' January 2005 speech at the National Bureau of Economic Research emphasizing women's innate deficiencies and dismissing well-documented forms of gender discrimination was thus the jagged tip of an iceberg.

As the President of Harvard University, Summers spoke for us, was legitimized by our reputation for scholarly excellence, and, in censoring our communications and invitations to guest lecturers, prevented us from speaking for ourselves.

Even when given the opportunity in his final days as president to speak up for our most cherished ideals, he failed us. According to a January Institutional Investor article, Summers' protégé, economics professor Andrei Shleifer '82, engaged in rank conflicts of interest while directing Harvard's USAID-sponsored project to set up Russian capital markets. Summers knew a great deal about the case. He had testified on the matter in federal court, and Shleifer's investments had, according to Institutional Investor, long been known in the economics department. Summers was surely aware of the \$26.5 million in legal fees and fines that Harvard was forced to pay. Yet, asked at the Feb. 7 Faculty meeting for his thoughts on the matter, Summers professed ignorance and refused to affirm the principle behind the affidavits that every professor with grant funding must sign—that we will not maintain investments whose profitability could be affected by our official research. At that critical moment, Summers' reputation for "straight talk" failed him, and the selectiveness of his respect for truth, scholarly integrity, and equal justice became exquisitely self-evident.

The university is the one place in U.S. society intended to guarantee the freedom to state the truth based upon evidence, logic, and self-scrutiny. Here, no bully can batter us, no political action committee can bribe us, and no boss can fire us for expressing a contrary opinion. The truths that we infer are subject to no test of patriotism or loyalty. Without such freedom of expression, we risk leaving life-and-death conversations to the people least able to engage tête-à-tête, those who prefer gun-to-gun, bomb-to-bomb, and plane-to-tower.

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