

Campuses Should Resist Canceling Controversial Speakers

I have no opinion on Milo Yiannopoulos, the editor at *Breitbart News* whose acceptance of an invitation to speak at the University of California Berkeley recently [sparked a massive protest](#) that turned into a riot.

All I know is that he's gay, Jewish, and lands somewhere on the right. I've never read anything he has written. I have never seen him speak with the exception of a mildly entertaining YouTube clip in which he was peppered with questions by a feisty British feminist.

Maybe Yiannopoulos is the extremist his critics claim. Maybe not. Either way, he deserves the right to speak. My opinion has nothing to do with Yiannopoulos—frankly, he seems more like a clever entertainer and provocateur than a man of ideas and substance—and everything to do with the precious right of free speech.

Voltaire might not actually have said, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”; but it’s an idea that has permeated enlightened minds for hundreds of years.

Benjamin Franklin called free speech “a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins.”

He wrote these words more than a half-century before France’s National Constituent Assembly passed the the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. Article XI nobly began: “The free communication of thoughts and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man: any citizen thus may speak, write, print freely...” And ended so ignobly, “...except to respond to the abuse of this liberty, in the cases determined by the law.” We saw how [that turned out](#).

Free speech is the cornerstone of a civil society. The very meaning of the word tolerance—a word popular today—carries the implication that one is putting up with something distasteful.

Nobody enjoys tolerating views they despise, views they might even think are dangerous. But it’s something required of us, prudent minds of all political stripes generally agree.

“If we don’t believe in freedom of expression for people we despise,” Noam Chomsky once declared, “we don’t believe in it at all.”

Prominent liberals echoed Chomsky’s sentiment in the wake of the Berkeley riot. Peter Beinart, [writing](#) in The Atlantic, declared that everyone has a right to free speech, even Milo Yiannopoulos. Beinart’s argument, however, was diminished by his incessant virtue signaling (a reader’s phrase), ad hominem attacks, and vulgar utilitarianism (the episode

allowed “Yiannopoulos depicts himself as a victim of ‘political correctness,’” Beinart writes, which helps the right).

More clear and forceful was Matt Teitelbaum, president of the College Democrats of Maryland.

“Learn to make actual arguments or get out of the debate hall,” [he wrote at the Huffington Post](#). “It’s important for people from different sides of the aisle to listen to one another.”

Rafael Walker, [writing](#) at the Chronicle of Higher Education, made a similar point—that college administrators who cave to demands to cancel controversial speakers are doing a disservice to their student bodies and undermining the principle of free speech everywhere.

When academe gets in the business of suppressing voices that it doesn’t like and limiting students to only those views that it broadly sanctions – no matter how popular those views are in the culture at large – is free speech safe anywhere? Moreover, do we do our undergraduates any favors by shielding them from the “deplorable” views of the big bad conservatives beyond the ivory tower?

In a shrinking world, connected and fused by new media, it’s more important than ever for individuals to understand that they must tolerate—not agree with—views that run counter to their own beliefs. It’s what mature people and a civil society do.

Let ideas do battle in the realm of public debate. As a wise dwarf once observed: “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you are not proving him a liar, you’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.”