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We Are All Harvard Now

I'm the last person I thought would ever say this.

By John Warner

If you were to page through the decade-plus of archives of this blog you will find many criticisms of our nation's elite private universities.

My complaints and grievances as cataloged in these pieces are almost too numerous to mention. I do not approve of their distorting effects on college admissions; I find their claims of being meritocracies hollow; I decry their lousy leadership; I lament the amount of attention and money they suck up relative to their paltry share of the overall higher education sector.

In my book, *Sustainable, Resilient, Free.: The Future of Public Higher Education*, I suggest a positive future path for the collective of higher education would be for our wealthiest private institutions to share some of that wealth through a system of taxation which would redistribute some of the benefits these institutions receive as nonprofit entities to public postsecondary institutions.

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What then, one might ask, is my take on a Trump administration proposal to tax (some) university endowments at the top marginal rate for corporations?

Perhaps I should say something like “It’s a reasonable idea, but unfortunately it’s being carried out in a haphazard fashion.”

Maybe I should take a page out of Princeton history professor David Ball’s book and say that Trump has a point, as Ball does on the issue of international students in a recent *Times* op-ed titled, “Don’t Let Trump’s Brutality Fool You. The Internationalization of American Schools Is a Real Issue.”

Somehow Bell has these two sentences within a paragraph of each other:

“To be sure, no one should take the Trump administration’s position on the issue seriously.”

And:

“But the fact that the Trump administration is handling the issue crudely doesn’t mean it’s not a real issue.”

Bell’s objection is that the Trump rationale for restricting international students is bogus, but the idea that we should shrink the number of international students because, well ... they aren’t like us, is A-OK. There is less daylight between Trump’s rationale and Bell’s stance than he would like to admit.

I’ll end whatever suspense I’ve generated and say that no, Trump’s proposal to significantly increase the tax on university endowments is not something I support. No, it is not a good idea being handled crudely. No, it is not something we should really spend all that much time debating on the merits. It has no merit.

(Though, as pieces from Perry Bacon Jr. and Paul Starr thoroughly demonstrate, what is being proposed is bad on the merits.)

I do not support this proposal because it is part of the Trump administration’s naked attack on independent democratic institutions that he must bring to heel to further his authoritarian and autocratic aims. If the administration’s actions—brought under an obviously bogus fig leaf of combating antisemitism—aren’t enough proof, consider that Trump has admitted this outright, saying in an Oval Office press conference, “Harvard has got to behave themselves.

Harvard is treating our country with great disrespect, and all they're doing is getting in deeper and deeper and deeper. They've got to behave themselves."

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This is an existential battle, not just for Harvard, but for a free democratic society. Donald Trump wants to destroy higher education because it is in his way.

We have already seen alarming capitulations to rule by strongman fiat from some fancy New York law firms and also Columbia University, and we cannot afford to lose any more ground.

For now, Harvard must remain the frustrating, elitist attention hog that it is, as unmolested and intact as possible. There cannot be any caveats to our collective solidarity in resisting the assault on Harvard, which is an assault on all of us.

What is so frustrating is the refusal of some of those inside the elite institutions themselves to recognize this. David Ball of Princeton above is a good example. He wants to use the occasion to press an issue I'm guessing he's been agitating on for years. He seems to believe that he can use Trump as a wedge to steer institutions toward his preferred policy aim. Unfortunately, this is treating Trump like a flashlight who is illuminating problems, rather than a flamethrower who has come to burn it all down.

The leadership of Columbia University acutely experienced this, thinking they could use Trump to enact changes they wished for anyway to bring unruly students and faculty to heel and mollify restive donors, only to find Trump rampaging through the entire institution, leaving it a (possibly permanent) shell of its former self, with internal conflicts becoming even more pronounced.

I understand that elites don't often have to worry about solidarity in the other direction. One of the reasons to become elite is to be excused from the concerns of those without the same status or money. Columbia has been exposed as something of a shell game, an elite reputation without the foundation of wealth to fall back on. Harvard, fortunately, has much more substance (\$\$\$\$\$) behind it, which provides the fuel to fight. Over the last decades, Harvard and its ilk could've done innumerable things to lift up the collective of higher education. Some of these might've required a bit of sacrifice of their money or their status, but I feel confident they would have remained at the top of the pile.

The chose otherwise.

But right now, they need us, and saying Trump has a point is not helpful.

I also understand why some of us who have not benefited from a system that privileges the elites so nakedly might have a hard time mustering a fighting spirit to defend those elites. It's tempting to sit back and see what it feels like for Harvard to squirm for once.

But right now, we are all Harvard, and if they fall, we all fall.

I don't know that I am encouraged about the ultimate chance of victory in this fight. Harvard clearly has all the legal legs to stand on while Trump has none, but we've seen the limits of the law when an administration is allowed to defy it without consequence.

What I am encouraged by, however, is how clear the fight has become. I hope everyone can come to the same conclusion. It's the only way we stand a chance.

Written By

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