

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: Lawrence Summers, President Emeritus and Professor, Harvard University

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I: Political Correctness on Campus (00:15 – 26:46)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have with me again today Larry Summers, President Emeritus and University Professor here at Harvard.

We're doing this here right near Harvard. What's going on? What's going at Harvard? What's going on in higher ed? As someone, like me, who is attached to Harvard and has a respect for American higher education, but a little bit appalled by the last few months, but maybe I'm wrong or missing something. Tell me.

SUMMERS: Look, Bill. The main thing that's happening is what always happens: professors teach courses, students take courses, students aspire to graduate, they make friends, they plan their lives, they have a formative experience, they are educated. And anybody who thinks that that's not the main thing going on on college campuses is making a mistake. That said –

KRISTOL: I feel better.

SUMMERS: That said, it seems to me whether it's the President of Princeton negotiating with people, as they took over his office, on the name of schools at Princeton. Whether it is the kind of attacks on very reasonable free speech having to do with adults' right to choose their own Halloween costumes at Yale. Whether it's the administration using placemats in the dining hall to propagandize about what messages students should give their parents about Syrian refugee policy when they come home.

There is a great deal of absurd political correctness. Now, I'm somebody who believes very strongly in diversity, who resists racism in all of its many incarnations, who thinks that there is a great deal that's unjust in American society that needs to be combated, but it seems to be that there is a kind of creeping totalitarianism in terms of what kind of ideas are acceptable and are debatable on college campuses.

And I think that's hugely unfortunate. I think the answer to bad speech is different speech. The answer to bad speech is not shutting down speech. Whether it's climate deniers – I yield to no one in my degree of confidence that the scientific evidence points to overwhelming evidence that there is a serious global climate change problem, but atmospheric scientists who disagree with that conclusion should be able to have their say.

I was proud to write a brief as President of Harvard in support of affirmative action. And I think that's the right position, and I hope the Supreme Court will uphold it, but those who feel differently should be able to have their say. And, the idea that, for example – this took place in recent years, a serious suggestion is put forward that the law of rape not be covered at Harvard Law School because it would be a painful

experience for some law students, is one that, it seems to me, administrators should be denouncing rather than sympathizing with.

The idea that somehow microaggressions in the form of a racist statement contained in a novel should be treated in parallel with violence or actual sexual assault seems to me to be crazy. And I worry very much that if our leading academic institutions become places that prize comfort over truth, that prize the pursuit of mutual understanding over the pursuit of better and more accurate understanding, then a great deal will be lost.

Lost, in terms of the education of students. Lost, in terms of a model for society, based on the authority of ideas rather than the idea of authority. And based on what will be lost if what's comfortable is prized over what's uncomfortable. Because what history teaches – the history of ideas, if anything, teaches that the greatest progress almost always involves ideas that are initially hugely uncomfortable for the existing order.

KRISTOL: And liberal education is always about making people uncomfortable. Uncomfortable in one way or another. Socrates made people uncomfortable.

SUMMERS: If liberal education doesn't – I would go so far as to say that if you come home after your freshman year in college with no fundamental preconception that you had shaken, your freshman year in college has not been a success, and so the whole idea of privileging comfort seems to me to be a very dangerous one. But it is one that is increasingly fashionable on campuses.

KRISTOL: I've been struck by that. I think you'd also agree if all your professors are moving to simply replace one set of preconceived ideas with another that's not the point either. You want challenges to conceptions among your professors and among your students on campus –

SUMMERS: I had the experience some years ago of attending a commencement ceremony at a different university – not Harvard – where I was fortunate enough to be receiving an honorary degree. The President of that university gave a very powerful commencement address, but at one point said, "Here at this university, we consider every argument, analyze every question, process every bit of data, ponder every text, engage in intense conversation on every subject. And out of that comes . . ."

And I waited. And I expected the answer to be something like, "A closer approximation to the truth we will never find." Or, "A better understanding of the world." And instead what I heard was, "A better understanding of each other's positions." And that idea that privileged the equal respectability of all positions, the idea that there wasn't a way of making progress through debate, but all that came was a greater understanding of each other's positions seem to me to deny the basic methods and modes of thought that had driven so much progress over the last 200 years.

Whether it was scientific progress that enables us to live the way we live today, or whether it was progress with respect to ideas that's led to the very different way that women live relative to men compared to what was the case 100 years ago.

That idea that there was no such thing as changing one's position in the face of being unable to defend it in a compelling way, that seemed to me so antithetical to what should be academic values. But at the same time, it seemed to all of those around me to be so much a commonplace that I think there is a serious epistemic challenge in terms of the modes of thought that prevail in many parts of university communities.

KRISTOL: And what do you think happen? I agree. I sort of went from – let's say, among conservatives, I was probably one of those somewhat minimizing – I made fun of political correctness and thought it was a bad thing and unfortunate for students who had to put up with it, but didn't think it was really a serious threat to freedom of inquiry, freedom of speech.

Even freedom of thought, to some degree, for the undergraduates, especially. It's one thing if you're already faculty – tenured faculty – you can keep your thoughts to yourself if it's too painful, if you're going to get too much pressure if you say something. But you won't stop thinking.

But if you're 19 years old and you've sort of been told certain things are out of bounds, then you may not even inquire in the first place and you won't learn the arguments against your own position, you might not change your mind, and you might not understand your own position better. Mill makes that point in *On Liberty*, right? Unless you've heard the other arguments, you won't test your own.

Now, I am more alarmed – I have to say – trying to talk to students over the past six months or a year. What happened? The faculty didn't change that radically, presumably. Administrators? Is it really a student-led thing?

SUMMERS: I'd say two things. One, take a group that you know better than I, and a group that on 97 percent of all questions I disagree with, The Federalist Society. The Federalist Society has probably been the most successful effort to nurture within academic communities a set of ideas, based in law schools. Has driven a whole set of conservative jurisprudence, almost all of which, I want to be absolutely clear, I oppose. But it always impressed me that they were always willing to invite any progressive who would come, to come and denounce what they had to say. Over the years, I've attended a number of their events, and, you know, argued in very vigorous ways for more active approaches to economic regulation or progressive taxation than they favored.

But they always wanted to have the debate. And that, it seems to me, is something that many on the more numerous Left side of the spectrum in universities have been too reluctant to do and too quick to dismiss those they disagree with as irresponsible or not worthy of being – not worthy of being heard.

I think that it's gotten worse for a combination of reasons, I would guess. What happened in Ferguson, Missouri and in some other places has been jarring with respect to the national psyche. I think there's a kind of intellectual contagion across college campuses, and when this starts in one place, it has a tendency to spread.

I think the weakness of – the weakness of administrators who have often had as their dominant instinct to placate rather than to educate has emboldened those who see their moment to establish a kind of orthodoxy. And, I think that there may be an element in this generation's just come to feel that there's a set of narrower range of what's acceptable.

You have to recognize that social norms are, can be a good thing. And at the same time, shutting down debate can be a bad thing. And there's a line. The set of things, the set of ways in which a homosexual can be described in socially acceptable terms is completely different than it was when you and I were in college, and that is a mark of progress for us as a society towards being a more tolerant and just society.

The other side of that is going to be that sometimes it's going to go too far and that it's going to have the effect of cutting off or limiting debate. And that's a balance that has to be struck. I think it's a mistake to be an absolutist on these things.

Take a somewhat broader question that implicates education, Bill, that goes beyond universities, the fact that we had a national summit in the White House on bullying. How should one think about that? On the one hand, one can say, "Oh come on, kids will be kids. Kids have to work out their own problems." On the other hand, there's been a lot of cruelty. Many people have died by their own hand because of the shame and the difficulty they've had in encountering bullying. Perhaps, it is a sign of our greater humanity as a society that we're now able to define bullying as a problem.

So I think one makes a mistake in just trying to laugh off the concerns that lead to political correctness. At the same time, I think there are some very real excesses, and certainly, I think that the excesses of administration rhetoric at many universities have been a real problem.

I think this is a case actually where satire and ridicule have been effective. I think the efforts of the number of Harvard students to mock the placemats were in a way more effective than thoughtful critiques of political correctness. I've actually been gratified that on most of the campuses where these things that seem quite odd to me have taken place there have been student movements of protest and student movements of concern that have risen up.

My guess is that we'll find our way back towards some equilibrium. I think it is the responsibility and a responsibility that's not being fully met of academic leaders to address these issues.

KRISTOL: What's striking for outsiders, as you said, were the protests were at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton – not exactly hotbeds of, you know, right-wing sentiment or even of people, really. And the people who they went after – this poor housemaster and his co-housemaster. I guess that's a term we're not going to use much longer. Head of the house, or whatever you're supposed to say. At Yale, who were liberals, I mean – there's that pathetic YouTube where he's trying to say, "I'm with you. I've been a liberal all my life; I've devoted my life to helping liberal causes."

That's what's sort of striking from the outside. I think we can argue about Ferguson, Missouri – they've got a real issue of police departments and minorities and how to do policing. Those are real policy issues. But what seems crazy from the outside about some of the stuff in colleges and universities –

SUMMERS: There are morally serious things happening. There are people being slaughtered. There are people who aren't safe on streets who should be protected. To regard it as one of life's premiere moral injustices to have to eat dinner underneath the portrait of Woodrow Wilson is to lose perspective on what is happening in the world, and I think it's the job of adults to provide some perspective on that.

But it's very important not to recognize that this isn't part of something that has a lot of – it's not that there's no merit in the kinds of concerns that are being expressed. In some ways, it's like, you know, I showed my students a little bit of photography and video of what happened at Harvard in the late 1960s when, you know, there was offices that were, came close to being burned. And when administrators were, I think it's fair to say, forcibly and physically removed from their offices. Students today were shocked that something like that could have happened, and it was an appalling time and what was done was appalling. But it wasn't that the Vietnam War wasn't a grave mistake.

I think that that kind of perspective is a useful perspective to have in viewing all of this. But I don't think we're going to get to the bottom of understanding the huge sets of social problems that we have in our country if we're not able to engage in open and free factual inquiry with debate and with the recognition that there may be offensive policy recommendations but there aren't offensive facts. All facts should be matters of open and clear inquiry.

KRISTOL: I think as you sort of suggested the trivializing of what can be genuinely important causes is bad actually for those who want to advance those causes because then it just looks to people outside the university world and people who maybe aren't that sympathetic to some of those liberal causes in the first place, well, this is all just crazy. Renaming schools and placemats and so forth.

One last word about the present, and then I want to go back to your own experience as you've been through this so much. The administrators do seem – the students are students; they're 19 years old; I don't blame them for too much. They should be punished, in my opinion, if they do things that are really beyond the bounds, but they shouldn't be yielded to.

The faculty seem to not have been terribly prominent, one way or the other, in most of these issues. What has been striking is the administrators who I do think a generation ago would have not capitulated quite as quickly to what in many cases are just ridiculous demands and aspersions on the campuses they've been running. I mean, if Princeton is a racist place, you'd think the President of Princeton would think, "Gee, I've been President of Princeton for a while, I can't just sort of accept this argument."

It's slander, also, on all the people of Princeton. I am a little startled by the administrators' unwillingness to defend what you'd think are their own institutions and their own places they've been their whole lives and so forth. The administrators seem to be different from what they once were.

SUMMERS: I think it's hard to know in historical perspective. I personally had strong feelings about this. Just before I became President of Harvard, the President's office was occupied for two weeks over the issue of the wages that Harvard paid its workers. And the students left after two weeks with a number of concessions having been made. And with the administrators who occupied those offices, clapping for the students as they left, who, in many cases, had been fed through the windows with milk and cookies by members of the university's administration, with total amnesty for all. And I have to say I thought it was appalling.

And I made clear, with the support of the Harvard overseers and corporation – basically, the trustees of the institution – we had a code with respect to rights and responsibilities – and if offices were occupied after warnings were given and people remained in those offices, there would be disciplinary consequences. I'm not sure, Bill, that you're quite as right to entirely exempt the faculty.

KRISTOL: I'm happy not to.

SUMMERS: I think that one of the issues is that the tradition and the custom in universities is that student discipline is a faculty matter, and I think one of the challenges for administrators is they can't rely on the faculty to carry through on discipline even in very egregious cases, like the physical occupation of offices, and that then affects the amount of leverage that administrators have.

And so, I think there is a – I think a lot of this does go back to a faculty who tend – very much particularly the faculty who take the greatest interest in university affairs – who tend very much to be sympathetic to protest movements of one kind or another.

II: Universities and the Pursuit of Knowledge (26:46 – 36:35)

KRISTOL: I think – maybe I'm wrong about this – we said this at the time in *The Weekly Standard* that when the assaults on you at Harvard were somewhat successful, in the sense that they did succeed in unfairly attacking you, and then you left as President in 2006 – I thought that was a very bad moment because I do think it sent a signal – I thought it was bad for Harvard, in my opinion, because you were a very good President, I thought.

But also it sent a signal that these kinds of – misrepresenting what someone says or mischaracterizing his actions can work. And I think the administrators' sense – it's not entirely an accident, this is the most prominent university in the country, and maybe it's not an accident that the administrators decided capitulating quickly and trying to just smooth everything over and hiring six more assistant deans for student life and make sure everyone doesn't get upset about anything as opposed to defending faculty members – You're not going –

SUMMERS: I surely made mistakes. I'm surely not an objective observer of that time. I do think that trustees of universities have an important obligation not to over-privilege comfort and harmony.

There is a tendency, on the part of trustees who are not themselves of university communities, who care deeply about universities, to value harmony and happiness over what may sometimes be necessary, which is painful argument, and often change that is disturbing to many.

I think American higher education is the envy of the world, but if it has a flaw, it is that it changes and evolves too slowly. That, because of traditions of faculty governance, it has the dynamism, or lack of dynamism, that economists traditionally establish, or attribute, to workers' collectives. And, you know, why should it be that in the 35 years, in 35 years there was not a single change in the departmental structure of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University? Could one imagine such a thing in

almost any other major institution in society? And so I think that this privileging of comfort is a threat to the ability to keep up with the demands of a rapidly changing society.

KRISTOL: And I guess it also, it both makes the universities more conservative with a little “c” and also less willing to take risks.

SUMMERS: I was surprised when I gave my inaugural speech at Harvard I had towards – after I’d laid out an agenda, the number of issues that I wanted to work on –

KRISTOL: When was this?

SUMMERS: 2001. I had a paragraph in which, I thought of it as – I didn’t think the language was empty, but I didn’t think of it as all that substantive a paragraph, in which I said, “We will take great risks, we will sometimes fail. Indeed if we never fail, that would be the greatest failure of all because it would mean that we had not taken enough risks to meet the greatest challenges of our time.”

I was surprised by the number of people who felt that “Why should we plan to fail?” It reflected a kind of mindset that I think was unfortunate. Looking at universities, there’s a set of issues, and I’m never sure quite where to come down on, but I’m pretty sure we’re not in the right place.

Median age of the Harvard professoriate – those who are tenured professors – is only slightly younger than I am, and I am 61. And that seems wildly inappropriate. And if you compare it with almost any other human institution – any great law firm, any great management team, any great company, the physicians at any great hospital, even the senior officials of the US government – it looks very old. And then you ask yourself, what is it that’s special about a university? Well, the key job of a faculty member is working with people between the ages of 18 and 25, and the other key responsibility is to have bold new ideas.

So you would think, if anything, there probably are arguments for university faculty for being younger than other institutions, not substantially older, and so I think that lifetime security, that tendency towards an aged faculty – you know, Harvard has more professors over the age of 80 than it does under the age of 40 – seems to me to be something that is quite damaging in terms of the ability of universities to keep up.

KRISTOL: That’s interesting. And some of that is due to a fluke, I suppose, in an interpretation of federal law, you can’t have mandatory retirement –

SUMMERS: Some of that is. The universities have not protested very much, but the elimination of mandatory retirement – I would say there has been a minimum of innovation in seeking to find ways of contracting that would avoid the mandatory retirement and even the extent to which there are things you can do that are often not done.

For example, you may have tenure as a professor, you don’t have tenure in your 3,500 feet of laboratory space in the Biology Department. You don’t have the privilege of teaching, you don’t necessarily have the privilege of being centrally involved in choosing the next generation. I think that that is a serious threat to – in general, it’s all part of a phenomenon of the excess seeking of comfort.

An issue that I was concerned by – I made progress on one aspect but not on another – was the whole question of grades and honors. Honors inflation at the time when I became President, it was close to being true that the most unique way in which you could graduate was without honors. Nearly 90 percent of the students graduated with honors.

We were successful in reducing that to a little bit above 50 percent. I think that’s not a small thing, but we as an institution should stand, it seems to me, above all for intellectual excellence. And when 30 percent of the students in the typical class are getting A’s, and A is the most common grade, then the student who is the best student in a class of 60 people is really very different in all likelihood than the student who

is the 19th best in a class of 60 people – when we give the same grade and don't recognize it. But it's part of the desire for everyone to feel comfortable.

And it's that universal desire for comfort that I'm not sure does a great job of preparing people for the world, and I think sometimes can interfere with other absolutely crucial values in terms of the search for truth.

III: Israel Boycotts and ROTC (36:35 – 58:28)

KRISTOL: It's funny we were talking about this, and I think from the outside people that don't follow the internal governance of universities much and haven't thought as much about the complacency maybe and the sclerosis of universities that you were trying to deal with. People remember your taking on the BDS movement, the anti-Israel boycott movement, trying to get ROTC back on campus, then more politically charged issues.

I want to talk about those, but I'm curious just to begin, which actually caused more trouble for you at Harvard, do you believe? Was it the politically hot-button issues that you did speak out about and certainly were entitled to, it seems to me, as a University Professor and President, and tried to take appropriate action on in one or two cases? Or was the actual shaking up of the actual university itself and its internal governance and norms and –

SUMMERS: I'm not sure I can compare. I think it was both. I think that, in retrospect, I chose to take on a large number of issues that involved running through goodwill. And, someone who had been perhaps wiser or certainly who had been committed to being in place longer, would have been more selective with respect to the battles that were taken on. I think you can debate that; they all seem very important to me.

Grade inflation seemed very important to me. The general cultural question of the culture of comfort seemed very important to me. Questions like the university's estrangement from people who wear uniforms seemed very important to me. And I think the collectivity in a community that was committed to a certain way of doing things, a community that did not lack for self-regard and thought of its president more as a cheerleader than as a social critic led to the very substantial tensions that I had with members of the faculty.

On the other hand, I look back and take great satisfaction from the really quite substantial changes, whether it was in making Harvard universally accessible and seem to be universally accessible to families with low incomes or the huge expansion we mounted in the commitment to the life sciences or the substantial increase in the amount of faculty contact that there was with undergraduates. Or the – what was the important internal issue, the extent to which there was interaction between the different schools, for example, for the first time the university came to have a common calendar.

I look back at all of that, and I think a great deal happened that was important, and while certainly I didn't enjoy, and my family enjoyed even less, the degree of controversy that surrounded it all, I think a great deal of it was worth accepting controversy for because I think what universities and what Harvard does in terms of education and research is hugely important. It was able to do them in different ways as a consequence of some of the controversies we had during that time.

KRISTOL: Talk about the controversy over BDS, which was the boycott movement of Israel, which you correctly said was uniquely targeted on Israel of all the known nations in the world, this was the one that universities were being asked to divest themselves –

SUMMERS: This is a continuing issue today. There was a movement during the time I was President on the part of the members of the faculty to ask the university to divest any stock that any company that invested in Israel. And it seems to me, there are a set of general arguments why universities should not use their endowment in political ways, but it seemed to me that quite apart from those general arguments the idea that Israel should be singled out as a human rights abuser was morally insensate.

It seemed to me that there wasn't much question that if an African country was singled out for censure, and there was no clear grounds for why that African country was worse or different than a number of European or Asian countries, I have no doubt that it would be seen in many quarters as racist.

I chose words that were carefully selected. I said that the proposals if they were implemented would be anti-Semitic in their effect. Even if not, because I believed the people who proposed them were well-intentioned if misguided, even if not anti-Semitic in their intent. So I said anti-Semitic in their effect, if not in intent.

And it generated substantial controversy. I'll admit that this was part of my objective. I think many people who hadn't thought about it that carefully and who had a general kind of progressive sense of alienation from the peace process probably just didn't want to contemplate the possibility that they were near anti-Semitism and decided not to push the issue as hard as they might otherwise have in the face of what I had said, and certainly, a number of students who if they'd had the word – if they'd had the current vocabulary – would have felt they'd been the victims of microaggressions in the form of feeling identified with Israel and having Israel attacked thanked me very much for what I had said and done.

For a number of years afterwards, the divest Israel movement was relatively quiescent. It's been back in force in recent years. The American Studies Association, the American Anthropological Association, a variety of academic associations have announced their intention to boycott Israeli scholars or to boycott interaction with Israeli universities.

I think it's deplorable. My wife – and it matters. My wife visited a prominent Israeli university last winter, and the person who introduced her spoke about how much this meant. She had come from a peace rally, the set of people that Lisa was speaking to were anything but supporters of Netanyahu, and yet they felt so stung by the idea that they studied America and that scholars in American studies wouldn't come and participate in their colloquia. It had an enormous impact.

I've been disappointed by the response of university presidents. It's true that they've not welcomed this development, but they've framed the argument almost entirely in terms of their distaste for academic boycotts rather than anything about the specific substance. I'm not sure that boycotting Hitler's universities actually would have been such a terrible thing, and so it seems to me that it's inappropriateness in recognizing what's going on in Israeli universities and with Israeli scholars, with singling out Israel that's to be condemned.

That hasn't been a position that American academic leaders, at least the ones who are sitting in office, have been willing to take. In a number of cases, including Harvard, universities have maintained their institutional memberships in organizations like American Studies that boycott Israel, and I have to say I find that deplorable.

KRISTOL: It's really stunning. When the whole movement began, I just thought it was so ludicrous because whenever you think of the Israeli government, the settlements, all that stuff. If you came down from Mars and looked at the different countries in that region, you would say there was quite a lot more academic freedom, decent treatment of minorities, democratic mores, etc., democratic elections, freedom of speech in a country like Israel than many of the neighboring countries.

And the idea that one of all is selected for a boycott, and it's pretty serious. I think you make a very good point on that. I think I myself underestimated – the economic side of it always seemed kind of ridiculous, and it's pretty easy for people running endowments to say, "We can't get in that business because that's a crazy way to manage money, and we have a fiduciary responsibility."

But the actually boycotting – I've talked to Israeli academics, the sense that they are pariahs, and the pressure then internally on faculty members elsewhere not to go to Israel or even to invite Israeli scholars to give a talk here in the US, I suppose, at their university, it's a little shocking when you think about it. You're a professor at Hebrew University, you're probably some dovish anti-Bibi Netanyahu voter, and I guess the position of the boycotters is that person shouldn't be invited –

SUMMERS: It varies. Sometimes, it's that person, sometimes that institution. They shouldn't partner with that person's institution. It varies from boycott to boycott.

But the general direction seems to me misconceived, and as a practical matter – and this is outside of my area of most expertise – but as a practical matter, it seems to me a very poorly calculated strategy for bringing about what is desired. Because it seems to me an Israel that feels more secure, rather than an Israel that feels more pressured, is an Israel that's likely to walk more steps for peace than an Israel that doesn't think the United States has its back, that doesn't think it can rely on the United States, is, it seems to me, to be an Israel that's much less likely to be constructive, as constructiveness is seen by those who would have Israel take more steps to withdraw.

So it seems to me that it's from a position of more commitment rather than more condemnation that we have a better chance of encouraging the kind of two-state solution that those who are most committed to this movement think is most important.

Except for those – and I don't think they're most of them but they're certainly some – within the BDS movement whose real goal is to entirely delegitimize Israel as a state. But for those who have a constructive vision, and there are many, I think the political analysis, even if one leaves aside the moral and the truth-seeking aspects is quite problematic.

KRISTOL: And the ROTC is sort of a similar situation, I think, where you stepped back and said, 30 years ago, there might have been a reason because of Vietnam to kick ROTC off campus – maybe there wasn't, but anyway – it's was a relic of that time.

SUMMERS: I don't see how one can be a responsible citizen and deny the obligation as a citizen to be part of respecting the democratically elected, repeatedly made decisions about the defense of the country.

So, I personally – from the time the issue first emerge, at least, on my consciousness in the early 90s – I didn't like the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy. I favored the policies we have now, which are like those in most other countries. But, it seems to me, when you have decisions taken by multiple Commanders in Chief of both parties, supported by bipartisan Congressional votes in both houses, of both parties, implemented by the military in response to democratic control, that the idea that universities are simply going to say, "We're not going to cooperate with this institution." Like it was a law firm that ran wet t-shirt contests, seems to me to misunderstand and miseducate on the nature of obligation within a democracy.

So I found it profoundly offensive and said so. It was at the point, I didn't – I was able to bring Harvard and ROTC closer together in a number of ways, but I didn't actually bring ROTC back on the campus. You know it was revealing to me that when I arrived I was told that students who were in ROTC could not list their service in ROTC in the university yearbook because only university recognized activities could be listed in the yearbook and ROTC couldn't be recognized as a university activity because it was excessively exclusionary because of the military's discriminatory practice.

But they could issue, they could list themselves as part of an organization as Friends of Harvard ROTC because Friends of Harvard ROTC – I said, "Would you allow there to be an organization which was 'Friends of the Ku Klux Klan' that was prepared to admit anybody?"

Eventually, we succeeded in having good sense prevail and allowed those students to list themselves in the yearbook, and I was proud to be the first Ivy League President in 30 years to attend an Ivy League commissioning, an ROTC commissioning ceremony. And I attended each of them during my time as President. But I do think it was a case where we had lost our way, and fortunately, because the gays in the military issue has been resolved, we now have at least some degree of collaboration with ROTC.

But I still think there's a serious issue of the degree of estrangement between people who wear uniforms and people who are in academic communities. We listen to university presidents' speeches about public

service. Public service is always a value that's being extolled in universities. I was always careful when I spoke about public service to include military service as an example of public service.

That is very much the exception. And I don't see how one can – I have not served in the military, but I don't understand how one can regard working in a school as – it's not morally inferior, but I don't think it's morally superior to being involved in the direct defense of freedom. It seems to me it's very important to recognize that.

KRISTOL: I think on that issue you prevailed. That is to say, you didn't – your successor mostly continued your practice. Before "Don't ask, Don't Tell" ended, didn't she actually put ROTC back on campus?

SUMMERS: I think there was a continuing impact there. I think that's probably right.

KRISTOL: It does show university presidents can exercise moral leadership and political leadership somewhat against the grain of their institutions, maybe most usefully against the grain of their institutions. Because what's the point of having someone just agreeing with your institution, wouldn't you say? As you said earlier, a cheerleader for the institution as opposed to challenging –

SUMMERS: I want to also say I think it's a mistake, Bill, to treat all of this as just being Right and Left, and the Left is wrong. One of the things that I was proud to have done was when the Bush Administration made what I felt was a substantial error very early on in the way in which it curved federal support for stem cell research.

We committed a very substantial volume of funds to supporting stem cell research because we believed it could be done in ways that were morally acceptable and that there was very substantial potential to contribute to life saving. And we established a substantial stem cell center with university resources that took the place of the federal resources that we thought should have been available. That's another case where ultimately things went our way.

But I want to emphasize that not everything that's controversial and involves politics is taking the Right side of thing as distinct from taking the Left side of things. I thought it was very important when I became President that only a quite small fraction of Harvard students had international experiences or studied abroad. We were, I think, the lowest in American higher education, rivaled only by West Point and Annapolis.

And I felt that kind of attitude reduced the level of international understanding, and we were able over time to very substantially increase the extent of the university's international connections for students. I want to emphasize that while there are in some of the things that were more controversial on the campus did have a Right-Left aspect, there was nothing rightwing about the idea that if your family's income is under \$40,000, you shouldn't have to pay to come to Harvard instead of these other things like the stem cells, like the emphasis on international experience and understanding.

IV: The Future of Higher Education (58:28 – 1:14:46)

KRISTOL: No, and from my point of view, one of the great things about America is it's a free country, and it's got hugely important private institutions, which don't work for the federal government and are free to sponsor research that the federal government, in a particular administration, chooses not to sponsor and is free to choose their own paths.

One of the distressing things from the outside about higher education, in some ways, is that there is not as much real diversity as you think there might be. You think we can have 3,000 universities, but let's just say there are 100 or 200 prestigious, more academic universities in the country – maybe that's too low, maybe 300 or 400, I don't know.

They should sort of look more different from each other, don't you think? This is broader question. I do think someone who came down from Mars would say, "Why do they look so similar?" Surely, it can't have been inscribed on tablets there should be a four-year education and the following departments should exist everywhere and there should be the following tenure rules everywhere. You think there should be – I don't mean diversity in the fancy political sense, but I just mean in a commonplace sense.

There is sort of – there are fancy upscale French restaurants and there are cheap pizza parlors and there are chains and there are mom-and-pop places. Somehow, that's what we think a free society looks like, and then in higher ed, it just strikes me the uniformity probably can't be healthy just for finding out what works and for challenging the status quo. You tried to do a little bit of that at Harvard, obviously.

SUMMERS: I think that's a fair comment, and I think it would be worthwhile to try to understand that. I'm not certain how much of that reflects the universities' universal desire to imitate each other and how much reflects the demands of a society. The legal profession maintains what, to my mind, are far excessive set of common requirements to be a lawyer. Then, we observe that there's certain similarities between all the law schools.

Employers look for a certain kind of thing in a college degree, and so I think there is a question around that. I think it's also a feature of education that you only get your college education once. And so it's much easier to encourage experimentation with toothpaste where if you don't like the toothpaste, you can go back to the new toothpaste.

Some of the things I think are structural in that dimension. I think that's right, and I think that in many ways the challenge for American education is be more like us. Because if you look around the world, I think you'd say, here's what I think you'd say. I think you'd say America does extremely well in higher education. Of the top 100 institutions in the world, more than half are American, and you wouldn't find that in so many spheres.

And I think you'd say that because in the rest of the world, there's a tendency for universities to either be run like the Department of Motor Vehicles, thick salaries for everybody, detailed state prescriptions for curriculums. Or, and this also happens in many places, really run like a kibbutz. The president's elected for a three-year term by all the faculty and staff, which creates overwhelming pressure on the president to do what the faculty and staff want to get another three years, or if that's not feasible and the President is only there for three years, then there's a limit to how much they can do.

And so, American universities actually stand out in the extent to which they're internally governed rather than externally governed. But internally governed from the outside by a board of trustees. And the extent to which they compete with each other. Yes, and I agree with you that if those elements were even strengthened, they would probably be even stronger institutions than they are –

KRISTOL: Do you think they'll pretty much look the same 10, 20, 30 years from now? You've been involved somewhat in the online courses and some efforts, and this itself is a kind of way of trying to educate students or give them a taste of some topics and introduce them to thinkers and figures sort of outside the conventional classroom or university.

SUMMERS: My guess is that the leading institutions will look broadly as they do, but that we will see a set of substantial changes in what happens in higher education broadly. I think that for many, many people education will become an increasingly lifelong pursuit rather than something that's confined to four years.

My fear is that because they'll be too tied to doing it in their traditional ways that, as often happens when an industry is disrupted with new technology, it will be new entrants rather than the existing entrants that will lead in using the Internet to provide lifetime education. But I hope that I'm wrong in that judgment.

I think there will be more and more development of skills-based certification, where people learn certain aspects of material and are then deemed by employers to be qualified to do certain things. Some of that

will take place in four-year residential institutions and two-year residential institutions, but much of it will take place outside of residential institutions. So I would be surprised if higher education doesn't change more over the next 40 years than it has over the last 40 years.

But I think I would also be surprised, just given that the basic form of universities has been around for a very, very long time, if you didn't still have a group of extraordinarily talented 18-year-olds gathering together in September of each year at a set of institutions preparing to be educated over the next four years.

KRISTOL: On the whole, you think that's a good thing? How worried should one be? And I'm ambivalent about this myself, it is sort of a critique from the Left and Right, you might say, of the sorting process that, you know – you say it in a nice way, talented 18-year-olds having a wonderful four years. And it is a wonderful four years in many ways at Harvard or any other colleges and universities.

On the other hand, from a certain point of view, you can say this is just accentuating inequality. The smartest kids are meeting other smart kids and marrying them, which is great. But on the other hand, it's creating more of a bubble, they're going from Harvard to Yale Law School to Goldman Sachs or whatever.

The kind of concerns that people on the Right, people on the Left have raised – Charles Murray, Bob Putnam – sort of, are we inadvertently really creating in a meritocratic way – so it's not like old 19th-century, perhaps, legacies – but are we inadvertently creating two tracks, almost, in society? How much – you certainly tried to worked hard to create more opportunity –

SUMMERS: That's why I put so much emphasis not just on creating opportunity but on recruiting the kids, on looking in a holistic way at people's background, and recognizing that if you're privileged to come from the kind of family I came from or the kind of family you came from, that a certain level of academic performance maybe suggested less than if you got that same level of academic performance and you came from a family with much less, much less advantage.

I don't think we have devoted the effort to addressing issues of class that we have to issues of race. I think that's a hugely important challenge going forward. I think there's an issue that I also tried to push not over my horizon with success, which goes to the scale of these institutions.

If you thought about an institution as successful as Yale or as Princeton or as Harvard, and you looked at how rapidly it grew since 1970, it would grow in the private sector vastly faster. But these institutions have a bit of the aspect of an exclusive club, they don't grow, and I think that's something that needs to be thought about.

I think in terms of meeting their responsibilities a greater commitment to growth would be appropriate. Perhaps the use of technology will lead to more of that. I think there's a question what the right degree of involvement is of leading universities with the question of K through 12 education in the country. And in an earlier era, the university system had a great deal to do with the establishment of College Board tests, AP tests. Those institutions are more flawed today, but in their day they were major engines of opportunity and major stimuli to improvement.

Just what the right ways are is a very hard question, but it seems to me that universities could be doing more than they are to support the development of K through 12 education in the country. But yes, I think it is this question of cleavages is a very, very real – real issue for the society.

KRISTOL: It does seem to me that if – close on this, maybe – but if you and Marty Feldstein teach an excellent American Economic Policy course here at Harvard – and look, the kids who get into Harvard are great and they deserve to have a very good course and they deserve to have your personal attention and good grad students as TA's and so forth – it wouldn't be crazy to say incidentally at the same time maybe Harvard should just make available online at least the lectures.

It wouldn't be as good, it wouldn't be like sitting in there and having the personal access. But of course, one could imagine ways where you could give people access online with, you know, an hour or two with a grad student or with you or sending questions. Even so something that would let – one has the feeling there's an awful lot of excellent teaching that could be, that a lot of other people could benefit from in the country and maybe in the world.

I know you were involved a little bit in efforts to do this. Does it work? Is it a reasonable thing to think about?

SUMMERS: I'd make these points. One, I'm broadly sympathetic to what you say. My vision for this is a vision that most of the leading universities have pursued has been a little different – has not actually been precisely in this direction – was to think about the concept of an extension school. We have an extension school at Harvard, it teaches courses at night, it doesn't have exclusive admissions, it has a somewhat different faculty than the one that teaches during the day. It offers a different degree, but it offers a Harvard experience to residents of Boston, Cambridge.

Perhaps we should have a 21st-century extension school via the Internet, and if we do it that way, we might be able to reach people on a huge scale, but that involves a rather different vision than the vision that we currently have which emphasizes the synergy between our outreach and what's going on within our campus. I think that notion of 21st-century extension education is a powerful one.

I think it's a little more complicated than you suggest because one of the clear learnings even in these early days is this, at the beginning of movies, people thought the idea was that you go to a theater and you put a camera in the back of the room and that would be your movie. And they came fairly quickly to recognize that it really wasn't going to be that good to have a theater without the immediacy and that once you had the cameras, you had the potential to do all kinds of things that weren't possible in the theater.

I think the same thing is true with respect to video, and that we make a mistake if we think that it's simply a matter of taking my course. My wife has produced a course on American poetry that reaches each year five times as many students as she's taught in a classroom in her whole life. It's very different though than just filming her classes.

I think it will turn out to involve a somewhat different set of skills, that the old sage on the stage may or not be as successful as a video architect for an educational experience. But I think that there is scope, and you're seeing it in people all over the world have an occasion to learn basic physics or to learn this, and I'm sure that this will move toward in some very important directions.

KRISTOL: I hope you're right, and I think it will move forward more quickly if American higher education has leaders with courage and willingness to take risks, which you were when you were President of Harvard. So I thank you for that, and I thank you for joining me today on CONVERSATIONS.

SUMMERS: Thank you Bill.

KRISTOL: Thanks, Larry. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]