

Prepared Testimony and Statement for the Record of
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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and distinguished Members of the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, you have invited me to testify about my own personal experiences with free speech issues on college campuses and what I have learned from them. It is an honor and a privilege to share some thoughts with you here today.

Last February, several of my students asked me to moderate a talk with the libertarian scholar Charles Murray and another set of students asked me to moderate a talk with Edward Snowden. As I wrote in the *New York Times*, this was a chance to demonstrate a commitment to the free and fair exchange of views in my classroom.¹ While Mr. Snowden’s presentation went forward without a problem, Dr. Murray’s was drowned out by students who never let him speak, we were forced to retreat to another location to live stream our conversation, and he and I were intimidated and physically assaulted while trying to leave campus.

Why did this happen in the United States of America, on a bucolic college campus in the Green Mountains of Vermont? I think there are three reasons.

First of all, any liberal arts college campus is something of a bubble, but Middlebury College is in the state of Vermont, making it a bubble within a bubble. We are the state that elected Senator Bernie Sanders, and we had the second smallest percentage of Trump voters (30.3%) in the country.² In that context, Charles Murray was a lightning rod that he might not otherwise have been.

The second reason I wound up injured follows from the behavior of a small minority of Middlebury faculty, who cheered on the protests, which is their right. However, these faculty also did not encourage their students to read Charles Murray or listen to him first before drawing their own conclusions about his work or his character, which was their obligation as educators. There are members of the Middlebury faculty who acknowledged publicly that they had not read a thing Charles Murray has written, but still knew everything they need to know from what the

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/understanding-the-angry-mob-that-gave-me-a-concussion.html?_r=0

² <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/president>

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) website had to say about him.³ Just because everybody is saying something about some person or group obviously does not make it true. Exhibit A is 1938 Nazi Germany. Our responsibility as educators is to encourage students to read and think for themselves, not to outsource their thinking to others. The SPLC's blurred lines between advocacy and information also must bear a portion of the blame for what transpired.

The third reason events took place as they did on the Middlebury campus is that some students believed that shutting down speech was a means to social justice; some Middlebury professors shared that view, thereby encouraging radical action. It is important to realize that everyone inside the lecture hall was a member of the Middlebury community, as IDs were checked at the door. Outside agitators were among those protesting outside. Some members of the Middlebury community would like to draw a distinction between what happened inside the lecture hall and what happened outside it, where I was injured. They are mistaken. Shutting down speech is always an invitation to violence. There was a direct line between the fighting words on campus, the suppression of speech and the angry mob that gave me a concussion. All violence is a breakdown of communication.

I met JD Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elogy*, last week, and he asked me whether what happened to me was a one-off thing related to a particular moment in time or an expression of something larger. It's a good question. I responded that it is both. The overreaction was very much rooted in the bubble within a bubble that is Middlebury College, but it is also a reaction to larger trends that have long been in motion having to do with growing inequities in our country that correlate with unequal K-12 educational opportunities. Middlebury successfully recruits a diverse class of the best and the brightest from all corners of the country and world, but some students of color who arrive on campus from urban areas are confronted for the first time with the challenges of living in one of the whitest states in the union. At Middlebury, they encounter unfathomable privilege, which is sometimes accompanied by a sense of entitlement. Since our Constitution once counted slaves as 3/5 of a human being, when vast inequality aligns with racial difference, it breeds legitimate resentment. None of this is to excuse the shutting down of speech and the violence to which it led, but it is to point out that the emotions the protestors brought to the event were real and justified. There is still much equality work to be done in our country.

Lest I be misunderstood, I want to make it clear that we are talking about a small minority of students and faculty who applauded censorship. But they were loud and vocal, just as those of us were who stood for freedom of expression. A fundamental misunderstanding arose. Instead of seeing freedom of speech as the bedrock of both liberal education and American constitutional democracy, the ground rules through which greater diversity and inclusivity have been and can still be achieved, the opponents of having Charles Murray speak on campus saw a tradeoff between freedom of speech, on the one hand, and inclusivity, on the other hand. Nothing could be further from the truth, since free expression is the foundational means to greater diversity. The idea that there was a tradeoff between free speech and inclusivity, however, initially carried the day in our campus discourse. It could do so only by ignoring both American history and the empirical world beyond the Green Mountains, which provide inescapable evidence that it is precisely the marginalized who suffer most when civil

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/education/edlife/middlebury-divided-campus-charles-murray-free-speech.html>

liberties are compromised. The view that inclusivity and free speech are mutually exclusive had and will continue to have popular appeal, since it seems to embrace moderation defined as middle ground between two extremes. It comforted those pained by the conflict they were witnessing, both on campus and beyond, because it meant that one didn't have to choose a side.

There were quite a few brave souls, however, who saw the foundation of the university under challenge and spoke out publicly, including Middlebury's president, Laurie Patton.⁴ They understood that academic freedom is a foundation for both knowledge and human excellence, and that it matters what is happening in universities, because democracy and liberal education are intertwined. Two of my colleagues organized a Principles of Free Expression petition that garnered over 100 signatures from Middlebury faculty and was published in the *Wall Street Journal* in March. There were three general patterns among the signatories:

1. Many supporters had studied or experienced intellectual life under an authoritarian or totalitarian regime.
2. Others had lived in American red states and had loved ones with whom they disagreed politically.
3. Quite a few were older rather than younger.

I myself happen to fall into all three of these categories. I should also add that professors from the STEM fields, religion, and political philosophy were disproportionately represented.

In general, the signatories understood the critical importance of being able to agree to disagree, for the sake of the community, free inquiry, and democracy itself. It was shocking to discover that I had colleagues who did not share my understanding of the academy's and America's core values.

Part of the reason I was shocked by what happened at Middlebury is that I do not encounter captive minds in my classroom. I have been able to shape a learning environment where ideas can freely collide. My students know that I want them to speak their mind without worrying about whether or not what they say might be labeled offensive. If anybody winds up offended by what another student has to say (this rarely happens), they know they must apologize, and we can then move on. Students must feel free to speak their minds, make mistakes, and learn from them if they are to develop both intellectually and emotionally. They must learn to challenge speech with more speech, to think for themselves rather than relying on somebody else to tell them what to think or do, as well as to reflect on how their words and actions affect others. While students must always first demonstrate that they understand an argument on its own terms, I make sure they know that they are free to disagree, both with a particular text and with me. I will grade them on the strength of their argument and the evidence they muster in support of it, not the conclusions they may reach. With these maxims, students not only write better papers, they also learn skills that arm them to fight injustice in all its manifestations.

⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-right-way-to-protect-free-speech-on-campus-1497019583>

Because cultivating open-mindedness is so important for learning, I am always on the lookout for challenging alternative viewpoints, as they provide an ideal catalyst for intellectual growth. As a graduate student in the Harvard Government department, civil conversations with conservative professors with whom I disagreed changed my life by forcing me to examine my own biases. In so doing, I came to understand the difference between emotion and reason, both of which are important for human flourishing. Part of the reason I agreed to engage with Charles Murray is precisely because I want my students to benefit from a comparable educational experience. I want them to learn to think for themselves so they are capable of standing on principle and resisting peer pressure in their pursuit of self-knowledge, truth, and the good. Viewpoint diversity is an asset for any institution of higher education.

Nothing less than liberal education and the possibility of reasoned political debate is at stake in the debate over campus censorship. The very values that animated and inspired the founders of our constitutional order are being challenged when protestors chant “Liberalism is white supremacy” and “the revolution will not uphold the Constitution.” As a professor of comparative and international politics, I can tell you with complete confidence that those who embrace such logic are misinformed about their relative good fortune in being born in the United States. Because they have seen what happens to civil liberties under authoritarian regimes, African students at Middlebury College tend to view recent events through a different prism than African-American students. We have a civic education crisis in our country today, and it originates in K-12 education.⁵

Looking to the future, what have I learned over the course of the past seven months? I have three conjectures for your consideration.

First, while the entire university cannot and should not be a safe space, there must be some safe enclaves on campus to foster inclusivity. That commitment, however, must not undermine social interaction across socioeconomic and racial/gender divides. That commitment must not come at the expense of liberal education. Sports teams can function as safe spaces for team members and should also be pushed to integrate with the larger community whenever possible. Free discussion in a diverse classroom can help make that happen.

Second, if we are to avoid the implicit endorsement of real violence, such as what happened at Middlebury, institutions of higher learning cannot be in the business of policing symbolic violence. Calling speech symbolic violence, unfortunately, seems to justify physical violence as a reciprocal response. Many protesters rightfully pointed out that Charles Murray's research and thinking have been weaponized. Fair enough, but Pierre Bourdieu's, Jean-Francois Lyotard's, and Kimberle Crenshaw's writings have also been weaponized. What justifies shutting down one and not the other besides ideology? Universities exist to promote an arena in which ideas can be exchanged freely, not to render value judgments on the ideas themselves. There are larger implications to getting this right. Reducing group think in the academy is a necessary condition for reducing it in the electorate.

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2017/10/23/daily-202-the-corrosion-of-support-for-first-amendment-principles-started-before-trump-he-s-supercharged-it/59ed49b130fb045cba000926/?utm_term=.eba3e92844c5&wpisrc=nl_daily202&wpmm=1

Third, we need a Treaty of Westphalia between departments and programs on our college campuses.⁶ At Middlebury, a student club invited Charles Murray to speak, and the political science department co-sponsored the event. In the campus outcry that ensued, the Sociology/Anthropology department sought to rally the community to censor the Political Science department by demanding that we withdraw our co-sponsorship. In so doing, they abandoned long established norms of tolerance and open-mindedness, as well as collegiality. Universities must denounce efforts by one department to sanction another in this way, even when it is done with the best of intentions. Attempted censorship is a violation of academic freedom.

Allow me to conclude with some wise words from the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, who won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize while imprisoned for his commitment to democratic values and who died this summer. For his Nobel lecture, he penned the following memorable lines:

“Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth.”⁷

There is a dangerous idea that has recently taken hold on the American left that one must fight fire with fire. As a result, we now have an Alt-Left and an Alt-Right in the US. In resisting what they see as extremism, they embrace extremist tactics. Democracy and reasoned debate have been and will be the main casualties, since the extreme left and extreme right are rebelling against liberalism itself. Upholding freedom of expression protects all of us, because it gives individuals ways to dissent without resorting to violence.

More broadly, our constitutional democracy will depend on whether Americans can relearn how to engage civilly with one another. Our national security also depends on it. America’s enemies all seek to divide us. We must not allow them to do so.

The challenge before all of us, therefore, is to channel our emotions into thinking about how we might better work together as Americans on what Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Alexander Hamilton calls “America, you great unfinished symphony.”⁸

There is important work for Democrats and Republicans to do together. Let’s get to it.

Thank you for your attention, and I welcome your questions.

⁶ The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia ended the wars of religion in Europe by upholding *Cuius regio, eius religio* (Whose realm, his religion), meaning that the ruler of a sovereign state could dictate the religion of those ruled.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/world/asia/liu-xiaobo-china-nobel-writings.html>

⁸ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (Hachette Book Group, 2016), p. 273.

Biography

Allison Stanger is the Russell Leng '60 Professor of International Politics and Economics and founding director of the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs at Middlebury College. She is the author of *One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy* and the forthcoming *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Leaks: The Story of Whistleblowing in America*, both with Yale University Press. She is working on a new book tentatively titled *Consumers vs. Citizens: How the Internet Revolution is Remaking Global Security and Democracy's Public Square*. Stanger has published opinion pieces in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *Washington Post* and has testified before the Commission on Wartime Contracting, the Senate Budget Committee, and the Congressional Oversight Panel. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a Scholar in Residence at New America. Stanger received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University.