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Opinion

Harvard University (United States): Powerful donors managed to push out Harvard's Claudine Gay. But at what cost?

Wednesday 3 January 2024, by [REICH Robert](#) (Date first published: 3 January 2024).

Not until now have major donors so brazenly used their financial influence to hound presidents out of office

The core problem is that one of the major jobs of today's university presidents is to solicit money.'
Photograph: Will Oliver/EPA

Amid accusations of plagiarism and continuing outrage among Harvard's major donors at her alleged failure to condemn Hamas and defend [Israel](#), Harvard's president, Claudine Gay, has announced her resignation.

Harvard's secretive board of overseers, known as "the Corporation", apparently insisted on it.

"After consultation with members of the Corporation," Gay wrote in her resignation letter, "it has become clear that it is in the best interests of Harvard for me to resign so that our community can navigate this moment of extraordinary challenge with a focus on the institution rather than any individual."

Dr Gay's presidency has been the shortest of any in the history of [Harvard](#) since its founding in 1636. She was also the institution's [first Black president](#), and the second woman to lead the university

I don't know enough to address the charges of plagiarism against her, but it's worth noting that all of them apparently came from the same source, via the Washington Free Beacon, a conservative online journal.

In a 12 December statement, the Corporation said that after conducting an investigation into the first set of such charges, it had found "a few instances of inadequate citation" in two articles, which it said would be corrected, but that the infractions did not rise to the level of "research misconduct".

A particularly troubling aspect of Gay's resignation concerns the apparent clout of wealthy Harvard alumni, who were angry with Gay for not coming out more clearly against Hamas and in defense of [Israel](#).

Kenneth Griffin - who earned billions on Wall Street and has donated more than half a billion dollars to Harvard (\$300m this year alone, enough to get Harvard to name its graduate school of arts and sciences after him) - was particularly enraged by a statement made by several Harvard student organizations shortly after the 7 October Hamas attack, holding Israel responsible.

Griffin called the head of the Corporation, Penny Pritzker, urging that Gay take a more forceful stand against these students.

Bill Ackman, another Harvard alumnus and major donor, who heads the giant hedge fund Pershing Square Capital Management, demanded that Harvard release a list of members of the student organizations behind the letter.

In a string of posts on X (formerly known as Twitter) Ackman said he wanted to ensure that he and other CEOs did not “inadvertently hire any of their members”.

Seth Klarman, another wealthy financier and major donor whose name adorns Harvard buildings, also let it be known publicly that he was upset with Gay’s weak response to the Hamas attack and the student letter.

Lloyd Blankfein, former chief executive of Goldman Sachs, said: “Given the use of Harvard’s name by Hamas-supporting student groups, it was a grave mistake not to condemn the hate messages more quickly and absolutely.”

That’s only a partial list of major Harvard donors incensed at Gay.

Their ire intensified after a 5 December congressional hearing in which Representative Elise Stefanik – herself a Harvard graduate and former Republican mainstream conservative turned pro-Trump Maga Republican – ambushed Gay, along with two other university presidents – Elizabeth Magill of Penn and Sally Kornbluth of MIT.

I can understand the frustrations of these donors. But to use their influence to force the ouster of these university presidents is an abuse of power

Towards the end of five hours of testimony, Stefanik linked the Arabic word “intifada” – a term generally translated into English as “uprising” – with “genocide”, describing crimes of deliberate group-based mass destruction.

“You understand that the use of the term ‘intifada’ in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict is indeed a call for violent armed resistance against the state of Israel, including violence against civilians and the genocide of Jews?” Stefanik asked Gay.

Gay did not contest Stefanik’s definitions but said “that type of hateful, reckless, offensive speech is personally abhorrent”.

Stefanik then asked the presidents whether calls for intifada against Jews on campus violated the codes of conduct or harassment policies at their universities.

Gay temporized. “It can be,” she said, “depending on the context.”

Penn’s McGill and MIT’s Kornbluth gave similarly evasive answers to the same question.

They should have answered unambiguously and unequivocally that calls for genocide of any group are intolerable.

Four days after the hearing, McGill – also the target of wealthy alumni for not speaking out forcefully enough against anti-Israel student demonstrations – was forced to resign.

Wall Street billionaire Marc Rowan, chief executive of Apollo Global Management and the chair of the board of Penn's Wharton School, had loudly called for McGill's resignation and asked fellow donors to cut off funds.

Another major Penn donor, Jay Clayton, chairman of Apollo's board, said he was put off that his alma mater was willing to host speakers who criticize Israel in polemic terms yet was slow to denounce the attack on Israel.

I can understand the frustrations of these donors. But to use their influence to force the ouster of these university presidents is an abuse of power. It sets a dangerous precedent of mega-donor intrusion into university life.

It endangers the autonomy of America's universities to determine for themselves how to strike the right balance between freedom of expression and hateful speech,

The core problem is that one of the major jobs of today's university presidents is to solicit money.

Even at Harvard, whose endowment dwarfs all others, major donors are courted – their names carved into marble pediments, professorships named after them, university honors bestowed on them.

For the same reason, boards of trustees like the Harvard Corporation are packed with wealthy donors. They're not supposed to have any say over the day-to-day operations of the universities they oversee, although they routinely veto candidates for university presidents harboring views they find offensive.

Yet not until now have major donors so brazenly used their financial influence to hound presidents out of office for failing to come out as clearly as the donors would like on an issue of campus speech or expression.

As a Jew, I also cannot help but worry that the actions of these donors – many of them Jewish, many from Wall Street – could fuel the very antisemitism they claim to oppose, based on the age-old stereotype of wealthy Jewish bankers controlling the world.

Robert Reich

P.S.

• The Guardian. Wed 3 Jan 2024 13.20 CET:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/03/powerful-donors-managed-to-push-out-harvards-claudine-gay-but-at-what-cost>

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• *Robert Reich's articles in The Guardian:*
<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/robert-reich>

Well, 2023 didn't exactly go to plan, did it?

Here in the UK, the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, had promised us a government of stability and competence - not forgetting professionalism, integrity and accountability - after the rollercoaster ride of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Remember Liz? These days she seems like a long forgotten comedy act. Instead, Sunak took us even further through the looking-glass into the Conservative psychodrama.

Elsewhere, the picture has been no better. In the US, Donald Trump is now many people's favourite to become president again. In Ukraine, the war has dragged on with no end in sight. The danger of the rest of the world getting battle fatigue and losing interest all too apparent. Then there is the war in the Middle East and not forgetting the climate crisis ...

But a new year brings new hope. There are elections in many countries, including the UK and the US. We have to believe in change. That something better is possible. The Guardian will continue to cover events from all over the world and our reporting now feels especially important. But running a news gathering organisation doesn't come cheap.

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Happy new year!

John Crace

Guardian columnist

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