

Should College Presidents Speak Out Against the Latest Hamas Abomination?

by [Walter E. Block](#) (February 2024)



A Hearty Debate (detail), Reinhard Sebastian Zimmermann, 1875

University presidents are leaders of our society. Do they not owe at least a moral obligation, albeit of course not a legal one, to lead, speak out on such occurrences?

No. Why should they? No one expects this of other important institutions such as hospitals, auto manufacturers, computer companies, steel mill CEOs, airline executives, partners of

law firms, presidents of fast food emporiums, etc. Why should spokesmen for institutions of higher learning, only, be called upon for such responsibilities?

Yes, universities are concerned with intellectual pursuits, and we need all the knowledge we can muster to shed light on such events now taking place in the Middle East. But anyone who thinks these other sectors of the economy do not require brain power of the highest order should think again.

Then there is the economic issue of comparative advantage, specialization and the division of labor. The study of war, murder, torture, politics, history, punishment—the issues that arise in the present Gazan context, are all specialized disciplines. Expertise in any of them take years to develop. Suppose that the background of a college president is in astronomy or poetry or physics or mathematics or music. He might be an entirely successful leader of a university, but his professional credentials give him no expertise at all on the basis of which to comment upon the despicable Hamas incursion.

This of course should not preclude him, or anyone else for that matter from commenting upon current events. We are all entitled to an opinion. We all have free speech rights (well, not during the present woke period, but let us ignore that disgraceful episode; soon it will be gone, and bad cess to it.)

But leaders of academic institutions are being singled out, all too often by Jewish organizations (a shonda) for failing to do so as clearly as they might. Threats of reduced contributions are being used to this end. We contend, in contrast, at least while we are making the “no” case, that everyone should be free to speak out, but no one should be embarrassed into so doing.

The president of the university does not speak for the entire

institution, except on rare and narrow occasions having to do with campus occurrences. He is not even the first of intellectual equals; often, far from it. He might be, upon occasion, but he certainly need not be. This holds true even if his expertise is of great relevance to the issue under discussion, in this case Israel's policies and is thus better positioned to represent the institution. In all cases, the president was chosen on the basis of entirely different criteria. Yes he must be at least a fair to middling scholar, but management and fund raising ability also play a large part.

What about the fact that there are now protests, either on the Israeli or Hamas side, very often both, that take place on campus over which the president indubitably presides. Surely, one would expect to hear from the university president on such occasions. Yes. But pure pablum is all that is required. Suppose there were student groups harshly contending against one another over such issues as veganism versus vegetarianism or chess enthusiasts contending over the best opening moves, or astronomy majors fighting over whether or not Pluto is a planet. The message from the president should be along the lines of everyone should speak less and listen more, engage with one another with collegiality, and if any violence were employed perpetrators would be expelled from school. No more and no less should be reasonably be required of any university administrator.

The Kalven Report [speaks clearly](#) on this matter: "... there emerges ... a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be."

Now for the yes side. And here is why the Jewish organizations are justified in conducting financial boycotts of universities whose presidents issue such luke-warm statements in the

present context. These campus leaders have not scrupled to maintain a dignified silence, or limited themselves to let both sides play nicely statements on a whole host of other issues on which they have no expertise. For example. They have bellowed forth on abortion, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, engaged in Donald Trump derangement syndrome, excoriating capitalism, the benefits of the LGBTQ movement, etc. They have waxed eloquent about the importance of pronoun use (just ask Jordan Peterson about that initiative), the importance of feminism, anti-racism, the evils of straight white males and their supremacy.

Their silence in the present context is deafening. And when they do speak up, they engage in platitudes. Or, they call for peace right after Hamas engages in massive brutality, and right before or while during Israel engages in any punitive measures. Jews and their organizations are thus entirely justified in responding critically. Many have promised to withdraw funding from institutions whose leaders take strong stances on every issue under the sun except this one.

Hypocrisy, thy name is all too many college presidents.

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