

# The Ivy League Flunks Out

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Sophie Park for The New York Times

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I was still kvelling about [earning my Ivy League degree](#) when the glow of that parchment dimmed.

On Tuesday, the presidents of Harvard, M.I.T. and the University of Pennsylvania put on a pathetic display on Capitol Hill when they were asked if calling for genocide against Jews counted as harassment.

It depends, they all said. Penn's Elizabeth Magill offered a chilling bit of legalese. "It is a context-dependent decision," she told Representative Elise Stefanik, a Republican from upstate New York.

Not since Bill Clinton was asked about having sex with Monica Lewinsky and replied, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is," has there been such parsing.

It's hard to be on Stefanik's side, given that she epitomizes the grotesque transformation of the Republican Party to an insane Trump cult, but she was right to pin down the prevaricating presidents.

Citing a Washington Free Beacon report, Stefanik noted in The Wall Street Journal that Harvard has cautioned undergraduates that "cisheterosexism" and "fatphobia" helped perpetuate violence and that "using the wrong pronouns" qualified as abuse.

When Stefanik [asked](#) Harvard's president, Claudine Gay, whether calling for the genocide of Jews constituted bullying, Gay said it could, "depending on the context."

I felt the same disgust with the Catholic Church sex scandal, seeing church leaders who were charged with teaching us right from wrong not knowing right from wrong. University presidents should also know right from wrong. As left-wing virulence toward Jews collides with right-wing virulence, these academics not only didn't show off their brains, they didn't show their hearts.

"I think the inability of these individuals to articulate a simple, straightforward answer to what should have been the easiest question in the world was mind-boggling," Jonathan Greenblatt, the director of the Anti-Defamation League, told me. "It's like a hurricane of hate in the last few months. You ask yourself, how is this happening? Now we know." He added, "The truth is that these presidents are not committed to free speech. They're committed to favored speech. They selectively enforce the codes of conduct when it works for them or their friends in the faculty lounge."

Leon Wieseltier, the editor of Liberties, a humanistic journal, has an essay on antisemitism in the next issue, echoing Greenblatt with a complaint about the "selective empathy" that made kaffiyehs "cool."

"I think this is still America," Wieseltier said, "but what is so wounding and intolerable is how we went from spending four years intensely and rightly focusing on one class of victims in society, and now are prepared to make light of the troubles that another class of victims are experiencing."

"The culture on campuses is a culture of oppressors and oppressed. Israel is now Goliath and no longer David — though God knows it has mortal enemies capable of the most astonishing savagery. The Jews were long ago stricken from the rolls of the oppressed because they are seen as white and privileged."

We are a culture which loves victims and worships victimization and gives great moral authority to victims, but we don't treat all victims equally."

The U.N. women's rights agency and social justice groups grossly [delayed](#) condemning barbaric sexual attacks on women by Hamas during its Oct. 7 massacre.

Wieseltier also put blame on the authoritarian Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. "One of the reasons for this war is the Israelis' decades-long neglect and humiliation of the Palestinians," he said. "They thought it would never come back and bite them. Netanyahu plays right into the left's false analysis of Israel as a colonial settler state."

As James Carville told Bill Maher: "How the hell am I still looking at Netanyahu's stupid, crooked, ignorant, negligent face? This guy's still in power after the greatest intelligence failure at least since 9/11?"

Roger Cohen [wrote](#) in The Times that Netanyahu let Hamas grow stronger while taking a "kick the can down the road" approach on a two-state solution. As the Palestinian issue vanished from the global agenda, Palestinian fury grew.

That is no excuse for what Hamas did on Oct. 7, but Oct. 7 is also no excuse for Israel's relentless bombing in Gaza.

I think this is still America. But I don't understand why I have to keep making the case on matters that should be self-evident.

Why should I have to make the case that a man who tried to overthrow the government should not be president again?

Why should I have to make the case that we can't abandon Ukraine to the evil Vladimir Putin?

Why should I have to make the case that a young woman — whose life and future ability to bear children are at risk — should not be getting [persecuted](#) about an abortion by a shady Texas attorney general?

Why should I have to make the case that antisemitism is abhorrent?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/09/opinion/antisemitism-university-presidents.html>

Hardliners, vicious people on both sides of this war-impasse-divide, will not approve any outcome that does not lead to the annihilation of the other, or at least license to seek to do so. They orchestrate things, counting on their likeminded enemies, to keep any approach towards a “moderate” solution from becoming established. Amongst their own people, they can count on tolerance, acceptance, or protection based on fear of them and fellow-feeling as a well-intentioned, however overzealous “protectors of the nation.” The “other guys” serve as a very useful ploy, “the enemy” that unites “the people.”

Palestinians do not deserve what is happening to them. Jews did not deserve what was happening to them. No one deserves genocide; calling for the genocide of any people or nation is wrong. Muslims have always used Jews as easy targets; Islam is prone to an anti-Semitic streak, and Israeli injustice to Palestinian Arabs, Muslim and Christian, has only stoked these fires.

It was “Europeans,” the Romans, who drove the Jewish people out of their homeland. At the time, Judah-Israel-the Jerusalem Temple Cult was a strange, stubborn resistor like none the Romans had encountered elsewhere. The Jews just would not go along. First the Romans destroyed the Temple, and when this was not enough, they came back and set to slaughtering the holdout Jews, driving almost all of them into exile in the Diaspora. A remnant remained that reformulated Judaism as Torah-Talmud Rabbinicism, which soon spread through the Jewish world. That this dispersal happened 2000 years ago means nothing to devout Jews; a liberal Kabbalah scholar teaches that “God is a Verb” making distinctions between past, present, and future irrelevant; Then is Now in an eternal Present.

The Holocaust was only the “tip of the iceberg”—or rather, one inverted—of European prejudice against Jews. Here too Jews largely refused to be assimilated, even if they were never rebellious subjects. See the East European *shtetl*. Some Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) leaders attempted to overcome this divide, but the mistrust was never vanquished on both sides, and Jews continued to be easy scapegoats, persecuted for their insularity, their honed intelligence and sensibilities, and the wealth that accrued for some—in some alcoves, many. Jewish distrust settled in all the more, Zionism arose, and the Holocaust only proved the doubters right.

After WWII, European nations, on both sides of the Atlantic, shamefully continued to refuse to include Jewish survivors, and set to getting rid of the Jews by facilitating their return to Palestine. The Palestinians already there were treated abysmally. Israel would never have come into being without Western backing; it would never have survived without massive aid, mostly from America. We let the hardliners have their way; that we could have stopped them is a good question. We are too caught up in our own immature, half-baked intellectual and ethical reckonings to sort all of this out. TJB