

Madam President, esteemed colleagues:

I speak as, by now, a member of this distinguished faculty for a very long time – and proudly so. But today I am worried, as I have not been in many years, about the direction our faculty and our much-cherished university seems about to take.

I am worried because our students are afraid – and they have cause to be. Some are afraid of what our increasingly intrusive national government threatens. And we have rightly taken note of their concerns. But others are concerned, rightly as well I believe, at the threatened intrusiveness of our own Harvard College administration. Our students do not want us to govern their private lives apart from university activities and away from university property. They observe our proceedings and they wonder which of their off-campus and maybe even out-of-town pursuits, and which of their affiliations, will suddenly be forbidden to them – not absolutely, of course, but at the expense of their right to remain Harvard students and to enjoy the privileges of this institution to which they were duly admitted.

I am worried because, while we have heard a great deal about “Harvard values” during our discussions over these past months, I do not recognize the values and the distinctions we seem so intent on imposing. I do not understand why membership in the American Nazi Party is somehow consistent with Harvard values, but membership in the AD Club is not. I am baffled that a young woman who belongs to, say, the Aryan Nations might be fully entitled to serve as president of the Harvard Crimson, or captain of the Harvard tennis team, but not if she belongs to the Bee Club.

I am worried because the administrative machinery we will need to implement the intrusive restrictions we are now considering will inevitably come to resemble those against which this university nobly stood in a prior, now deeply despised era. To draw the necessary distinctions proposed, and implement the associated penalties, we will surely require some form of a Harvard Unaffiliated Activities Committee. And, like the much-loathed HUAC of that prior era, it will have to ask our students some form of the question “are you now, or have you ever been a member of such-and-such a group”? Our grandchildren will not be proud of us.

Finally, I am worried because, in the deceptively harmless-looking motion offered for consideration following this discussion, we face the prospect of abdicating not just our prerogatives as the faculty of Harvard College but our responsibilities too. Rather than addressing our students’ freedoms and the mission of our beloved college by granting blanket authority to our administrators and whatever committees they might choose to appoint, we should face up to the burden of addressing explicitly these freedoms and whatever tensions and conflicts they present. Colleagues of my generation will remember that a seemingly harmless resolution passed by the U.S. Congress in response to an attack on a single American ship in the Gulf of Tonkin provided the legal basis for what became, at that time, our nation’s longest war. Today we are all aware that a similar “AUMF” – Authorization for Use of Military Force – passed five days after the atrocities of 9/11/2001, is the basis for what has now become America’s longest war – and after sixteen years, with no end in sight. For our faculty to duck its responsibilities by granting such a blanket authorization to our administration would be a historic change for this university. Our successors in future generations will not admire us for it.

I end with a wistful tinge of sadness about what we have been doing here – but also a hope for what we might yet do. Like many colleagues present, I read the file of materials that

Dean Smith distributed a year ago in an earlier phase of this discussion. One conclusion stood out clearly: the life of the houses, those jewels of the Harvard structure, is nowhere near as engaging to our students as it should be, and in consequence it is losing out to life in other venues. What have we done in response? An all-too-familiar feature of American business behavior (I'm an economist) is that when a firm's product is losing out in competition, the firm's response is not to improve its product but to seek to get the regulators to take its competitor's product off the market. In effect, that's what we have been doing here. Think of what we might have accomplished – think of what we still might accomplish – if we redirect the time and talent and energy that this faculty has put into this two-year-long discussion (just look at the turnout for these meetings) to thinking about how best to re-invigorate life in houses, rather than simply looking to shut down the alternative that too many of our students now prefer instead.

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