

The Halls of Ivy and National Defense

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The relationship between the federal government and American universities is tense and often misunderstood. The gap between the purposes and priorities of government, on one side, and the missions and functions of universities, on the other, is alarming.

Historically, the United States has relied on its colleges and universities for several things critical to national defense. First, higher education produces a more educated work force for a globally competitive marketplace. Second, advanced learning fills federal, state, and local government positions that citizens rely on for necessary services. Third, the military and civilian defense establishments require leaders who understand the science and engineering behind modern weapons. Future defense and national security leaders must also understand the American military experience and the relationship between the armed forces and society.

The current and prospective [international system](#) is one that poses a wide variety of threats to world peace and international order. U.S. armed forces will be tasked for deterrence and war fighting missions across the entire spectrum of conflict, from nuclear weapons spread and the possibility of war in space, to the nuances of urban terrorism and counterinsurgency. Officers who rise to senior command will need the perspective of innovators and adaptors, sometimes improvising in combat when exigent conditions override old rules of engagement.

As technology advances and the geostrategic environment grows more complicated, the United States will need a stronger educational establishment to compete with China and other rising powers. Nowhere in Europe or among major Asian military powers is national education under such crossfire as it is in the United States today. How did we get here, and what is to be done?

A primary cause of the war against American education is the perception among politicians, activists, and journalists that higher education has been colonized by [radicals](#) who hate America, misrepresent its history, and aim to produce dissidents who attack traditional culture and values, including patriotism and military service. This narrative has spread through misleading political campaigns, indifferent media coverage, and, unfortunately, some missteps by educators themselves.

At the center of this narrative is [conflict](#) between the Trump administration and Ivy League universities, where demonstrations included violence and charges of antisemitism. Coverage of episodes at Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia has emphasized the behavior of a small percentage of students, sometimes supported by nonstudents and outside money, and overlooked the far larger share of students and faculty who avoid political violence and intimidation.

Admittedly, some leaders in higher education were slow to confront agitators who crossed the line between permissible speech and harassment. On July 24, 2025, Columbia University

announced a [settlement](#) with the Trump administration: \$220 million in fines in exchange for an end to attacks on Columbia's federally funded research program. Some commentators and observers saw a dangerous precedent; others preferred Harvard's [decision](#) to litigate. Acting Columbia President Claire Shipman [argued](#) the agreement was needed to prevent further disruption, and possible destruction, of the broader research enterprise. Whatever the outcome, we are far from the day President John F. Kennedy, at Yale's 1962 commencement, [joked](#) that he enjoyed the best of both worlds: a Harvard education and a Yale degree.

Attacks on higher education also suggest that students, faculty, and administrators are elitists out of touch with Middle America. In fact, [most](#) students that attend public institutions come from middle class families, and do not learn their basic values from professors. Values are learned years before college through family and other primary groups. Professors rarely convert diehard conservatives into liberals, or vice versa. Radicals who break the law and violate campus codes are seldom motivated by instructors and more often they are encouraged and funded by activists who move from campus to campus. For example, [antisemitism](#) at some universities has been fueled by provocateurs exploiting student concern for non-terrorist Palestinians in Gaza while mischaracterizing Israel's response to the October 7, 2023, attacks.

Administrators can also be faulted for negligence in defending First Amendment rights and for suppressing speech on spurious grounds. Unlike high school students, most college students are legal adults. They have the right to use confrontational rhetoric and provocative discourse protected by the First Amendment, however infuriating it may be. Too many universities have come to see themselves as providers of reassurance and guarantors of good feeling, backing that impulse with coercive training and sanctions against so-called offensive remarks inside and outside the classroom. The result is an atmosphere in which conversation is reduced to clichés and the celebration of the obvious instead of the clash of ideas from which great minds are molded.

It is an irony that more cut-and-thrust classroom testing of ideas can be found in some U.S. military war colleges and service academies than in many civilian institutions. Even there, however, trends toward government micro-management of curricula and textbook selection are troubling. Ukraine's [resistance](#) to Russia since the February 2022 invasion is lesson to be learned in this debate: Ukraine turned a failed coup de main into a war of attrition through determination, drones, better intelligence, and a faster OODA loop (observe, orient, decide, act) than Russia.

Going forward, educators, politicians, warriors and voters will have to decide: do we want rigorous and results-oriented learning experiences for our future generations of leaders, or, instead, do we prefer ritualized feelgood rites of passage that will produce generations of intellectual bobbleheads majoring in conspicuous consumption?

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