

January 10, 2024

The downfall of Claudine Gay is a case study of ideological distortion. The established narrative nearly everywhere is that Gay initially came under fire for her slow response to the Hamas attacks of October 7, and to the rise of anti-semitic harassment on the Harvard campus. After her disastrous appearance before Elise Stefanik and others in Congress, the attacks on Gay expanded into a plagiarism scandal, which eventually led to her resignation.

Nearly everything in that capsule summary is either false or misleading.

Her response to the attacks of Oct. 7 was not slow, and if anything she bowed to pressure to characterize legitimate student responses in terms of anti-Semitic harassment. It is questionable what the role of a University President is in condemning the brutalities of Hamas themselves, and therefore not clear how Gay's response is to be faulted there. The 'plagiarism' scandal is ambiguous as well and she did not resign but was forced out.

It is important to sort out a few of the basic facts of the case before they are lost forever in the media storm and the culture wars. For me what has been most astonishing about the whole thing is how quickly and firmly a misleading narrative establishes itself, with the help of media outlets from Fox News to the New York Times. I don't claim any special knowledge here, but I do have some sense of how the events at Harvard unfolded in real time.

So, first, the Oct. 7 attacks were on a Friday and there was a statement from Gay and other administrators circulated on Monday Oct 9. In the meantime, a group of pro-Palestinian students published a letter saying that Israel was "entirely responsible for all unfolding violence". It was at this point that Larry Summers, in particular, intervened and made a public statement saying he was "sickened" by the "silence from Harvard's leadership", both in response to the attacks themselves and the students' statement. Elise Stefanik also chimed in about the Harvard students at this point (on Twitter / X). (This fact is reported in the Harvard Crimson Oct. 10, 2023.) I do not know if Summers and Stefanik were in communication during this 48 hours. It is highly irregular for a former President of Harvard (let alone one who was himself forced to resign) to publicly criticize the behavior of the current President.

Let's start with the statement from the pro-Palestinian students. It may be thoughtless, factually wrong, crude, or offensive in any number of ways to say in the immediate wake of the attack that Israel is "entirely responsible for all unfolding violence". But saying this is not remotely a call for genocide. It is not even a statement of support for Hamas (and there is no such statement elsewhere in their letter, as one can see in the same issue of the Crimson). There is nothing in the

statement downplaying the horror of the Oct. 7 attacks. It is perfectly consistent for someone to blame Israel and also condemn the atrocities committed by Hamas, or even to hold Israel responsible for the continued existence of Hamas itself while condemning the attacks. (The students' statement is miles away from, for example, Cornell professor Russell Rickford's initial announcement that he was "exhilarated" by the attacks because Hamas had "shifted the balance of power", which is both barbaric and politically stupid, and which he eventually walked back.)

Very soon then, this distinction between support for the Palestinians and support for Hamas became impossible to discern in the public discourse at Harvard and elsewhere. (And naturally that fusion is one of the aims of Hamas itself.)

And soon after that, the very idea of students supporting the Palestinians became equated with anti-Semitic harassment, so Gay was under pressure to condemn the students, and the local issue at Harvard became exclusively one of responding to anti-Semitism on campus.

This in turn morphed into a criticism of her failure to condemn the Hamas attacks themselves in strong enough terms, and soon enough. At this point the public discourse loses sight of an important question: how is it the business of a University President to issue statements of condemnation for atrocities around the world in the first place? How is that thought to be appropriate or even helpful? Even if a university hasn't signed on to anything like Chicago's Kalven principles, it surely cannot be simply assumed that it is any part of a University President's job to issue statements about conflicts around the world. Very soon, however, such questions became lost to the conversation and Gay was under fire both for not publicly condemning Hamas and for tolerating anti-Semitism on campus (in the form of student demonstrations in support of the Palestinians). A major distortion thus took hold, both about her job as President and about what should count as anti-Semitic behavior.

So Gay was clearly rattled and issued a much longer statement to the Harvard community, outlining the creation of a taskforce to address anti-Semitism on campus (e-mail of November 9, 2023). Here she criticizes the language of some pro-Palestinian students but, to her credit, does not call for sanctions against them. But in this response, she capitulated to the framing of the issue exclusively in terms of combatting anti-Semitism on campus and not the issues concerning any other parties in the wider conflict. This memo she sent is pages long, with many familiar phrases about civil behavior and civil discourse but concentrates exclusively on anti-Semitism as the problem to be addressed. The word 'Islamophobia' comes up exactly once in a list of things "we don't condone". But there is no mention of the infamous 'doxing' of the students, with a truck driving around labeling them anti-Semites and giving their pictures, names and addresses (Harvard Crimson, Oct. 13, 2023). And that's just the most graphic form of harassment these students faced. I heard from various students at Harvard that several of the students who signed the letter lived in fear and were not able to leave their dorm rooms for weeks. But all this was buried in the subsequent responses from President Gay. (Eventually there was a task force to support students facing doxing and other forms of harassment. Crimson Oct. 25, 2023)

In her long memo of Nov. 9 there is also no mention of a complication in the whole issue of combatting 'anti-Semitism on campus'. I have spoken with several students about this and what they all have reported is that (unsurprisingly) while there certainly has been a cascade of anti-Semitic (and anti-Arab) harassment, almost all of it takes place online. So, what then counts as 'on

campus' here, and how exactly is such online harassment to be combatted by the University? The policies in place were designed for actions taking place on the actual physical campus but now that is quite problematized. And that reinforces the impression that the incidents of anti-Semitism at Harvard being referred to very much are meant to include such things as the original student letter of Oct. 10 and other support demonstrations taking place in Harvard Yard. And that, I have suggested, is itself a serious distortion.

Her second, stronger public response thus capitulated to the framing of the issue that would be most helpful to Stefanik and others: the issue at hand is a crisis of anti-Semitism on campus, evidenced by students publishing a letter calling Israel "entirely responsible" for the violence, and that she had stumbled in her response, both to the student's letter and to the original attacks in Israel. Opposing anti-Semitism then comes to mean unconditional support for Netanyahu's governing coalition and its war of revenge, and any qualification counts as support for genocide.

This is the box she found herself in, due in part to her own missteps. So, with the incompetent help of her advisers in the upper reaches of Harvard, she was a sitting duck for the congressional hearings. It was clear beforehand that she was walking into a trap, and yet she was utterly unprepared to contest Stefanik's framing of the issues, which should not have been difficult. When Stefanik equated the use of the word 'intifada' with a call for genocide, Gay should have stopped her right there and said that this was mistaken. She should have had the presence of mind to point out that the students who originally provoked the ire of Summers and others had not spoken in support of Hamas or its brutalities and had certainly never called for genocide. But by this point Gay was so engulfed by the crisis that she lost all sight how the original issues and events had been warped by everyone around her.

So, she came back from Washington weakened, and in the meantime Stefanik, Rufo and others had already prepared the ground for the second phase, the bogus 'plagiarism' scandal. I say 'bogus' because while it does now seem that she could be a remarkably careless scholar, the examples I have seen don't look anything like "taking credit for someone else's work or ideas", which is the understanding of 'plagiarism' that is important in this context. I still think that distinction matters and is neither pedantic or legalistic. Gay's use of sources is certainly to be censured but the word 'plagiarism' suggests deliberate dishonesty and the attempt to claim credit for someone else's work or ideas. This distinction became erased from the public discourse as well.

The Harvard Corporation initially resisted the mounting outside pressure but soon caved into what it is now clear was an orchestrated hit job. What this unfolding of events shows clearly is that, at various levels, Harvard allowed itself to be manipulated by various forces which undermined basic University governance, and which capitulation damages the very idea of a university as an institution of learning and research independent of moneyed interests and bad political actors. Today, universities throughout the U.S. are subject to unprecedented levels of interference from state legislators, donors, and others. With its enormous endowment and prestige Harvard was in a position to resist this trend and give hope to less powerful colleges and universities facing similar threats. With the recent actions of the Harvard Corporation, it failed that test, and is thus already encouraging further interference from Congress, private money, and elsewhere. In the coming months there will be many statements and initiatives at Harvard aimed at

healing and re-affirmation of the basic values of higher education and academic community. That is of course necessary. But the public reckoning with that basic failure to defend higher education has not yet taken place, along with any credible assurance that this sort of capture will not be allowed to happen again.

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