

The Conspicuous Fatuousness of the Harper's Letter

The “intellectual” signatories seem to learn nothing—not even from even the recent past.

by Conrad Black

HARPER'S
M A G A Z I N E

The recent letter [“on justice and open debate,”](#) published in *Harper's* magazine on July 7 and signed by some 150 self-nominated intellectuals, will stand as one of the conspicuous fatuities of this intense American election year.

The intellectuals begin with the portentous assertion that “Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial.” It is then explained that forces that have all long demanded “police reform and greater equality and inclusion across our society,” goals whose championship these signatories claim throughout for themselves, are now being threatened. They have “intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity.”

Morons incapable of understanding a single sentence written by any of the signatories could heartily agree with that proposition, and a great many people who do not claim to be intellectual have been doing their best to express that concern for quite some time.

It is at this early point that the authors of the letter

to *Harper's* reject the one tactical option that could have made their message both rigorous and significantly influential. In all their handwringing alarmism, like drowning people who in their panic don't realize that all they have to do is reach for the proffered life preserver, they instead engage in a pathetic sacrificial ritual, presumably designed to establish their *bona fides* with those who have become so "intensified" they now challenge the ability of the signatories to express themselves.

Up to this early point I had tenaciously clung to a hope of something sensible, even though the identity of many of the signatories discouraged optimism. Instead of joining forces with the one faction in this fierce struggle for control of public opinion and government in the West, especially the United States, which could assure them a likely victory and effectively absolve them of their innumerable past offenses of precisely the character to which they now object, these ostensible intellectuals plunged headlong into the most primitive, barbarous, and ignorant of rituals.

"The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The Democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides." Trump is thus an ally of those trying to destroy him—this *aperçu* is the kernel of the intellectuals' letter.

Even now, as they see the apparent murder of an African-American by a white Minneapolis policeman transform itself into the destruction of statues of Christopher Columbus, Ulysses S. Grant, Frederick Douglass—and, it is threatened, Abraham Lincoln—as well as the defacing of monuments to Winston Churchill and the American sacrifices in World War II, this spontaneous gathering of intellectuals identifies the

chief victim of the intolerance and bigotry that they denounce *as the source of it*.

In fact, the authors are among the principal practitioners of precisely the execrable and even totalitarian habits that they rightly attack, and at the tactical level, their only effect will be to assist President Trump, whom they uniformly dislike, but who is now the world's premier defender of the rights that they correctly identify as being endangered.

They at least furnish Trump a confirmation of the dishonesty of his accusers. This letter underscores that the president's most militant enemies are totalitarians, criminals, bigots, and in many cases, urban terrorists, as he has called them.

Most of the people I know among those who signed the *Harper's* letter have gone to extremes of illiberalism in attacking the president. Some have accused him, without knowing him or much about him, of having no motive except self-enrichment, and of a long catalog of crimes and offenses from wife beating to treason.

There is plenty of room for criticism of Donald Trump as a public personality and it is perfectly legitimate to take issue with his policies. But in a letter that purports to uphold traditional liberal values—freedom of speech and of free debate—it is perverse to imagine that Trump is an enemy and that he poses a threat to democracy while addressing Black Lives Matter and Antifa as if they had some potential to rally to the cause and were really good chaps carried away in the righteous heat of events.

But that is just half the story; it is offensive and obtuse to claim that Trump is a threat to democracy; it is monstrous to hold him responsible for the conduct of the thugs and urban terrorists whose chief purpose is the destruction of the Trump presidency. Thus those modestly holding themselves out as our intellectual guides are in fact witless dupes and formerly

usefully idiotic allies of the people they are now warning against.

Their initial declaration of solidarity with the militants they are allied with against Trump incites the question of how intelligent people in positions of some academic and journalistic influence can be so unutterably *stupid*. This is in the tradition of the pilgrimages of worshipful boot-licking of Lincoln Steffens, Bernard Shaw, Nancy Astor, and other intelligent but politically hopeless people in the 1930s to purr and grovel at the feet of Stalin in the midst of his great famine and his show trials.

Added to all their posturing is the problem that a number of the signers of the *Harper's* letter have heaped praise on despotic and totalitarian regimes of the last 75 years. To cite only the most egregious case, Noam Chomsky was the foremost apologist and idolatrous promoter in the Democratic West of North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. And neither he nor many of his cosignatories have shrunk from trying to throttle those who differed with them with defamatory attacks.

It is an elemental principle of the common law that those who seek equity should practice it. In this case, instead of setting themselves up as the party of a very few people, raising moralistic hands heavenwards and offering a plague on both houses—to Trump and to his enemies who produced the Russian canard and the spurious attempt at impeachment—the intellectuals should have declared their reservations about Trump but pitched in wholeheartedly with him in opposing those who would muzzle academics, boycott commentators, and press fraudulent allegations of collusion with a foreign power to rig an election. Many of them have much to atone for in the poor advice they have given the public in the past, and many appear to be disgruntled by their current lack of influence; they should have learned by now that when no one listens to them they have no influence.

But instead of aggregating their legitimate concerns about the dictatorial tendencies of their former anti-Trump allies into a cautionary note that almost no one will pay any attention to, this was their chance to make a difference—to make an alliance with the chief wronged party of those whom they now oppose, and enable themselves to claim part of Trump's victory when it comes, as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz did with the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980. They seem to learn nothing from even the recent past.

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