

The Big Read Antisemitism

The Ivy League, Wall St donors and the furore over antisemitism on campus

Wealthy alumni have campaigned about rising hostility towards Jews. The controversy has already forced one university president from office

Joshua Chaffin in Cambridge, Massachusetts YESTERDAY

It was a riveting image: the presidents of three of the world's most elite universities — Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology — seated together at a witness table. All were women; one black and one Jewish.

They were the star witnesses at a congressional hearing on campus antisemitism. Within days, one of them would be forced from office and the others would be clinging to their jobs.

That seemed an unlikely outcome on Tuesday morning as Harvard's Claudine Gay, Penn's Elizabeth Magill and MIT's Sally Kornbluth displayed the caution of academics as they strained to provide pinpoint answers to questions from members of Congress about whether their university cultures had somehow abetted a hostility towards Jews that has surged since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. In their opening remarks, all three denied this and offered repeated and explicit condemnations and assurances.

Yet none of that seemed to matter after a three-and-a-half minute encounter with Elise Stefanik. The Republican representative from New York — herself a Harvard graduate — posed a seemingly straightforward question: yes or no, would calls for genocide of Jews on campus violate their codes of conduct or harassment policies? Asked to show moral clarity, the presidents turned lawyerly and hedged.

"If the speech turns into conduct, yes, it can be harassment," Magill replied, smiling awkwardly.

"I'm asking if specifically calling for the genocide of Jews — does that constitute bullying or harassment?" Stefanik pressed.

"If it is directed and severe or pervasive, it is harassment," said Magill, a former dean of Stanford Law School.

"So the answer is yes?"

There was a rising, almost palpable, sense of disbelief.

"It is a context-dependent decision, congresswoman," Magill concluded.



An exchange between Elise Stefanik, Republican congresswoman for New York, and the university leaders was seen by many as highlighting the scale of ethical confusion at elite US institutions © Ken Cedeno/Reuters

Faced with the same question, Gay also sounded, as one observer put it, like a defendant in a courtroom. “It can be,” she said, “depending on the context.”

In a matter of hours, that exchange was being treated by many — Jews and non-Jews, alike — as a historic moment in which the moral confusion of America’s elite universities was laid bare. It was the same confusion that astonished so many when, with Hamas’s slaughter of Israeli civilians still continuing, some students either celebrated it or sought to justify it.

Albert Bourla, the Pfizer chief executive — and grandchild of Holocaust victims — called the presidents’ testimony “one of the most despicable moments in the history of US academia”.

Even before the hearing, a campaign by some of Wall Street’s most powerful figures had for weeks been working for the removal of Magill and Gay. The next day both women issued statements in an effort to contain the damage.

But it was too late for Magill. On Saturday evening, she resigned under pressure during an emergency meeting of Penn’s board of trustees. She was followed, moments later, by Scott Bok, the board chair who had been a staunch Magill defender.

The academics, attempting to straddle the divides between freedom of speech and campus safety, between angry students and furious donors, and between competing

philosophies of social and racial justice, had in the end found them impossible to bridge.

“It became clear her position was no longer tenable,” Bok said in a statement, calling Magill’s testimony “a very unfortunate mis-step”.

Meanwhile, at Harvard — where Gay is also facing calls to step aside — David Wolpe, a visiting scholar at the Divinity School, resigned from an antisemitism advisory committee established by the president after her initial reaction to October 7 was deemed lacking.

“The short explanation”, Wolpe wrote on X, “is that both events on campus and the painfully inadequate testimony reinforced the idea that I cannot make the sort of difference I had hoped.”

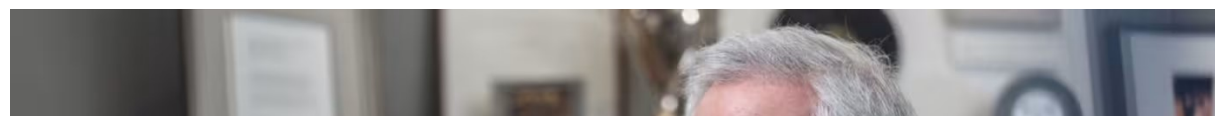
Wall Street titans

It turns out one of the most influential people in the saga was not even in Washington that day. Bill Ackman, the Harvard alumnus who has led the charge for a reckoning, both on social media and behind the scenes, watched from the offices of his New York hedge fund, Pershing Square Capital Management.

Working in parallel has been another Wall Street titan, Marc Rowan, a Penn alumnus and a founder of Apollo Global Management, one of the world’s largest private equity firms.

They have waged their campaign with the same vigour — and some of the same bare-knuckle tactics — as those they have undertaken against recalcitrant corporate boards of directors. They have used well-timed public letters, contacts in Washington, longstanding relationships with the press and, most notably, threats to end their donations.

That has prompted criticism about the influence that heavy-handed, billionaire donors should wield at what are supposed to be citadels of academic freedom. “What you’re seeing now is a handful of super-ultra-wealthy individuals — plutocrats that, I guess, you would call philanthropists — who have incredible leverage over higher education,” says Isaac Kamola, a professor at Trinity College in Connecticut who has written about donor influence.





The hedge fund manager Bill Ackman has pushed for a reckoning over Harvard's leadership. He recently held a screening at the university that showed Hamas's atrocities © Jeenah Moon/Bloomberg

“A lot of them have this understanding that they’re the wealthiest person in the room, they’re the smartest person in the room, and therefore they know best.” Like many older men, Kamola believes, they yearn for the campus they remember — one that was notably less diverse and where there was much less discussion of racial politics.

An adviser to one donor rejected claims of meddling, saying: “This is existential. This isn’t like, ‘I don’t like this particular class.’”

One complaint among donors is that the presidents have not sufficiently engaged with them. But doing so risks the appearance of being in the pockets of the elite. Even many critics concede the university presidents have been thrust into an agonising position: asked to referee impassioned student reactions to the vexed issues of Israel and the Palestinians in the midst of a fast-moving war. Many who have joined protests are steeled by the righteous belief that this is “our Vietnam”.

During her testimony, Gay noted that her first instinct after October 7 was to ensure the safety of Harvard staff and students in the region — not to issue statements. Even so, critics have noted her initial statement fell well short of the emotional one she issued after George Floyd’s killing in 2020. On Friday, she apologised for her testimony, telling the Harvard Crimson, the university newspaper: “I’m sorry . . . When words amplify distress and pain, I don’t know how you could feel anything but regret.”

Jewish students are not the only ones complaining about a growing climate of intimidation and violence. Many Muslims have reported an accompanying rise of

Islamophobia that has left them fearful, too. In Burlington, Vermont, three Palestinian university students, two of whom were wearing keffiyeh scarves, were shot while walking down the street in late November. One was left paralysed. As Palestinian students in the US sat for finals last week, they did so while the civilian death toll in Gaza was rising vertiginously.

Magill, who only took office last year, had been lauded for her commitment to preserving free speech on campus in an era in which it has been curtailed by cancel culture and trigger warnings.

But even some who were sympathetic to the presidents' plight shifted their stance after last week's hearing. "This thing jumped the rails yesterday," one Jewish Penn graduate said on Wednesday, expressing a deep sense of anguish. "Jews at Penn thought that they had overcome the antisemitism of the 1950s and quotas and then they looked up and discovered that they've been ostracised by the liberal elite — because they think we're 'white' and they hate Israel."



Gay, Harvard University's president, apologised on Friday for her testimony, saying that given the pain it caused, she did not know how she could feel 'anything but regret' © 2023 Getty Images

As that comment suggests, the donor campaign is also becoming a fight between generations about the progressive philosophies — including diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and critical race theory — that have taken hold on US campuses in recent years.

In the view of many Jews, there is a growing tendency to treat them as “white

in the view of many Jews, there is a growing tendency to treat them as “white oppressors” and villains, but rarely as potential victims. The result, they say, is a double standard in which sensitivity to people of colour, queer people and other minorities has been heightened — but not Jews.

A point of contention is the activist chant to free Palestine “from the river to the sea”, which can be interpreted as a call for the elimination of Israel; or, to “globalise the intifada”, which many Jews hear not as a push for liberation but for violence against Jews.

“Especially after George Floyd, we have had a re-education of America,” says Kiran Lang, a social worker who graduated from Harvard in 1993. “It’s not about how one party thinks about what they said — it’s how it is received.” By continuing to shout such slogans, demonstrators are being deliberately hurtful, she argues, saying: “This is not a statement to ‘free the Palestinians.’”

For all their resources, donors often wield less clout than it might appear, according to Frederic Fransen, whose firm, Donor Advising, assists wealthy donors with philanthropic gifts. Universities, he notes, spent decades building relationships with wealthy patrons. Those relationships, he predicts, will eventually resume for the age-old reasons.

“Donors are looking to get their less than academically stellar grandchildren into prestigious institutions,” he says. “And as long as donors have less than academically stellar grandchildren, they’ll hold their nose.” With a \$50bn endowment, Harvard could seemingly withstand a challenge from activist donors.

Jews, themselves, have a multiplicity of views about the donors’ campaign. One Harvard undergraduate says he appreciates Ackman speaking up but worries that it “kind of plays into the stereotype” of wealthy Jews controlling the world.

At least until the hearing, many believed the critics should have been more discreet. Ackman, who is bright — and aware of it — often ruffles feathers. Carl Icahn, the fellow investor with whom he has feuded, once called him a “crybaby” on CNBC, adding: “I couldn’t figure out if he was the most sanctimonious guy I met in my life or just arrogant, and that’s Ackman.”

Ackman has strafed Gay with a series of letters published on X. He appeared to taunt her with a public invitation to a screening of Hamas atrocities he was holding at Harvard last Monday. When Gay’s office replied that the president was to testify before Congress the next morning he offered to send his private jet and provide

..

dinner.

“There’s a part of Bill that loves being the centre of attention,” says a person who knows him.

We’ve been consistently trying to alert universities about it, and now it’s all come out

The battle has become ugly. Bok, who protected Magill, is the chair of boutique investment bank Greenhill & Co. A New York public relations firm that works with Rowan’s Apollo quietly stirred a campaign to thwart the closing of Mizuho’s acquisition of Greenhill. The PR firm, Gladstone Place Partners, circulated a document intimating that Bok’s leadership at Penn had damaged

Greenhill’s prospects. The \$550mn deal was still completed this month.

For hallowed universities, so accustomed to deference and admiration, the publicity has been bruising and uncomfortable. A litany of antisemitic incidents, including swastikas and other antisemitic graffiti, has now come to light, as well as tales from Jewish students about the harassment they have endured. Some say they no longer wear items outside their dorm rooms that might identify them as Jews for fear of being spat on or accosted.

On Monday, during a visit to Harvard, Gilad Erdan, Israel’s UN ambassador, said the university had become “dangerous for Jews” and “an incubator” for supporters of terrorists”.

“For a school that puts *veritas* — truth — above all, this is shameful,” Erdan said.

A long brewing dispute

While October 7 escalated the fight between donors and universities, it was not the starting point. At Penn, Rowan and Ronald Lauder, the billionaire cosmetics heir, had taken umbrage at a September literary festival, Palestine Writes. Held on the school grounds, it featured some speakers with a history of what many view to be antisemitic rhetoric, including Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters. Waters has denied that he is an antisemite.

Working behind the scenes, Rowan and Lauder pleaded with Magill to disassociate Penn from the festival. The president ended up issuing a statement that noted her concerns — but also explained what she believed were her limitations.

“We unequivocally — and emphatically — condemn antisemitism as antithetical to our institutional values. As a university, we also fiercely support the free exchange of ideas as central to our educational mission. This includes the expression of views that are controversial and even those that are incompatible with our institutional values,” it read.

That, in turn, prompted a public letter signed by 36 Penn faculty members, who expressed “deep concern” and complained that Magill’s statement had unfairly conflated an entire cultural festival and its participants with antisemitism. Some progressive Jews also protested, complaining that Magill’s warning had further marginalised an already-marginalised community.

Then, on the eve of the event, a man broke into the campus Hillel, a centre for Jewish students, turned over furniture and rubbish bins and shouted antisemitic slurs.



A lunchtime queue outside the Goldie falafel restaurant in Philadelphia. The business, owned by a Jewish Israeli chef, was targeted by pro-Palestinian protesters during a march this month © Matt Rourke/AP

After October 7, pro-Palestinian activists projected the slogans “Zionism is racism” and “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” on campus buildings. Last week, a crowd of hundreds demanding an immediate ceasefire marched through central Philadelphia, including the Penn campus. They paused at the Goldie falafel restaurant, owned by a Jewish Israeli chef, and chanted: “Goldie, Goldie, you can’t hide — we charge you with genocide!”

That prompted a rebuke from Pennsylvania’s Jewish governor, Josh Shapiro, who said: “Tonight in Philly, we saw a blatant act of antisemitism — not a peaceful protest.”

Andrés Spokoiny, president of the Jewish Funders Network, a group that links Jewish donors and philanthropic causes, says members have been pleading with university administrators about the increasing hostility on their campuses long before October 7.

“We’ve been consistently trying to alert universities about it, and now it’s all come out,” Spokoiny says.

Some insisted they were aware of the problem, he says; others said they had opposing complaints from pro-Palestinian groups. Spokoiny adds that some appear to dismiss their concerns outright, suggesting: “Oh, these Jews. They’re so sensitive.”

The more his constituents examine the universities they have been supporting, the more disturbed they have become at what they discover, he says. Sacking Magill would accomplish little, he says: “This is a systemic problem.”

Safe spaces

Caught in the confusion are students like Alex Bernat, now 21, who recalls some discussion about campus antisemitism while attending a Jewish day school in Chicago. When he arrived at Harvard two years ago, he noticed trappings of a vigorous pro-Palestinian movement but did not feel intimidated by it.

There were stickers on containers of Israeli-made hummus in the cafeteria, linking it to genocide. There were the “keffiyeh Thursdays” in support of Palestinians. There was the annual Israeli Apartheid Week, a series of lectures and events, sponsored by the Harvard College Palestine Solidarity Committee, which drafted a now infamous letter blaming Israel “entirely” for Hamas’ violence.

“I basically ignored the beginnings of it in my Freshman fall,” he says.

For him, a turning point came last year, when the [editorial board](#) of the Harvard Crimson endorsed the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement.

While we applaud all legitimate efforts to combat antisemitism and

After that, Bernat says he felt the atmosphere on campus changed. The next month, a swastika was found carved in a bulletin board at the Currier House dorm. When Jewish

combat present and rising dangers of antisemitism, this hearing was not such an effort

students raised the matter with administrators, they say they were told it was being handled internally.

“That shocked me,” Bernat said. “That was the moment Harvard could have dug deeper and had a reckoning.”

At Penn, Yasmin Wiesenfeld, a Jewish freshman, who is studying mathematical economics, says she had not encountered or thought much about antisemitism on campus until the controversy unleashed by the Palestine Writes festival. “Most Palestinian protests tend to be peaceful and don’t infringe on my life,” Wiesenfeld says. But she has struggled to separate those from others that are not — like the Goldie march, or the defacing of posters of Israeli hostages.

She is convinced Magill is not an antisemite. Still, she believes she has failed a vital test in Washington. “Now the clip has gone viral”, she says, “and there’s no context.”

Palestinian students have their own complaints. Writing in the *Crimson*, Mahmoud Al-Thabata, described an Ackman appearance on campus to speak to a Jewish group as a neglect of student safety. He said the hedge fund manager had supported the “doxxing” of pro-Palestinian students who signed the PSC letter.



Magill resigned as president of the University of Pennsylvania after the backlash following her response to questions about antisemitism on campus in the committee hearing © Mark Schiefelbein/AP

He added that a truck with their portraits subsequently drove around Cambridge with the tagline: Harvard's Leading Antisemites. It was organised by Accuracy in Media, a conservative group. A spokesperson for Ackman insisted he had no involvement.

“Why is Harvard refusing to extend the same valuable institutional resource it provides to Jewish students to their Arab and Muslim peers?” Al-Thabata asked. “The administration's inadequate response tells me that I, as a Palestinian, do not meet the standards for safety or support.”

Following the congressional hearing, the PSC and several progressive groups — including Harvard Jews for Palestine — issued a statement denying that calls for Palestinian liberation were antisemitic. “While we applaud all legitimate efforts to combat present and rising dangers of antisemitism, this hearing was not such an effort,” it read.

“We see through the political theater and condemn the hearing for what it was: a diversionary charade meant to distract from the ongoing genocide in Palestine by targeting students of color.” The PSC did not respond to a request for comment.

Several Palestinian students approached by the Financial Times did not respond or declined to comment. Some expressed distrust of the media, while others said they feared retaliation by being added to online blacklists of supposed antisemites.

Traumatic images

On Monday, on the eve of the congressional hearing, Bernat attended a screening of Hamas's atrocities on October 7 that were compiled by the IDF from smartphones, traffic cameras, body cameras and other raw footage. Security was heavy, and attendees were made to sign waivers releasing the IDF from responsibility for psychological trauma.

Ackman had arranged the screening with Harvard Chabad, an outreach organisation led by Hasidic Jews, where he was given a glowing introduction by Chabad rabbi Hirschy Zarchi.

“You are about to hear from one of the world's most successful investors who has emerged as one of the most admired and beloved of our people,” Zarchi said, embracing Ackman.

The footage was unfathomably grim. Many attendees were unable to sit through the entire 46-minute screening. Gay did not attend. But Rakesh Khurana, the dean of

Harvard College, sat through it all, as well as the brutal criticism from Erdan and others.

During a discussion that followed the often cocksure Ackman was restrained. He dabbed a tear from his eye and softened his tone towards Gay. “I meant her no harm,” he said. “I meant her inspiration to show leadership. And what’s missing, to be candid, is leadership.”

The next day came the hearing, and soon the familiar Ackman was back. “The answers they gave reflect the profound moral bankruptcy of Presidents Gay, Magill and Kornbluth,” Ackman wrote on X. “They should resign in disgrace.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
