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The Evangelical Capture of the Republican Party and Its Implications for Academia

ABSTRACT. For the first time in American history, a major political party has a vested interest in keeping the electorate's education level relatively low. This is largely the result of the Republican Party's capture by one of its clients: the White evangelical Protestant population with anti-intellectual tendencies. In this political environment, academics must resist the understandable temptation to go beyond the traditional missions of truth-seeking and truth-telling. Surrounded by a deeply unjust society, we must not make the mistake of trying to pick up the social pieces left on the national floor by the failure of other institutions. Telling the truth is enough, if we do it well.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AMERICAN HISTORY, A MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY HAS a vested interest in a low-education electorate. This astonishing fact has inspired remarkably little discussion. Religion has a lot to do with it. The Republican Party courted evangelical Protestants for decades, but the client eventually captured the patron. The party was gradually narrowed by the Manichean worldview and limited intellectual horizons of evangelicals. Even Republicans with a strictly opportunistic, rather than principled, engagement with evangelicalism found themselves stuck to it like a tar baby. Dependence on evangelical votes became too great to allow for release.

How did this happen? How has it changed the political environment in which universities must operate? How, in this environment,

can universities maintain their integrity as knowledge-centered institutions while advancing pluralist democracy?

So, to my first question: How *did* this massive historical anomaly come about, and with so little notice? The long-developing education gap between Republican and Democratic voters finally began to draw widespread attention when the results of the 2024 election showed this gap cutting across the classic lines of identity. Low-education White women and men moved decisively toward Donald Trump and other Republican candidates, and so, too, did non-White men and women. In the 2024 presidential election, nearly one-fourth of Black men and nearly one-half of Hispanic men voted for Trump, a candidate conspicuous for his failure to renounce White supremacy. Of voters who had never attended college, 62 percent went for Trump, crossing all ethnoracial and gender lines. Of voters with a degree beyond the bachelor's, which includes the Republican-inclined people with MBA degrees, 61 percent voted for the Democratic Party candidate Kamala Harris. The ethnoracial and gender identity groups long alleged to explain just about everything in American life are much less salient than educational level in explicating voter behavior in this all-important election.¹

But the Republican dependence on low-education voters is not new. In the campaigns of 2016 and 2020, as well as 2024, Trump made no serious effort to win states with high-education voters. He did not compete for the electoral votes of any state in the entire eastern corridor from Maine to Virginia with the sole exception of Pennsylvania. Nor did he try to win the Pacific states of California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. Already by 2016, before Trump achieved control of the Republican Party, that party's abandonment of those 16 coastal states was so far advanced that of the 32 senators representing those states, only Susan Collins of Maine and Patrick Toomey of Pennsylvania were Republicans. States that once produced Republican presidents and senators of real stature had come to be of little interest to a Republican Party that supposed it could control the White House and the Senate without those states. Republican leaders spent decades

working to establish an electoral foundation that could enable them to essentially write off the “coastal elites” that by 2024 Republican media had succeeded in making into a stigmatized identity group.

This Republican design centered on the notorious “Southern strategy,” the religious and educational coordinates of which remain to be appropriately confronted. Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan all understood the potential of voters uncomfortable with school integration and with federal protections of the voting rights of African Americans. Reagan began his 1980 presidential campaign by extolling states’ rights while virtually standing on the graves of the Neshoba County martyrs, three civil rights activists murdered by the KKK in 1964. Shortly after his Mississippi speech, Reagan famously and cleverly told a Texas convention of the National Association of Evangelicals: “I know you can’t endorse me, but I endorse you.”² For Reagan, evangelicalism, states’ rights, and the mantra “government is the problem” all worked harmoniously.

A portentous fact, never hidden but rarely recognized to this day, is that the states with the greatest preponderance of voters Reagan was trying to reach were also states with the highest percentage of evangelical Protestants and with the lowest levels of education. Hence the Southern strategy was also, by implication, a religious strategy and an educational strategy. Many evangelical Protestants were and are college graduates, to be sure, but as late as 1970, 18 percent of the ministers serving congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention had no schooling beyond high school. In 2020, 22 percent of clergy serving White evangelical congregations had not completed college, compared with 8 percent of those serving “mainline” ecumenical congregations (Chaves et al. 2025).

Decade by decade, the evangelical client’s grip on its patron became stronger. Once the party’s dependence on evangelical voters—about 80 percent of whom were voting Republican even prior to Trump’s first presidential campaign—became pronounced, the culture of those voters had to be honored, at least up to a point. Evangelicalism’s weak commitment to modern standards of epistemic

plausibility became a fuzzy boundary of Republican discourse.³ When Franklin Graham, an evangelical leader and the son of the evangelist Billy Graham, declared that God had turned Trump's head to avoid an assassin's bullet in Butler, Pennsylvania, during a campaign event in July 2024 (Mackey 2024), what could a self-respecting Republican senator or representative do but agree—or remain silent? Some well-educated Republican leaders simply preferred a corporate-friendly, more-authoritarian-than-not political order and had little interest in evangelical habits of thought and feeling. But for more and more of them as each election came and went, evangelicalism proved to be too powerful an instrument to go unused.

Historically, the Republican Party had long enjoyed the votes of the bulk of the upper middle class and had often given more support to public higher education than had local Democrats in many states. The leadership of New York Governors Thomas Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller in the creation and expansion of the State University of New York after World War II is an example. Another is the long list of Republican leaders over many decades who promoted the growth and independence of the University of California. But by prioritizing White Southern evangelicals and their counterparts in the Middle West and in the mountain states, the party gradually abandoned most of the states with highly educated electorates.

Evangelicalism also brought into the Republican Party a Manichean sensibility that fostered sharp polarization and made the Republicans in both houses of Congress less willing to compromise with Democrats. When the Christian supremacist Senator Josh Hawley in 2017 asserted that the “ultimate authority” of Jesus Christ had to be established in “every sphere of life,” including the government of the United States (Stewart 2021), there was nothing the least bit novel about it. Generations of preachers had encouraged the faithful to see themselves as a morally superior community, required by God to either separate themselves from a sinful society or to take it over and subject it to Christian authority. At the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the fundamentalist leader Harold

Ockenga delivered an apocalyptic address calling on the faithful to make war against the New Deal and a variety of secular and liberal forces in the nation (Sutton 2014, 287).

Here is a recent Manichean and classically apocalyptic utterance of Donald Trump himself, delivered in 2023 before an audience of evangelicals:

This is the final battle. With you at my side, we will demolish the deep state. We will expel the warmongers from our government, we will drive out the globalists, we will cast out the communists, . . . we will throw off the sick political class that hates us, we will rout the fake news media and we will liberate America from these villains once and for all. (Moran 2024)

In other Bible-related effusions before evangelical audiences, Trump promised to restore Christian hegemony so resoundingly that evangelicals would never have to vote again in order to advance evangelical priorities (Gold 2024). Only a Christian-supremacist understanding of what “truth” actually is could deny that Trump reverses the old Quaker slogan of speaking truth to power and speaks power to truth.

Theologically liberal versions of the faith have never paid much attention to the Manichean themes in the Bible, but the Republicans, by developing evangelicals as clients, catapulted evangelical ideas from the margins of American public life to its center.⁴ This happened during the same decades in which the old “Protestant establishment”—the liberal, ecumenical Protestants led by Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Northern Baptists—experienced their historic decline in membership, depriving the nation of what had been the most powerful countervailing force against the influence of evangelicals.⁵

To be sure, Republican sectarianism is not exclusively a consequence of evangelical influence. In the 1990s Representative Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan, a paleoconservative commentator and

politician, urged Republicans to demonize Democrats and to stop working with them as co-stewards of a pluralist democracy. Gingrich famously asked Republican office seekers to get “nasty” and demanded that Republicans in both houses of Congress blow up bipartisan projects and run the tables their own way. Buchanan made his reputation by insisting that Reagan had betrayed his revolutionary potential and become a conventional compromising pragmatist. Gingrich and Buchanan did not need evangelical inspiration to turn their party in more polarizing directions, but they well understood that Reagan had delivered to them a voting constituency ready to go with their florid flow.⁶

Not all Americans that identify as evangelicals promote right-wing views. A small but vocal contingent of “progressive evangelicals” publishes the magazine *Sojourners* and includes regular columnists for *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and other major media.⁷ Some evangelicals are politically indifferent. A number of African American Protestants self-identify as evangelicals on doctrinal grounds but rarely share religious or political culture with White evangelicals.⁸ Modern American evangelicalism’s center of ideological gravity is not in doubt, registered in the voting pattern of recent elections and documented by many scholars.⁹

Nothing illustrates the extent of the evangelical capture of the Republican Party more strikingly than its accelerating pace during the decades when the size of the evangelical population declined. The 13 percent of the nation identifying as White evangelical in 2024 is more empowered politically than evangelicals ever have been (PRRI 2024). This fact gives specific meaning to a remarkable paradox in American life of the third decade of the twenty-first century: *An increasingly secular society is saddled with an increasingly religious politics*. Exactly while the pace of secularization becomes more rapid, with nearly one-third of the national population now professing no religious affiliation at all, evangelical Protestants and their Catholic allies—well represented by J. D. Vance, the new vice president—exercise unprecedented power over the lives of all Americans.¹⁰ This distribution of power is a direct

consequence of the Republican Party's sponsorship of evangelicals and their eventual influence over what the Republican Party had become by the time of Trump's second election in 2024.

More specifically, and with particular reference to higher education, how has the evangelical capture of the Republican Party affected the political environment in which American universities must operate? This is my second question.

The willingness of federal courts to weaken church-state separation and to sharply limit women's reproductive rights are obvious consequences of evangelical influence. So, too, is the new confidence shown by state officials in many states as they openly promote Christian supremacy and drastically limit the ability of women to get reproductive healthcare (Closson 2024; Mervosh and Dias 2024; Rojas 2024). Relevant, too, is the selection of the resolutely evangelical Mike Johnson as speaker of the House of Representatives, third in line for the presidency. It is inconceivable that Republican Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, or George H. W. Bush could have appointed as ambassador to Israel any individual who declared publicly, as Mike Huckabee did, that the destiny of Palestine had been settled by God, who, according to the Bible, had awarded that territory to Jews (Boorstein 2024).

But beyond this easily extended list of evangelically intensive features of the political environment, that environment also makes education—or the lack of it—a huge factor in determining the direction of the society. The Republican vested interest in an electorate with limited education makes excellent sense when we consider what education can do in several of the policy domains of interest to Republicans. Education enables individuals to more easily recognize indicators of global warming; to appreciate the value of vaccines; to understand the past's disabling legacy for descendants of enslaved Americans; to grasp the evidence that Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election; to recognize how much of human life opens up for women when they have reproductive choice; to understand how tariffs affect consumer expenses; to follow the details of what hap-

pened in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021; to confront the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (the Nakba) by Zionist militias as a basic part of modern history; and to accept a host of other realities that “low-information voters,” as the press calls them, often deny, especially when encouraged to do so by confident voices claiming to speak from, or on behalf of, the voter’s own identity group, often carrying out purposeful campaigns of disinformation. One prominent talking head after another marvels at the gap between reality and what is believed by Trump voters being interviewed.¹¹ Education helps people see through the lies Trump told throughout the 2024 campaign and encourages skepticism toward the QAnon conspiracy ideas that appeal to many evangelicals (Jenkins 2021). Education promotes awareness of the importance of foreign aid and of the prodigious cost in human lives of the Trump administration’s early 2025 attack on the United States Agency for International Development (Demirjian and Kavi 2025; Houreld and Chason 2025).

The place of university communities in this dynamic is acknowledged routinely, but implicitly, by television newscasters every election night. “Washtenaw County has yet to come in,” CNN’s John King or MSNBC’s Steve Kornacki would say, “so the votes of the solidly Democratic population connected with the University of Michigan have yet to be recorded.” Or “the votes from Dane County, home of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, have just been added to the Wisconsin total, so the Democrats have just gotten a great boost in that key state.” The same goes for Austin, Bloomington, Charlottesville, Iowa City, Laramie, and other academic communities. In his re-election efforts, Senator Charles Grassley, a conservative Republican, has repeatedly won every county in Iowa except one: Johnson County, home of the University of Iowa.

If education were the answer to everything, the well-educated leaders of the Democratic Party might have accomplished more. They might have developed policies and practices more responsive to populations left behind during the economic transformations of the last several decades and might have found strategies for communication

to break through the bubbles of information and disinformation allowed by the Telecommunications Act passed by Congress in 1996 to end federal regulation. But if knowledge is not a certain basis for political wisdom, it certainly helps. This may seem a truism not worth voicing yet again. But the point demands reaffirmation in 2025, when resentment against “educated elites” is credibly claimed to be a huge force pushing voters away from the Democratic Party’s candidates for public office and when much of the punditry insists that the resentment is justified.¹²

John Dewey’s (1916) arguments about the dependence of successful democracy on education remain as sound as they were when Dewey developed them more than a century ago. As the Appalachian bard Joe Bageant remarked on behalf of his White ancestral tribe, “people here in the heartland will keep on electing dangerous dimwits in cowboy boots . . . until . . . it is possible to get an education without going into crushing debt” (2007, 33). Bageant reminds us of the economic context of all our discussions of education and democracy: The high cost of education is in itself a barrier to the health of pluralistic democracy. Malcolm X declared that “without education, you’re not going anywhere in this world.” It is no wonder that under Trump’s political canopy there has developed a robust movement to undermine public schools and to replace them, in the words of investigative journalist Katherine Stewart (2025a), with “a national network of publicly financed religious schools that explicitly favor conservative forms of Christianity.”

Although we are awash in screeds about academia’s elitism (e.g., Brooks 2024a), academia’s record for discovering and disseminating knowledge about nature, history, and society is much more impressive than today’s public discussion acknowledges. If the record of universities were not so good, universities would not be subject to such sustained attacks by people whose hold on power depends on a poorly educated electorate. The lobby groups and state legislators who want to diminish the hard-won autonomy of the professorate know exactly what they are doing. “Professors are the enemy,” Rich-

ard Nixon famously declared, echoed in our own time by J. D. Vance.¹³ Faculties free to teach what they know to be true are a threat to interests now concentrated in the Republican Party. The movement to bring elite academia to political heel has been gaining momentum for many decades but became more acute than ever in 2024 and 2025.¹⁴ When the National Institutes of Health found itself obliged early in 2025 to drastically reduce the “overhead” monies that normally accompany grants to university researchers—funds to maintain equipment and facilities and to pay support staff that keep labs functioning—universities found themselves facing a future with greatly diminished programs in natural science and medicine (Jewett and Stolberg 2025).

Can higher education be largely reduced to technical-vocational functions? If that happens, universities would be less able to generate critical perspectives on public affairs. When Nixon and Vance identified “professors” as an enemy, they were not talking about professors of electrical engineering or nursing. Knowledge about nature, history, and society as developed and taught in the liberal arts can threaten the truth claims learned in churches and families. Especially the study of history, sociology, political science, literature, and philosophy promotes critical reconsideration of inherited religious ideas and tribal customs. The Republican right knows that traditional research and teaching, entirely apart from ideological overreach, are an obstacle to their ideal America. They know who their enemy is. It is us: the kind of people who read *Social Research* and write for it.

Is there political bias in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge? There can be, of course, but what critics sometimes take for bias is simply the historicity of all communities of inquirers. Historians of science have been showing the cultural matrix of knowledge production since Thomas S. Kuhn established the dependence of valid science on distinctively constituted, historically particular human communities.¹⁵ Yet, even in Kuhn’s formidable wake, historians and philosophers of science generally agree that some truth claims

are much more fully warranted than others—and that what counts as warrant is not so difficult to agree upon in specific cases.

How academic professionalism actually works is so often misunderstood that its basic structure invites repeated articulation. At its core is peer review, which is carried out classically within a series of concentric circles of accountability. Any particular disciplinary community exists within an expanse of concentric circles that constitute an informal but vitally important structure of epistemic authority. In order to maintain its standing in the learned world as a whole, a given community must keep the communities nearest to it persuaded that it is behaving responsibly, and it must also, partly through the support of these neighboring communities, diminish whatever skepticism about its operations might arise in more distant parts of the learned world and beyond, in the society that scientists and scholars do, after all, serve. So the structure of epistemic authority moves out from particle physics to physics to natural science to science to the learned world as a whole and then to the most informed members of the public. The farther you get from the technical particulars of the field, the less authority you have to decide what should be going on, but in a democratic society there is some authority distributed all the way out. It is the job of deans and provosts to keep abreast of these transdisciplinary conversations and to pressure particular departments and schools to change their ways of doing things if the parts of the learned world most qualified to judge are truly dubious about their research programs and their attendant teaching and public service activities.¹⁶

In this perspective, there is nothing illegitimate about asking for professional accountability as long as it is, indeed, professional. Demanding this accountability need not be the serving as a cat's paw for some external and nefarious authority, "doing their dirty work for them." The learned world owes it to itself, as well as to the society that it serves, to make sure things are done professionally. Academia as a whole—as one large solidarity—must not neglect this respon-

sibility, as it is sometimes tempted to do, for fear of being seen as someone else's agents.

It is especially important to explain the role of academic professionalism in the humanities and social sciences. In *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II*, a book I edited for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a group of us demonstrated not only that these disciplines were in the forefront of bringing historically disadvantaged groups into academia, but also, more fundamentally, how these disciplines bring evidence and reasoning to domains where the rules of evidence are strongly contested and the power of reason often doubted (Hollinger 2006). Not every member of the public nor every university regent or state legislator can be expected to understand and appreciate this critical function of universities. But enough can do so to make the effort worthwhile.

The need to keep trying was pressed upon me with special force in 1999 at the University of California, Berkeley symposium marking the fiftieth anniversary of the loyalty oath that the regents of the University of California imposed on faculty in 1949. I had just finished presiding over a panel consisting of four former presidents of UC: Clark Kerr, Jack Peltason, David Gardner, and David Saxon. A journalist covering the event came up to me and said, with some impatience, "You academics are too cynical about the public, so you don't do enough to explain yourselves. You don't give people enough credit for being able to understand you." Surely, that is as right today as it was then.

Defending academic professionalism and explaining it to the public are part of the answer to my third question: How, in the environment created by the evangelical capture of the Republican Party, can universities maintain their integrity as knowledge-centered institutions while serving the interests of pluralist democracy? The challenge of getting this right is profoundly complicated by the manifest injustices in the society at large. Our appropriate commitment to pluralist democracy can lead us into a trap: *We are tempted to accept more than our share of responsibility for evils whose causes lie well beyond university*

policies and practices. The further the evangelically captured Republican Party moves the federal courts, the Congress, and the executive branch toward tolerance—if not advocacy—of White supremacy, misogyny, economic inequality, and Christian supremacy, the more tempting it is to fall into this trap.

“Let the professors do it” is the unstated motto of the folks in power who refuse to provide adequate social services and elementary and secondary education to historically disadvantaged populations. Universities—especially public universities—are invited to pick up the social pieces left lying on the national floor as a result of the historic and ongoing failure of other institutions to do their jobs. Hence, we academics find ourselves accepting too narrowly demographic an understanding of the services we provide to the public. Striving to include more members of historically disadvantaged groups in our student bodies and faculties is a good thing, but when we make a huge production of measuring and publicizing “underrepresented” and “overrepresented” populations, we imply an obligation to represent demographic groups in universities by the same proportion they are found in society. That expectation invites the public to find fault with us for failing to reach a goal of proportional representation that is unrealistic in the near future because of inequalities in the society at large. Correcting prejudicial practices within our own institutions is one thing, but the farther we go beyond that, the more we let other institutions off the hook—and the more we endanger our ability to do what we are designed to do.

Academic integrity has been weakened by the “DEI statements” through which candidates for faculty jobs are expected to declare their perspective on “diversity, equity, and inclusion” and to describe how they are able to act on a campus’s proclaimed DEI commitments. Statements may be required or may only be “recommended” with the implication that failing to submit one will hurt the candidacy. As several studies have shown, this practice can easily eliminate from consideration any candidate who does not satisfy a given campus’s diversity officer’s sense of what range of opinions is

acceptable (Brint and German 2021; Powell 2023). On my own Berkeley campus in 2019, 679 applicants for jobs in the biological sciences were disqualified before their research and teaching qualifications were even examined.¹⁷

A candidate who is willing to say that affirmative action was a mistake from the start can be ruled ineligible, even though until recently that opinion was accepted as a legitimate, if in-the-minority, opinion. DEI statements transform a class of opinions that used to be respectful collegial disagreements into an altogether different class: opinions that are at variance with a campus's shared values. During 2024 and 2025 a number of universities pulled back from this practice, but even the temporary requiring of DEI statements had the effect of turning the issue of academic freedom over to the conservative critics of universities and delivering hostages to parties that claim academia is saturated with political bias (Confessore 2024; Peters 2024).

We are cautioned against calling DEI statements “political tests,” lest they be discredited by bad company. So, we are told that DEI statements merely facilitate the operation of our shared institutional values. In the context of such talk, it is instructive to know that the University of California's loyalty oath of the early 1950s was not understood as a political test by many of its defenders and by many of those who merely tolerated it. Communist commitment was taken to be a barrier to the honest practice of critical inquiry. Today, we have no trouble recognizing this as evasion. But when the oath was proposed in 1949, the overwhelming majority of the UC faculty had little objection to it. David P. Gardner's classic study, *The California Oath Controversy*, documents the willingness of multiple faculty groups to tolerate the oath. At the time of their dismissal, Gardner concludes, the 31 nonsigners, as they looked to colleagues for support, “discovered themselves to be, for their irreconcilability, the object of resentment and criticism” (1967, 247).

Only in later years, after the legendary nonsigners of the oath were terminated and had created a deeper conversation about academic freedom—eventually winning a court order for their reinstatement—

ment as faculty members—did almost everyone agree that the oath had been a political test all along and was therefore repugnant. By 1963, when I arrived at Berkeley as a graduate student, that revised understanding was fully in place. Surviving nonsigners like the medieval literature scholar Charles Muscatine were great heroes, regularly invoked by those of us involved in the Free Speech Movement of 1964. The faculty's original willingness to go along with the oath itself can remind us that what we recognize as a "political test" is historically contingent.

Another aspect of the University of California's loyalty oath controversy is instructive for us today. Nearly all the nonsigners professed their opposition to communism in terms not so different from the terms in which today's critics of DEI statements affirm their own DEI values. The great medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz liked to boast that he, as a member of a militia, had fought communists in hand-to-hand combat on the streets of Munich in 1919.¹⁸ Since Kantorowicz was Jewish, it is convenient here to remember that it was during his generation that antisemitic barriers to Jewish faculty and students collapsed, and without the assistance of DEI programs. One of the most stigmatized and systematically discriminated against ancestry groups suddenly became demographically overrepresented in academia by hundreds of percentage points. That huge transformation was achieved under the aegis of a more honest and rigorous academic professionalism, not the weakening of its authority.¹⁹

Yet the later opening of academia to women and African Americans did require affirmative action programs and revealed the limitations of the value system that was able to make room for Jews. Affirmative action was very different from DEI in ways that explain why many critics of DEI programs supported affirmative action and why affirmative action was consistent with the professional authority of universities. Affirmative action was always more straightforward than the goal of "diversity" with which academia was saddled by the 1978 decision of the US Supreme Court in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. While university communities were often divided

about affirmative action—how much of it should be practiced, and exactly where, and how?—prior to *Bakke*, universities had the authority to decide just how they wanted to act on newly appreciated commitments to ethnoracial and gender equality. That authority was taken away by *Bakke*, in which the key opinion of Associate Justice Lewis Powell declared that members of disadvantaged population groups could be targeted for admission or employment not to correct historic injustices or to enact equitable policies, but on the much narrower grounds that such individuals added cultural and intellectual “diversity” to a campus.

According to Powell, bringing more African Americans into universities, for example, was justified because African Americans had a different culture. Of course, this was true up to a point, but scholars had long since shown that color and culture do not go together with remotely the frequency that the Powell doctrine assumed. Yet, universities were obliged to work within Powell’s framework. DEI is its legacy. We would be better off with pre-*Bakke* affirmative action because it was more truthful about its own character and enabled academics to be more honest with one another in their debates about its scope and operations. Powell gave us a way to recruit historically disadvantaged faculty and students, but at the cost of requiring academia to act as if it believed the deeply false proposition that the physical marks of biological descent are reliable predictors of culture.

The disingenuous claim that DEI statements are not a political test is the culmination of the many decades of evasion, self-deceit, and dissembling that were visited upon us by *Bakke*. The recent pulling back from this unwise practice is a step toward affirming the integrity of the American professoriate.²⁰

Popular writings about history constitute another domain in which academics can easily fall into the trap of trying to do more than their share to correct social injustices. When the writer Thomas Frank visited the National Portrait Gallery in the spring of 2024, he

happened to read the explanatory text beside an old painting. This note described the westward advance of the United States in the 19th century as “settler colonialism.” I read it, and I knew instantly where this nation was going. My problem with this bit of academic jargon was not that it was wrong, *per se*, or that President Biden was somehow responsible for putting it there but rather that it offered a glimpse of our poisoned class relations. Some curator at one of our most exalted institutions of public instruction had decided to use a currently fashionable, morally loaded academic keyword to address a visitor to the museum—say, a family from the Midwest, doing the round of national shrines—and teach them a lesson about American wickedness. (2024)

Is the emphasis on “settler colonialism” a mistake? Only when this portion of the truth is allowed to masquerade as the whole. Critics of academia are alert for any utterance by professors or administrators that can be construed as ideological overreach, but not always does the public need the polemical help of right-wing critics to recognize it. Sometimes, the evidence for it is all too real. Recent books by Jonathan Rauch (2021) and Sophia Rosenfeld (2018) document and lament a number of instances in which scholars have been so eager to score ideological points that the integrity of their calling is compromised.

Their calling? This idealistic construction does not come close to encompassing all the elements that go into any individual’s academic career. But it does invoke a tradition of truth-seeking and truth-disseminating practices that has been admirably renewed in the critical discussion of the *New York Times*’s *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021). Generally, historians agree that *The 1619 Project* succeeds in calling accurate attention to the massive role played by anti-Black racism in American history and in recognizing the labors of African Americans in perfecting democracy. But *The 1619 Project* has several

problematic features, judiciously addressed in the December 2022 issue of the *American Historical Review*, wherein 19 highly qualified scholars of a variety of specialties analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the *Project* (Gordon-Reed et al. 2022). There and elsewhere, historians complain that the *Project* too often embellishes its story, mystifies the actual dynamics of history, and erases the strength of the forces that have been marshaled against White supremacy. These scholars insist that the truth about White supremacy is quite enough. By popularizing the notion that racial slavery is the nation's "original sin," the *Project* moves a human event to a metaphysical realm and implies inescapability. The whole point of the concept of an "original" sin as developed by Augustine of Hippo and his followers was its permanence—the sin was *innate* and thus an inescapable condition of human life.

This failure of the *Project* to sufficiently recognize and proclaim the basic contingency of history is the most telling complaint made by the historian-critics. "A history that draws a straight line forward from 1619," complains Matthew Karp (2021), "cannot explain how that same American slave society was shattered at the peak of its wealth and power—a process of emancipation whose rapidity, violence, and radicalism have been rivaled only by the Haitian Revolution." By making the introduction of slavery in 1619 an "origin story," rather than one major aspect of modern America's historical foundation, the *Project* downplays the slaughter of the Indigenous peoples and slights the history of other non-White groups. The editors took this objection lodged against the 2019 *New York Times* edition seriously enough to lead them to make some revisions for the book version of 2021. Still, Daryl Michael Scott found that the revised version was not the "multicultural narrative" that would have been a great service to the public, but was instead "a sad, angry black-white love song calling for reconciliation and repair." Scott also voiced the common complaint that the *Project* exaggerates "how scholars and our educational system have ignored slavery" (2022, 1819).

The editors of the *Project* do acknowledge “a wave of important research and scholarship in the past fifty years” that has challenged the traditional avoidance of the centrality of the Black-White color line to American history. They insist that this newer vision of American history, while “uncontroversial among historians, has often struggled to permeate mainstream understanding of American history” (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021, xxi). This is true up to a point, but the editors make no mention of the work of historians on the National Standards for History for classroom use, nor of the striking success of the Organization of American Historians in getting the National Park Service to present an accurate account of the Civil War in relevant national parks.²¹ A frustrated James Oakes (2023) fumed that “1619 was there in every textbook and had been for decades.” The deep truth about the power of White supremacy now popularized by *The 1619 Project* has been “a staple of US history lectures in colleges and high schools across the country” for more than half a century.²²

The historians who warn against the *Project*’s deficiencies are in no way allied with the Republican politicians who have condemned it and who have even succeeded in banning that book’s use in the public schools of Florida and Texas. Yet, as with the more judicious critique of DEI statements common within academia, scholarly cavils about *The 1619 Project* can easily be lost in the avalanche of irresponsible efforts to prevent students from learning about the reality of racism and sexism in American history (see Holton 2024).

We scholars frequently acknowledge an earlier generation’s appreciation for eugenics, and we often voice our regret for academia’s having taken so long to act against practices that discriminated against women and non-Whites. The record of professional inquiry has never been entirely free of the prejudices of any age in which it is practiced. Yet we scholars have discovered and disseminated truths about racism and misogyny that conservative critics would rather not have widely broadcast. Social scientists, historians, and a variety of humanists, often inspired by protest movements, have been conspic-

uous players in the national awakening to the injustices that today's DEI programs are designed to counter.²³

All of us, as scholars across all branches of learning, have a responsibility to patiently and repeatedly explain the social value of what we do. *Ideally, we serve society by placing its inherited pieties and entrenched interests at risk, not in some iconoclastic mode, but rather by way of ensuring that beliefs and entanglements survive only when they are strong enough to meet the most empirically warranted and conceptually coherent of challenges.* In pursuing that mission, we are the people of Newton and Locke; we are the people of Darwin and Mill, the people of Einstein and Dewey, of Arendt and Habermas, of Du Bois and Oppenheimer, and of Rawls and Doudna.

Often today we are called upon to carry out a “reckoning” in the wake of public skepticism about the value of knowledge-based policies and practices.²⁴ As we do so, we must refuse unfair characterizations of ourselves. Many of the criticisms of academia are not made in good faith but are cynical duplicitous efforts to weaken the capacity of knowledge to inform the direction of society. We don't always get it right, but we do just that more often than today's loudest critics of universities are willing to grant. By failing to proclaim our record of speaking socially valuable truths, or by exaggerating them, we play into the hands of the deeply anti-intellectual powers that have always surrounded us but never so portentously as in the wake of the Republican Party's vested interest in a low education electorate. Truth has no agency of its own and can serve society only when acted upon by political agents. But for scholars acting as scholars, telling the truth is enough.

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NOTES

1. This sudden discovery of the importance of education has been widely noted; with slightly different statistics, all surveys agree on the basic picture. One unusually detailed statistical analysis can be found in Van Dam (2024).
2. The genesis and operation of the Republican decision to rely on Southern White evangelicals has been widely discussed by historians and political scientists. I have summarized these developments in Hollinger (2022, especially 108–14).
3. Prominent among recent treatments of the evangelical base of the Republican Party are Butler (2021), Curtis (2021), Gorski and Perry (2022), Onishi (2023), Stewart (2025b), and Taylor (2024).
4. Prominent Manichean verses include 2 Corinthians 10:5, Matthew 12:30, and Mark 9:40.
5. I have analyzed this fundamental shift in American religious history in Hollinger (2022, 90–107).
6. The definitive study of Gingrich and Buchanan and their influence on the Republican Party is Hemmer (2022).
7. For a discussion of the leading anti-Trump evangelicals, see Hollinger (2024).
8. Among the several studies of African American evangelicals and their relation to White evangelicals, an especially helpful one is Sharp (2023).
9. See especially Du Mez (2020), the most influential analysis of evangelicalism published during the Trump era.
10. For the sharp decline in religious affiliation, see Pew Research Center (2021) and Burge (2025). Yet, the mainstream press, including *The New York Times*, continues to lend credibility to the claim that Christians are a beleaguered community in a “negative world,” even while evangelical Protestants have unprecedented influence in the White House, both houses of Congress, and the US Supreme Court (Graham 2025).
11. For an especially poignant example, see Frum (2024).

12. Brooks (2024b) is representative of an avalanche of writings following the 2024 election addressing voter suspicions of educated progressives.
13. “There is a wisdom in what Richard Nixon said approximately 40, 50 years ago. He said, and I quote: ‘The professors are the enemy.’” J. D. Vance, speech at National Conservatism Conference, cited in *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2021.
14. See Blinder (2024), which describes efforts to diminish the authority of faculty senates and enhance the power of alumni and trustees to control the intellectual content of what happens in universities.
15. I have tried to clarify Kuhn’s ideas and to explain his influence in a number of publications, including Hollinger (1973) and Hollinger (2000).
16. An exceptionally cogent discussion of these issues is Williams (2002, especially 213–19).
17. I have discussed this incident in Hollinger (2023). Campus officials later repudiated the practice of evaluating DEI statements except in relation to a candidate’s other qualifications and later declared that DEI statements were to be recommended but never required. Yet it was widely assumed that failure to follow this recommendation damaged a candidacy.
18. See Gardner (1967, 34–36), which includes the full text of Kantorowicz’s famous speech on the floor of the Academic Senate. For an extensive account of the event, see Lerner (2017, 312–28).
19. I have discussed this major event in American academic history in Hollinger (2022, especially 33–37).
20. Some efforts to advance DEI pose no threat to academia’s traditional mission. These programs can facilitate exactly that mission by making sure knowledge about the history and present ordinance of social injustices is advanced and disseminated. We need fair and equitable policies for faculty appointments and student admissions, and we need research and teaching that includes ample reference to things some people would rather not confront. Republican governors and state legislatures who attack DEI often try to prohibit the scru-

tiny of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other aspects of life that academia's basic truth-seeking commitments demand be studied and taught. Academic leaders are correct to fight back and expose the pernicious anti-intellectual character of these attacks. Yet the public discussion of these attacks has the unfortunate effect of obscuring a genuine debate within the ranks of academic professionals who accept basic DEI goals. Academia's critics of DEI practices are not birds of a feather with Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, although colleagues defending DEI statements sometimes indulge in this slander.

21. For three decades the Organization of American Historians has worked directly with the National Park Service to ensure that history is accurately represented at the nation's national parks, especially those devoted to Civil War battles (<https://www.oah.org/oah-nps/>). For the sustained efforts by professional historians to provide elementary and high school teachers with an accurate basic grid for US and world history, see Ravich (1998).
22. Among the many works Oakes cites is a book of well over a half-century ago, Winthrop Jordan's (1968) *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812*. No single work did more to clarify and turn attention to the seventeenth-century origins of anti-Black racism in what became the United States. For a judicious analysis of the influence of this book, see Gordon-Reed (2012). As a graduate student, I was the research assistant to Jordan while he was working on this book. Inspired by that experience, I then in 1970 co-taught with two colleagues at the State University of New York at Buffalo the first course in African American history ever offered on that campus.
23. This vital contribution of scholars is egregiously undervalued in a widely discussed critique of academia, Musa al-Gharbi's *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite* (2024). This book offers a devastating expose of ostensibly anti-racist, pro-egalitarian initiatives that enable their agents to feel good about themselves while doing very little to actually diminish racism and inequality. Yet al-Gharbi misleads readers by largely ignoring the positive social functions of knowledge and expertise.

24. See, e.g., Blight (2024). Blight wisely calls on universities to do more to diminish the isolation from the world of learning felt by the “substantial parts of our society” that truly do not know “why history or science or art” matters.

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