

Opinion **US society**

Adults, not students, are America's problem

Campus protests are being routinely mishandled

EDWARD LUCE



Columbia University's initial decision last week to call in the New York police to eject the protesters was misguided © Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Edward Luce MAY 1 2024

America is in knots over the foolishness — or worse — of its campus protesters. But it is adults who are making the biggest dunces of themselves. The role of grown-ups facing student unrest is to keep the peace without sacrificing rights. These include free speech and physical safety. The task requires principled consistency. In practice, adults from all walks — Republicans, Democrats, the media and university administrations — are exhibiting traits of hysteria and dogmatism they deplore in the young. It should come as no surprise that the protests are getting angrier.

Students have every [right to protest](#) even with speech that many of their peers find abhorrent. One person's outrage over the killing of thousands of civilians in Gaza might be another's call for the elimination of Jews from Israel. Some of the demonstrators consciously subscribe to a Hamas worldview that would wipe Israel off the map. At what point does anti-Zionism become antisemitism? The line is blurry. But most [people](#) — except those in charge apparently — can tell the difference between lawful protest and calls to violence.

The blame for this mess is broadly shared. Among Democrats, the protests have sparked fears of a repeat of 1968. Like then, the current unrest began at Columbia University. As in 1968, this year's Democratic convention will be held in Chicago. But that is where the parallels end. The 1968 convention was a disaster for two reasons. First, Democrats were deeply split over Vietnam. Today's left is [angry with Joe Biden](#) for being too soft on Benjamin Netanyahu's government. But this is nothing like Vietnam. No American troops are dying. And most of the criticisms of Biden are that he is too weak. Protesters in 1968 likened Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee, to Hitler and Hirohito. Humphrey's chief rival, Eugene McCarthy, refused to endorse him. Biden will be the unanimous choice of his party.

The 1968 convention was also a disaster because Chicago's mayor, Richard Daley, sent his police into pitched combat with the protesters. The street battle dominated the media's attention. It would be astonishing if the same mistake were to be made in 2024. To be sure, some of today's protesters are obnoxious, idiotic and at least sound menacing in their rhetoric. The suspicion is that, like their 1960s counterculture forebears, many of them are unaware of what they are endorsing. "Queers for Palestine" is an admission of ignorance about [Hamas's](#) homophobic (and all-purpose phobic) ideology.

But the chief driver of these protests is humanitarian. It would be far more worrying if the young were indifferent to the deaths of thousands of children, some of them at the hands of US-supplied munitions. The same was true of those who signed up to Maoism in 1968. They had no clue what it was like to be caught up in China's cultural revolution, or about life in Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnam. But the fringe's posturing did not impugn the broader revulsion over a misguided war that was wasting young lives.

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The panic of many university administrations, including Columbia's, has needlessly fanned the flames. Columbia's initial decision last week to call in the New York police [to eject the protesters](#) was misguided. As the NYPD made clear, the students were non-violent. But they could be forgiven for being confused. Universities have for years promoted a worldview that endorses a hierarchy of suffering, which ranks people according to collective racial

guilt or victimhood. The more elite the university, the worse it is. Since October 7, that has been boomeranging. It is adults who have implicitly put Jews on the guilt side of that ledger. It is humanities schools that have validated the idea that speech is violence.

Many speculate that today's protests could mark the death knell of campus identity politics. That would be a silver lining, though it is unlikely to happen soon. But there is also an elephant in the room. Those calling the loudest for protesters to be removed and even locked up are on the right. They include Donald Trump. Until yesterday, conservatives were the harshest critics of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies and the lack of free speech on campus. Now they want to stamp it out. Hypocrisy is too mild a word to capture such a switch. Many of the same politicians are calling for the January 6 felons to be pardoned for having tried to overthrow an election.

What message does all this send to America's young, regardless of where they stand on Israel? Confusion would be a natural result. A resolve to do better could be another. The remedy is to think calmly about how so many adults could have gone so badly astray.

edward.luce@ft.com

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