

How culture warriors weaponized Jewish grief and forced Harvard's president to resign

Claudine Gay's enemies are not our friends

Contributing Columnist [Jay Michaelson](#) January 2, 2024



Claudine Gay, former president of Harvard University, testifies during a House Education and the Workforce Committee hearing in Washington, D.C., Dec. 5. Photo by Haiyun Jiang/Bloomberg/Getty Images

In a few years, no one will remember ex-Harvard president Claudine Gay's plagiarism kerfuffle.

All we'll remember is that that she angered some rich pro-Israel donors, as well as opportunistic activists and politicians, and they got her fired.

That should be chilling.

Gay, who resigned Tuesday after just a six-month tenure, has faced calls for her resignation since October, when a consortium of Harvard student organizations issued a statement blaming Israel for the Oct. 7 attacks. Instead

of condemning that position, Harvard's [response](#) merely stated that Gay and senior administrators were "heartbroken by the death and destruction unleashed by the attack by Hamas."

Calls for Gay's resignation increased after her much-scrutinized [testimony](#) in front of Congress on the question of whether "calls for genocide against Jews" would violate Harvard's anti-harassment policies. She [correctly noted](#) that the answer depended on context, but did not condemn such statements — which she was not asked to do.

[The criticism](#) was particularly vehement and sustained from conservatives. The same conservatives who, until about five minutes ago, professed deep fears that ideologically motivated actors were "canceling" academics they disagreed with.

But times have changed.

There are two motives in the coalition that forced this surrender: the pro-Israel politics of extremely wealthy (mostly Jewish) donors like Bill Ackman, and the war on "woke" higher education by social conservatives like Rep. Elise Stefanik and the same cadre of activists, like Christopher Rufo, who [call gay people "groomers"](#) and fight to ban books. Both are troubling.

Yes, the immediate pretext for Gay's resignation was a [plagiarism controversy](#). I can say — as someone who holds a doctorate and has written a handful of academic articles as well as a [book](#) based on my doctoral dissertation — that Gay's use of "paraphrases" that are really unattributed quotations with one or two words changed around is a significant offense. Everyone in the academic world knows this kind of non-citation is an ethical violation, and Gay did it in at least five of her 11 scholarly articles.

Of course, scholars can quote, but they have to cite as well. That's how it works.

Then again, it's also true that Gay, whose research focuses on government and African-American studies, is primarily a quantitative scholar, not a literary one. She didn't steal anyone's research, and she didn't take credit for anyone's ideas beyond a few phrases here and there. This was an infraction, but it's more like a speeding ticket than a criminal offense.

In context, the plagiarism issue is clearly a pretext to pressure Gay and Harvard Corporation, and to invite a time-consuming and distracting congressional inquiry. The whole campaign, particularly the government action, is the political equivalent of a [SLAPP suit](#) — a threat of legal action made with the intention of making its target's life so miserable that they just give up.

Which Harvard now has done.

Ackman's role in the fracas is particularly troubling — in part because no one would give a fig about his ill-informed and inflammatory views were he not a billionaire. (Ackman is the founder and CEO of Pershing Square Capital Management.) His [Dec. 10 letter](#) to the Harvard Governing Boards demanding Gay's removal misstated her positions and hyperbolically inflated their impact.

Gay did not “support ... rather than condemn” the organizations who signed the offensive and preposterous statement holding Israel “entirely responsible” for the Oct. 7 attacks. She simply, and I think ineptly, repeated the free-speech mantra that student organizations speak for themselves and not for Harvard.

And is it really plausible that “President Gay's mishandling of Oct. 7th and its aftermath on campus have led to the metastasis of antisemitism to other universities and institutions around the world”? Really? The statement of a Harvard University president is what inspired the bigots in [Ventura County](#) or France?

I share what seems to be Ackman's pained, anguished, and [arguably traumatized](#) response to Oct. 7. It still keeps me awake at night. But that doesn't mean the response is right.

Because it isn't about principle; it's about power.

And, yes, that exercise of power obviously reinforces antisemitic conspiracy theories of how rich, powerful Jews squelch criticism of Israel. Somehow, the same people hyperconcerned with the optics of Gay's actions can seem willfully oblivious to their own.

As to the culture warriors who joined with Ackman in efforts to displace Gay, they are part of a nationalistic campaign opposed to small-l liberalism. It's [not](#)

[about free speech](#) or the toleration of multiple viewpoints. It is simply a campaign of power: right against left, our side against theirs, MAGA versus “woke,” conservatism versus progress.

When “our side” is being censored, we are [for free speech](#). When “our side” is being attacked by speech, we are [against free speech](#).

The agenda of people like Stefanik and Rufo, here, is entirely clear. They have long fought against any form of education that they deem insufficiently patriotic; that dares to question conservative narratives of America’s greatness; that points out the enduring power of systemic racism; that diverges from religious traditions regarding sexuality and gender. In the hubbub over campus conflict over the war, they have found a new inroad for their fight.

These same folks are attacking school boards, liberal arts curricula, diversity programs and identity-based affinity groups. They wink at antisemitic statements and symbols when they’re made by people on the right, then profess outrage when they’re made, or allegedly made, by people on the left.

And now, as American Jews are reeling from Oct. 7, from the very real increases in antisemitism around the world, and from the horrors of the war in Gaza (whether we support or oppose it); at this moment when we are, frankly, vulnerable and raw — this is the moment at which our greatest fears are weaponized against the American liberalism that has welcomed Jews for a hundred years. For entirely understandable reasons, we have been swept up in a moral panic.

The last word here goes to a Harvard junior by the name of Tommy Barone. [Interviewed by The New York Times](#) last month, Barone said he did not believe Gay should step down. “Her resigning would be dangerous and set a precedent for higher education that would signal that with enough resources and commitment, powerful people can cow universities into making fundamental decisions about their structure.”

That precedent is now set.

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