

## Say it ain't so

Harvard president Lawrence Summers loses at the game of Truth or Consequences  
BY HARVEY A. SILVERGLATE

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THE INMATES TOOK over the asylum at Harvard last week, thanks to President Lawrence Summers's ignominious, ill-considered, and likely ill-fated retreat in the face of an organized assault by highly politicized feminist academics and their allies. At issue were comments Summers made, at a January 14 conference, merely stating the obvious: that genetic differences between the sexes *might* in part account for women's underrepresentation in math, science, and engineering, and that *research must be conducted* to answer the hard questions and devise remedies. He should have known,



however, that in the modern academy, it is no longer acceptable to speak honestly or intelligently about gender, race, sexual identity, or any other issue that has already been "decided" by entrenched orthodoxies — that these are no longer acceptable topics for rational discussion, much less scientific research.

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An here's the irony: Summers's "feminist" critics set back the struggle for gender equality far more effectively than even the most sexist anti-intellectual troglodyte ever could.

FOR THOSE who missed the brouhaha of the past two weeks, here is what happened.

The outspoken Summers was invited to speak at a Harvard academic conference run by the National Bureau of Economic Research, where he was urged to raise some of the thornier questions about the frustrating scarcity of women in academic math, engineering, and science positions. Summers suggested three areas of research seeking possible answers. First he noted the possibility that women raising children are often unwilling to put in the 80-hour weeks required to compete for elite posts. Secondly, he urged examination of the discrimination women encounter in the hard sciences.

But then Summers touched the third rail of academic politics. He observed that as early as high school, boys often seem to perform better than girls in science and math, raising the possibility that the disparity might be due in some measure to innate differences in gender. *All three* of these issues, he suggested, should be studied to figure out how to deal with them.

Midway through Summers's talk, Nancy Hopkins, an MIT biologist, walked out of the room, later explaining to *Boston Globe* reporter Marcella Bombardieri that if she hadn't

left she would have "either blacked out or thrown up." The next day, Hopkins told the *New York Times* that "when [Summers] began talking about innate differences in aptitude between men and women, I just couldn't breathe because this kind of bias makes me physically ill." Five other female conference attendees reached by Bombardieri likewise reported being offended.

Summers and Harvard professor Richard Freeman, who had invited the president to address the conference, at first frankly expressed their bewilderment over the emerging firestorm. Freeman explained that Summers was trying to "provoke" thought and research. "Men are taller than women, that comes from the biology," Freeman explained to *New York Times* reporter Sam Dillon. "Larry's view was that perhaps the dispersion in test scores could also come from the biology." Summers further explained: "I was trying to provoke discussion, and I certainly believe that there's been some move in the research away from believing all these things are shaped only by socialization."

Nonetheless, news of the incident reverberated across the nation. Before long, National Organization for Women president Kim Gandy intoned: "Summers must go, and Harvard must start with a clean slate." In short order, signatures were collected for a faculty letter admonishing Summers, who soon began to backtrack, issuing a statement expressing "deep regret" over the "impact of my comments" and an "apology" for "not having weighed them more carefully."

In a January 19 letter to "Members of the Harvard Community," Summers suddenly announced that he was sorry for having raised the issue — that research might be undertaken to determine what role, if any, genetics plays in accounting for the gender gap in math and science — in a way that "has resulted in an unintended signal of discouragement to talented girls and women." Summers's statement assured Harvard, the nation, and the world that in fact gender and biology do not indicate "that girls are intellectually less able than boys, or that women lack the ability to succeed at the highest levels of science." Never mind that Summers never suggested such a belief, and that his talk was sympathetic to the need to tear down existing gender barriers. "The human potential to excel in science" is not, he suddenly realized, *at all* gender-related — a stunning turnaround, given that the research he called for on January 14 obviously had not been completed by January 19. Rather, the question was resolved by the loudest voices who could raise the most clamor, collect the most signatures, and attract the most sensationalistic media coverage.

On Monday, January 24, the *Globe's* Bombardieri wrote disapprovingly in a *news* story — not an editorial column — that Harvard's inaction with regard to women's professional advancement stood in "stark" contrast to schools such as the University of Michigan, which, she noted, "has created skits to show professors examples of how subtle unconscious bias can affect the hiring process." In other words, Harvard is remiss for not requiring mandatory sensitivity training, which seeks to change attitudes not by reasoned discourse, but by intimidation of those who do not toe the line.

Such were the consequences when, clutching his January 19 statement, Summers returned to his cell in defeat. He lost a golden opportunity, a "teachable moment," to enhance academic freedom and to preserve the integrity and openness of intellectual discourse. He also forfeited the chance to put to rest the notion that all must kneel before certain intellectual and political orthodoxies — not only at Harvard, but throughout academia nationwide. Most distressing of all, if genetic differences really do erect barriers for some women in math and science, the means of adjusting for such differences will never be developed if the phenomenon is simply declared, by fiat, not to exist.

Two iconic images emerge from this unseemly rout: that of a male Harvard president running for cover because he dares ask an "offensive" question, and that of a female professor promoting the sexist stereotype of the weak, vulnerable woman who gets nauseated, throws up, and has to leave the room for her smelling salts when she encounters an idea she finds threatening. Quite a pair of role models! And yet it is Summers who is attacked for demeaning women.

THE MODERN university is the culmination of a 20-year trend of irrationalism marked by an increasingly totalitarian approach to highly politicized issues. Students are subjected to mandatory gender- and racial-sensitivity training akin to thought reform, often during freshman orientation and sometimes as punishment (or "remedial education") for uttering offensive speech. Faculty members and administrators are made to understand that their careers are at risk if they deviate from the accepted viewpoint. So, even though academic administrators don't necessarily believe in the official positions, in this brave new world, they must acquiesce for professional reasons. The mantra of the modern campus administrator — usually more a mindless bureaucrat than an intellectual leader — has become "no trouble on my watch."

When Alan Charles Kors and I were writing our 1998 book *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses*, we collected hundreds of examples of this tyranny of political correctness. Beginning in the mid 1980s, campuses initiated speech codes that redefined mere "offense" as "harassment." One did not simply *offend* a fellow student by saying something the student preferred not to hear; one *harassed* that student, a punishable violation. Harvard, too, adopted such a code, which exists to the present day. Under the guise of seeking to create a "tolerant and supportive" campus atmosphere "characterized by civility and consideration for others," Harvard's student handbook provides that verbal "harassment" is a punishable offense. "Sexual harassment" in particular is defined as any "verbal comments or suggestions which adversely affect the working or learning environment of an individual." Similarly, words that are deemed racially derogatory or suggest "racial stereotypes" are subject to official disciplinary action.

Harvard Law School, no less than the rest of the university, has its own repressive set of sexual-harassment guidelines, adopted in the late 1990s in reaction to a tasteless gender-related student parody written for the *Harvard Law Review's* annual April Fools' Day dinner. It is now an offense at Harvard Law School to utter any words "of a sexual nature" to a student that create "an intimidating, demeaning, degrading, hostile, or

otherwise seriously offensive working or educational environment." It was just a matter of time, of course, before similar restrictions managed to gag not only students and professors, but also the president of the university.

To his credit, Summers previously has shown a willingness to break the taboo against dissent from academic party lines. Early in his administration, in 2001, he had the audacity to suggest that those espousing the anti-Israel rhetoric so fashionable in academic circles today were "advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in effect if not their intent." This comment ignited a firestorm, but Summers stood his ground, explaining that he was not accusing the speakers of anti-Semitism, but was simply pointing out that the words sometimes had such an effect, even if unintended.

Another flap involved a private discussion he had with former African-American-studies professor Cornel West over the academic quality of some of West's work, including his rap music. West and his allies launched a highly public campaign against Summers, hinting that he had racist attitudes and did not adequately respect black faculty members. Again, Summers stood his ground, insisting that he was simply making inquiries as part of his duty to maintain high academic standards. West left Harvard in a huff and headed to Princeton. Summers remained at his post despite the tremors.

Summers must therefore have been surprised by his inability to quell the feminist lobby. Clearly he was knocked back and seemed unable to recover his balance. Why that was the case this time around is unclear, though surely it has at least something to do with the power of numbers, the importance of alumnae and other benefactors' financial support, and effective organization. Summers's surrender may have quieted the mob in the short term, but in the long term he will rue the day he failed to take on the totalitarians once and for all. He could have called a national press conference and invited his detractors to debate issues of academic freedom, entrenched orthodoxies, intellectual research and inquiry, and modalities that might indeed remedy real gender discrimination in the academy. He could have freed himself and every other academic administrator from a tyranny that has turned our university presidents into captives of groupthink — nothing more than yes-men and -women and, oh yes, fundraisers. He could have restored the role of university president from that of mere administrator and fundraiser to public intellectual — defender of academic freedom and rational discourse.

Harvard's Richard Freeman, the economist whose invitation to Summers triggered the tumult, insisted in a January 23 *New York Times* article by James Traub that he had invited Summers specifically to touch upon provocative issues, because otherwise "he would have given us the same type of babble that university presidents give." This is a sad comment on what has happened to our academic leaders. Lawrence Summers had an unparalleled opportunity to turn the tide in Cambridge and all over the country. He blew it.

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