

A Conversation with LARRY SUMMERS II

In his second conversation with Bill Kristol, Larry Summers reflects on the current climate of political correctness on campuses and its effects on freedom of thought and the pursuit of knowledge. Summers also discusses significant controversies from his tenure as president of Harvard, including his opposition to boycotts of Israel, his battle against grade inflation, and his interest in bringing ROTC back to campus. Finally, Kristol and Summers consider how technological developments might shape the future of higher education.

On the intellectual climate on campus, Summers says: The main thing that's happening [on campus] is what always happens, professors teach courses, students take courses, students aspire to graduate, they make friends, they plan their lives... That said, whether it's the President of Princeton negotiating with people as they took over his office over the names of schools at Princeton, whether it is attacks on very reasonable free speech having to do with adults' right to choose their own Halloween costumes at Yale, whether it's the administration using placemats in the dining hall to propagandize about what messages students should give their parents about Syrian refugee policy, there is a great deal of absurd political correctness.

I'm somebody who believes very strongly in diversity, who resists racism in all of it's many incarnations... But it seems to be that there is a kind of creeping totalitarianism in terms of what kind of ideas are acceptable and are debatable on college campuses. And I think that's hugely unfortunate. I think the answer to bad speech is different speech. The answer to bad speech is not shutting down speech.

On "micro aggressions" vs. the pursuit of truth, Summers says: The idea that somehow micro-aggressions in the form of a racist statement contained in a novel should be treated in parallel with violence or actual sexual assault seems to me to be crazy. I worry very much that if our leading academic institutions become places that prize comfort over truth—that prize the pursuit of mutual understanding over the pursuit of better and more accurate understanding—then a great deal will be lost.

On faculty abdicating responsibility, Summers says: The tradition and the custom in universities is the student discipline is a faculty matter. One of the challenges of administrations [today] is they can't rely on the faculty to carry through on discipline even in very egregious cases like the physical occupation of offices. That then effects the amount of leverage that administrators have. A lot of this does go back to a faculty—particularly the faculty who take the greatest interest in university affairs—who tend very much to be sympathetic to protest movements of one kind or another.

On Israel boycotts, Summers says: The idea that Israel should be singled out as a human rights abuser was morally insensate. It seemed to me that there wasn't much question that if an African country was singled out for censure—and there were no clear grounds for why that African country was worse or

different than a number of European or Asian countries—it would be seen in many quarters as racist. I chose words that were carefully selected. I said that [boycott of Israel] proposals if they were implemented would be anti-Semitic in their effect, [if not in their intent]...

I've been disappointed by the response of university presidents. It's true that they've not welcomed [the BDS movement] but they've framed the argument almost entirely in terms of their distaste for academic boycotts rather than anything about the specific substance. I'm not sure that boycotting Hitler's universities actually would have been such a terrible thing. [It's] the singling out of Israel that's to be condemned.

On the military and the academy, Summers says: There's a serious issue of the degree of estrangement between people who wear uniforms and people who are in academic communities. Public service is always a value that's being extolled in universities. I was always careful when I spoke about public service to include military service as an example of public service. That is very much the exception. I have not served in the military, but I don't understand how one can regard working in a school, though it's not morally inferior, as morally superior to being involved in the direct defense of freedom. It seems to me it's very important to recognize that.

Chapters in LARRY SUMMERS II Conversation

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