Is There a Cure for Campus Illiberalism?

Testimony of Robert P. George

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Colleges and universities have three fundamental purposes: the pursuit of knowledge of the truth; the preservation of knowledge securely obtained; and the transmission of knowledge. Of course, there are other desirable ends that colleges and universities legitimately seek while also pursuing these purposes, but these three are the fundamental, constitutive, defining purposes of academic institutions. All the other things such institutions legitimately do are founded upon them, and anything they do that undermines these purposes they should not be doing. So, for example, though I support college athletics, I support them only insofar as they do not damage the

academic program—the transmission of knowledge. When, or to the extent that, they harm the academic program, they need to be reformed or, if reform isn't feasible, abolished.

There are certainly colleges and universities today, as in the past, which place too much emphasis on athletics, to the detriment of the academic program. But athletics are not the greatest threat to the integrity of our colleges and universities today. A far greater and graver threat is posed by the politicization of the academy. The problem is most vividly manifest in the phenomenon of campus illiberalism. By that, I mean the unwillingness of so many members of college and university communities to entertain, or even listen to, arguments that challenge the opinions they happen to hold, whether the opinions have to do with climate science, affirmative action and racial or ethnic preferences; abortion; welfare policy; marriage and sexual morality; U.S. foreign and defense policy; the international economic order; or the origins of human consciousness.

At many institutions, speaking invitations to dissenters from campus orthodoxies are simply not issued. Or, if they are issued, dissenting speakers are "disinvited" under pressure from opponents of their views. Or, if they are not disinvited, they are pressured to withdraw under the threat of disruptive forms of protest. Or, if they do not withdraw, they are interrupted by abusive protestors, shouted down, or even subjected to violent assault (as we saw happen at Middlebury). And it is not just visitors to campuses. Faculty and student dissenters within campus communities are subjected to abuse and intimidation (as we have seen at Evergreen State and other places). Every effort is made to ensure that they are denied opportunities to speak their minds or are intimidated into silence.

I do not wish to paint with too broad a brush here. The situation is better or worse at different institutions. As it happens, it is not at all bad at my own institution. Recently, I complete my thirty-third happy year at Princeton, where I have never been subjected to intimidation or

abuse (though threats from off campus have been made against me, one of which landed the perpetrator in a federal prison, and threats have been made against Princeton for having me on its faculty.) But you all know the cases that I have in mind at colleges and universities around the country.

In referring to these cases of campus illiberalism you may have noticed that I spoke of this illiberalism as the way the problem I am concerned about "is most vividly manifest today." In other words, the denial of speaking opportunities, the disinviting of speakers due to their opinions, the disruption of meetings and shouting down of dissenting speakers, are what get the attention of the public. But these are merely some *manifestations*. The core of the problem is this: **Many institutions are letting the side down when it comes to the transmission of knowledge by failing to ensure that our students, at every level, are confronted with, and have the opportunity to consider, the best that is to be said on competing sides of all**

questions that are in dispute among reasonable people of goodwill.

They are permitting prevailing opinions on campus to harden into orthodoxies, orthodoxies that go largely unchallenged, leaving students with the false belief that there are in fact *no disputes* on these matters among reasonable people of goodwill. At the core of our problem is the toxic thing that provides an environment in which illiberalism flourishes and can be expected to manifest itself in the ways it manifests itself today, namely the phenomenon of groupthink.

We fail to understand the depth of problem, or appreciate the danger it poses to intellectual life, if we take a static view of knowledge, thinking of it as information that is passed into the mind of the recipient who records it there and draws upon it as needed. This is worse than an oversimplification. The transmission of knowledge very often goes beyond the acquisition of information (or skills) and requires the engagement of the knowledge seeker with competing perspectives and points of view. It also requires certain virtues, including open-

mindedness, respect for what Mill called “liberty of thought and discussion,” intellectual humility—humility of the sort one can possess only insofar as one appreciates, and not merely notionally, one’s own fallibility—and love of truth. It is the task of colleges and universities, precisely as institutions of learning, to expose students to competing points of view and to foster in them those virtues. That is necessary not because there are no truths to be attained, but, rather, because the pursuit of truth and the deeper appropriation of truths and their meaning and significance, requires it.

You see, then, that whatever is to be said about claims that the predominance of certain views and their proponents on campuses, and the exclusion of others, the problem I am calling attention to here is less about unfairness than it is about the need to avoid and, where it has set in, overcome groupthink in order to fulfill a constitutive purpose of academic institutions. We owe that to our students—whether they like it or not. It is a scandal when students are graduated from liberal

arts colleges and university liberal arts programs with no understanding (or, worse yet, grotesque misunderstandings) of the arguments advanced by serious scholars and thinkers who dissent from campus orthodoxies on issues such as those I mentioned a few minutes ago. Even if the opinions the students happen to have acquired in an environment of groupthink happen to be true, students' ignorance of the arguments of dissenters will prevent them from understanding the truth as deeply as they should and actually appropriating it—that is to say, understanding *why* it is so and why competing views have nevertheless attracted the attention and even the allegiance of serious thinkers.

I believe it was the great jurist Learned Hand who said that "the spirit of Liberty is the spirit of being not too sure one is right." In making that point, Hand was not endorsing radical skepticism or relativism or anything of the sort. Rather, he was pointing to the need for the virtue of intellectual humility in light of the inescapable reality of human

fallibility. His focus was on the need for that recognition and its corresponding virtue in the project of establishing and maintaining republican government and respect for freedom. But what he says about the spirit of liberty is also true of the spirit of truth seeking—a sense of one's own fallibility, a sense that one could be wrong, even in one's basic premises and most fundamental beliefs, an openness of mind, a willingness to entertain criticism and to engage critics, all of these things are essential to the truth seeking project, too. And that means that they must be cultivated in institutions whose mission includes the pursuit and transmission of knowledge.

That is not to say that we should not be advocates of our points of view, or that we should not be engaged politically. I would be a gross hypocrite, at best, if I were to suggest any such thing. Now there *are* people who see political engagement as incompatible with the scholarly vocation. But politically engaged scholars, like all scholars, need to be highly cognizant of their own fallibility—even on matters

about which they care deeply, and even when it comes to causes in which they are profoundly emotionally invested. Even as advocates, we must cultivate intellectual humility and a willingness to entertain the other guy's arguments in a serious way. One must never imagine that one cannot possibly be wrong about this or that cherished conviction, or that one's political adversaries and intellectual critics cannot possibly be right. That is fatal to the truth-seeking enterprise.

I think the proper attitude for us to hold is the attitude Plato teaches us to adopt, especially in the *Gorgias*. Socrates' attitude in that dialogue strikes me as exactly the one we need to emulate if we are to be good scholars and teachers. We must always be on the lookout for, and be open to, the true friend, that is to say, the person who will confer upon us the inestimable benefit of showing us that we are in error, where in fact we are in error. The true friend, in correcting our mistakes, does us the very best service. We need to see that, and we need to help our students to see it. The person who sees his intellectual adversary as an

enemy to be defeated, rather than as a friend joined with him dialectically in the pursuit of a common aim, namely, knowledge of the truth, is already off the rails. He is in grave danger of falling into the ditch of sophistry.

So openness to argument, to having one's premises and most fundamental beliefs and values challenged, is vitally important to the knowledge-seeking mission that defines liberal arts institutions (and professional schools that share the knowledge-seeking aspirations of liberal arts institutions) as the kinds of things they are. A spirit of openness to argument and challenge, where it flourishes in an academic culture, is what immunizes academic institutions against groupthink and chases the groupthink away when it comes knocking at the door.

Part of the problem, of course, is that once groupthink has taken hold, folks who are caught up in it don't recognize the problem. When is the last time you met somebody who said, "yeah, you know what, my

problem is that I'm caught up in groupthink. I tend to just think like everybody else around me thinks." I've heard someone say that only one time in my life—and she didn't put it quite that starkly. The trouble with groupthink is that when you're in it, you generally don't know you're in it. You may realize that not everyone shares your views, but you will suppose that those who dissent from them are irrational or ill-motivated. You will imagine that anyone who disagrees with you is a rube or a bigot or a tool of nefarious interests—a fool or a fraud. When someone is in groupthink, he could pass a lie detector test claiming that he is not in groupthink. But that doesn't mean he's not in groupthink. And wherever ideological orthodoxies settle into place and are not subjected to serious questions and challenges, you have to worry about groupthink setting in. And that's true whether or not campus illiberalism manifests itself in the more visible ways we are now seeing so frequently, with dissenting speakers being excluded from campus or being shouted down, or whatever.

Now it seems to me that viewpoint diversity or what we might call in an academic setting intellectual diversity has its value as a kind of vaccine against groupthink, and as an antidote to groupthink when it begins to set in. Diversity of views, approaches, arguments and the like is the cure for campus illiberalism. People who have the spirit of being not too sure that they are right, people who want to be challenged because they know that challenging and being challenged are integral and indispensable to the process of knowledge-seeking, such people (whatever their own personal views) will want intellectual diversity on campus in order for the institution to accomplish its mission.

Now of course we all know that it's pretty hard to get this intellectual diversity. And I think there are a number of reasons for that. While in my own experience it's true, and some of my colleagues on the progressive side tell me that in their experience it's true, that there is sometimes blatant, conscious, obviously deliberate discrimination in hiring and promotion against people who dissent from campus

orthodoxies, I happen to think that blatant, conscious, deliberate discrimination is not the heart of the problem. I believe the more fundamental challenge is not conscious and deliberate discrimination, but rather something else.

In this vale of tears, we human beings, fallen and frail creatures that we are, have a lot of trouble appreciating meritorious work and even good arguments when they run contrary to our own opinions, especially when we're strongly emotionally attached to those opinions. As I see it, this isn't a liberal problem, or a progressive, or a left wing problem. It's a human nature problem. Anytime an intellectual or political orthodoxy has hardened into place—it doesn't matter whether it's a left wing orthodoxy or a right wing orthodoxy—it's going to be very difficult for a lot of people to draw the distinction between "work I disagree with despite its being really very good and challenging, and interesting, and important," and "work that goes contrary to what I just know to be true on issues that are important and critical to me and bound up with my

sense of who I am as a, fill in the blank: progressive, conservative, feminist, libertarian, Christian, atheist, or whatever." People will experience challenges to the dominant opinions as outrageous attacks on truth, indecent assaults on essential values, threats to what is good and true and right and just, intolerable violations of the norms of "our" community.

So I ask myself the question: Well what should we do? First, I would say this to my friends in academia who are on the more liberal or progressive side of the ideological street, and who perceive the problem as I do: Number one, we need to expose and protest against any *conscious* discrimination based on viewpoint; number two, by both precept and example, we need to encourage our colleagues and students to be rigorously self-critical—to acknowledge fallibility (their own as well as everyone else's) and be open to arguments, evidence, and reasons that may be adduced against any position they happen at the moment to hold; and number three, we need truly to bend over

backwards to appreciate the quality of good work that challenges our own judgments, conclusions, values, and beliefs.

We need to encourage people to be self-critical in ways that would enable them honestly to say, as I might say about the work of, for example, my colleague at Princeton, Peter Singer. “Well, you know, I’m really scandalized by his defense of the moral permissibility of infanticide, but there’s an argument he makes that’s got to be met. And the burden is on me to make the argument that our dignity as human beings comes by virtue of our humanity—our status as rational creatures, beings possessing, at least in root form, even in the earliest stages of development, the capacities for the types of characteristically human activities that give human beings a special kind of standing and inviolability. The burden is on me in other words to meet his challenge.

I want my colleagues on the other side to take the same position about work by more conservative scholars, especially in these hot button areas. But I acknowledge that it’s hard to do. And it’s especially hard to

do when orthodoxies have hardened into place and one is not even hearing arguments against one's own positions. And when one is not hearing them, and everybody one knows, and everybody in one's circle, tends to think the same thing about that body of issues, no matter how much diversity there is on other stuff, we're likely headed for groupthink.

When one is hearing the same thing from everyone whom one respects—when one is being reinforced in one's own opinions by all one's friends and colleagues, whether one is a student or faculty member—the motivation to think more critically tends to be very hard to work up. It really is. Working it up is so much easier when one is regularly, in the normal course of things, being challenged by thoughtful people who do not always see things just as one does oneself. So it's best for us not to get ourselves into this fix in the first place by permitting ideological orthodoxies to form on college and university campuses. But if they have formed, then our challenge is to

help our colleagues to appreciate work—and be willing to say that they appreciate work—that is meritorious even when they do not agree with the arguments or positions being advanced.

And then there is something else. A growing number of prominent university leaders around the country—Robert Zimmer, president of the University of Chicago, Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, Christopher Eisgruber, president of Princeton University, Carol Christ, chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, Ronald Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins University, among others (most of whom are, by the way, self-proclaimed political progressives)—are publicly acknowledging the groupthink or "echo chamber" problem in American higher education and are asking for help in doing something about it. Here alumni and friends of American higher education who want to help make a difference have a golden opportunity. They can join efforts to found or support campus initiatives aimed at bringing a wider diversity of views into the discussion and turning what have all-

too-often been campus monologues into true dialogues (or trialogues, or quadralogues, or quintalogues). Centers and institutes have been created at various colleges and universities around the country to do just that. And they are already having an impact.

I want to close by giving you a couple of examples of the value of viewpoint, or intellectual diversity, again from my own experience. One is the James Madison Program at Princeton, which I have the honor to direct. The program was founded 18 years ago. Its impact on the intellectual culture of Princeton, precisely by bringing viewpoint diversity into our community in a serious way, has been remarkable. It gives me enormous satisfaction that this opinion of mine is shared by many of my liberal colleagues who share none of my other opinions. They have praised the Madison Program for turning what might have been campus monologues into true dialogues—benefitting everybody in the process. The presence on campus of an initiative like the Madison Program ensures that there are people around who think

different things, even about fundamental issues that everybody cares about, and which many people assume all academics are on one side of.

That's great, because it means that in general discussions across the university, and not just at the Madison Program's own events, people cannot simply suppose that everybody in the room shares the same assumptions or holds the same opinions. People know that they have to defend their premises—because they will be challenged. That makes for a different, and much better, and more serious, kind of engagement—a kind of engagement that profoundly enriches the intellectual life for the entire community.

The second example, again from my own experience, is the experience I've had teaching with my beloved friend and colleague Cornel West. Now Cornel and I differ about some very important issues. I'm a conservative. He is honorary co-chairman of Democratic Socialists of America. But we teach together at Princeton whenever our schedules

permit. A typical West-George seminar includes readings from Sophocles, Plato, St. Augustine, Marx, Mill, Newman, Kierkegaard, Hayek, Solzhenitsyn, John Dewey, C.S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Gabriel Marcel. What happens in our seminars is magical and the impact on our students is amazing. What you have here is a genuine collaboration. Cornel and I work together across the lines of ideological and political difference in the common project of truth-seeking, knowledge-seeking, wisdom-seeking, engaging with each other and our students in a serious, respectful, civil manner, striving to understand each other and learn from each other, treating each other, not as enemies, but as partners in the dialectical process of seeking truth, knowledge, wisdom.

Although we teach "great books," our approach is the very opposite of antiquarian: We look for the timeless meaning and contemporary significance of the texts we assign. We consider existential, moral,

religious, and political questions that are important to us and our students in the context of the writings we examine.

And here is the thing that really matters: The students learn, and they learn how to learn. They learn to approach intellectual and political matters dialectically—critically engaging the most compelling points to be adduced in favor of competing ideas and claims. They learn the value and importance of mutual respect and civility. They learn from two guys with some pretty strong opinions, neither of whom is shy about stating them publicly, that the spirit of truth-seeking, like the spirit of liberty, is a spirit open to the possibility that one is in serious error.

Let me be more specific. I want you to understand what I'm saying here because what Cornel and I do really is, I believe, part of the cure for campus illiberalism. Now, I've always prided myself as a teacher on being able to represent, accurately and sympathetically, moral and political views I myself do not share. So if I'm teaching about abortion,

or something having to do with affirmative action, or marriage, or religious freedom, or campaign finance and the First Amendment, or the Second Amendment right to bear arms, or whatever it is, in my constitutional interpretation classes or my civil liberties classes, I like to think that if someone came in who happened not to know which side I was on, he or she would not be able to figure it out from my presentation of the competing positions and the arguments for and against them. Now, that's not because I think professors should hide their views or anything like that. Outside the classroom, I certainly do not hide my views! It's just that I don't think that classrooms should be used to proselytize or push a moral or political agenda or recruit adherents for one's causes. There is a place for catechism classes and the like, but that place is not the college or university classroom. The classroom is for exposing students to the best that is to be said for the competing views so that they can learn to think more carefully, critically, and, perhaps above all, for themselves. So, as I say, that is why I always, without fail, regardless of how much I care about an

issue, present the very best arguments, not only for my own positions but for positions I strongly reject.

What I have learned in teaching with Cornel, though, is this: as good as I think I am at this, I am not good enough. The evidence for that is simply that time after time in the course of our seminars I have found Cornel saying something, or making a compelling point in response to a point that I or one of the more conservative students has made, that simply would not have occurred to me—a point that needs to be seriously considered and engaged. Had Cornel not been there, the point would not have been made, and the benefit to be conferred on all of us in grappling with it would not have been gained. And Cornel tells me that he has had precisely the same experience, time and time again. He has found me making points or developing lines of argument that, he says, he has never considered and which simply would not have occurred to him, despite the fact that he shares my aspiration to

represent as fully and sympathetically as possible positions and arguments from across the spectrum.

Now that, it seems to me, is a very good argument for promoting intellectual diversity. By the way, I think it's a very good argument for team teaching. I think team teaching is a wonderful thing to do, especially if you have people who disagree about things teaching together. And the things in dispute do not have to be political things. The disagreements might be about the proper interpretation of Shakespeare or the Bible, or any of a range of other subjects, especially (but not exclusively) in the humanities and social sciences. But it's a very valuable thing to do, and more of it should be done. But the truly important thing is this: A healthy intellectual milieu is one in which students and scholars regularly encounter competing views and arguments, where intelligent dissent from dominant views is common and the value of dissent is understood and appreciated, where beliefs that can be supported by arguments and advanced in a spirit of

goodwill are common enough that they do not strike people as reflections of ignorance, bigotry, or bad will, and people who do not share them do not experience them—because they seem so alien—as personal assaults or outrages against the community's values. It's great to have competing views among instructors in the classroom; I realize, however, that such a thing is a luxury that most institutions cannot afford to provide on a regular basis. But diversity among faculty on campus, even if not in the same classroom, helps to cure campus illiberalism. It voids the tendency of people—students and faculty alike—who hold positions that happen to be dominant to suppose that the college or university is theirs, and is for people like them, not for people who disagree with them. It sends a message that all who seek knowledge of truth and wish to pursue it in a spirit of civility and mutual respect are welcome here as insiders sharing the truly constitutive values and goals of the community, not outsiders who are, at best, merely to be tolerated as if they were present in the community only on sufferance.

Am I advocating “affirmative action” for conservatives? Not at all. I am advocating attitudes and practices that will cure campus illiberalism without the need to give conservative scholars preferences in hiring and promotion. If conscious and unconscious prejudice against people who dissent from prevailing orthodoxies were defeated, if intellectual diversity were truly valued for its vital contribution to the cause of learning, the hiring problems would take care of themselves. We would not have departments of sociology or politics or history with forty-three progressives and one conservative (or, more likely, one libertarian). Nor would we have the embarrassments, and (as at Middlebury) the tragedy, of campus illiberalism.

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Witness Disclosure Requirement — "Truth in Testimony"

Pursuant to House Rule XI, clause 2(g)(5) and Committee Rule 16(a), non-governmental witnesses are required to provide the Committee with the information requested below in advance of testifying before the Committee. You may attach additional sheets if you need more space.

Name: Robert P. George

1. Please list any entity you are representing in your testimony before the Committee and briefly describe your relationship with each entity.	
Name of Entity	**Your relationship with the entity**

2. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you or the entity or entities listed above have received since January 1, 2015, that are related to the subject of the hearing.

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I certify that the information above and attached is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.

Signature  Date: May 101, 2018

Robert P. George

Robert P. George is McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University. He is also frequently a Visiting Professor at Harvard Law School.

In addition to his academic service, Professor George has served as Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. He has also served on the President's Council on Bioethics, as a presidential appointee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and as the U.S. member of UNESCO's World Commission on the Ethics of Science and Technology.

He is a former Judicial Fellow at the Supreme Court of the United States, where he received the Justice Tom C. Clark Award.

He serves on the boards of the John M. Templeton Foundation Religion Trust, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, and the Center for Individual Rights, among others.

Professor George is author of *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1993), *In Defense of Natural Law* (Oxford University Press, 1999), *The Clash of Orthodoxies* (ISI, 2001) and *Conscience and Its Enemies* (ISI, 2013). He is co-author of *Conjugal Union: What Marriage Is* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life* (2nd edition, Doubleday, 2011), *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *What is Marriage?* (Encounter, 2012). He is editor of several volumes, including *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1992), *The Autonomy of Law: Essays on Legal Positivism* (Oxford University Press, 1996), *Natural Law, Liberalism, and Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1996), and *Great Cases in Constitutional Law* (Princeton University Press, 2000), and co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Natural Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Professor George's articles and review essays have appeared in the *Harvard Law Review*, the *Yale Law Journal*, the *Columbia Law Review*, the *University of Chicago Law Review*, the *Review of Politics*, the *Review of Metaphysics*, and the *American Journal of Jurisprudence*. He has also written for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *First Things*, the *Boston Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

A graduate of Swarthmore College, Professor George holds M.T.S. and J.D. degrees from Harvard University and the degrees of D.Phil., B.C.L., and D.C.L. from Oxford University. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at Swarthmore and received a Frank Knox Fellowship from Harvard for graduate study in law and philosophy at Oxford. He holds nineteen honorary degrees, including doctorates of law, letters, ethics, science, divinity, humane letters, civil law, law and moral values, humanities, and juridical science.

He is a recipient of the United States Presidential Citizens Medal, the Honorific Medal for the Defense of Human Rights of the Republic of Poland, the Bradley Prize for Intellectual and Civic Achievement, the Philip Merrill Award of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, the Paul Bator Award of the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy, the Sidney Hook Award of the National Association of Scholars, a Silver Gavel

Award of the American Bar Association, the Charles Fried Award of the Harvard Law School Federalist Society, the Irving Kristol Award of the American Enterprise Institute, and Princeton University's President's Award for Distinguished Teaching.

He has given the John Dewey Lecture in Philosophy of Law at Harvard, the Guido Calabresi Lecture in Law and Religion at Yale, the Elizabeth Anscombe Memorial Lecture in Bioethics at Oxford, the Sir Malcolm Knox Lecture in Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and the Frank Irvine Lecture in Law at Cornell. Professor George is general editor of New Forum Books, a Princeton University Press series of interdisciplinary works in law, culture, and politics. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is Of Counsel to the law firm of Robinson & McElwee.

Baylor University has named its new Washington, D.C.-based program the "Robert P. George Initiative in Faith, Ethics, and Public Policy."