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Harvard, Santorum and the One-State Solution



By Marty Kaplan

This coming weekend, Harvard's Kennedy School will host a "One State Conference" where some 20 speakers will be talking about "Israel/Palestine and the one-state solution." Between the idea of a one-state solution, and the reaction to Harvard's providing a venue for entertaining it, and the ongoing Republican assault on elites and universities, I don't know whether to cry or to cry.

The nicest thing you can say about a one-state solution, which is what the conference's organizers do, is that it's "a framework in which Israelis and Palestinians can share a liberal democratic state." Less nice, if you think that a Jewish state of Israel is a good idea, is that it would be the death certificate for that idea. That much is true, whether or not you think it's plausible that a minority Jewish population and a majority Islamic population could live together in pluralistic peace, or that an Israel/Palestine's regional neighbors, like Iran, and their surrogates, like Hezbollah, would keep their bloody hands off of it.

I don't doubt that some of those advocating a one-state solution sincerely believe that it's the last best hope for security and dignity for both peoples. I also don't doubt that others advocating it have latched on to the concept as cover for their antipathy toward Zionism and the project of dismantling Israel.

The former may regard a depiction like that of the latter as an excuse for tolerating racism and colonialism. The latter may regard the former as useful idiots.

Should Harvard, my alma mater, lend its name and its facilities to this event, which comes just in time for Israel Apartheid Week? Its website says that it's a student conference, "run solely by the student organizers, and students alone are responsible for all aspects of the program," and that it "does not represent the views of the Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, or any Harvard school or center." The sponsoring student groups are Justice for Palestine, the Palestine Caucus, the Arab Caucus, the Progressive Caucus and the Association for Justice in the Middle East.

The disclaimer on the website came at the insistence of the Kennedy School's dean, David Ellwood, who had been "particularly concerned that the conference materials may give the false impression" that the "very modest support from various funds" that Harvard gives to student-led conferences like this "in some way constitutes endorsement of the policy agenda." But in this media environment, enforcing the distinction between Harvard sponsorship and Harvard student sponsorship is like pleading, Wait - read this footnote! Whether Harvard intends it or not, a One State Conference at Harvard lends legitimacy to the proposition as an alternative worthy of debate.

Some propositions are so beyond the pale that a university shouldn't risk lending its imprimatur to them. "Imagine Harvard's response," asks a petition circulated by some Harvard alumni, "to a conference dedicated to showing the parallels between Islamism and Nazism, or in favor of the KKK." Their point is that Harvard, like other American institutions, draws distinctions; its commitment to academic freedom wouldn't stop it from keeping some kinds of speech off campus, speech it regards as odious or incendiary. There's a line. Where should they draw it?

Dean Ellwood said he was "deeply disappointed" about how "one-sided" the list of conference speakers was. "The credibility and intellectual value of any event," he said, depends on a "balance of divergent views." But balance, said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the ADL, won't fix this. It's not enough for Harvard to say - as Ellwood did, in response to a letter from Foxman - that Harvard "certainly would not endorse any policy that some argue could lead to the elimination of the Jewish State of Israel." To

Foxman, “there can never be any legitimate discussion of a concept which, by its very nature, will result in the end of the Jewish character of Israel.” No “balance of divergent views’ could ever legitimize the consideration of a one state solution.”

Enter Rick Santorum. He does believe in a one-state solution, though not the kind the conference organizers have in mind. That one state is Israel. “All the people who live in the West Bank,” he said, “are Israelis, they’re not Palestinians.” The West Bank “is legitimately Israeli country.”

Santorum also believes that universities are secular “indoctrination mills” where “62 percent of kids who go into college with a faith commitment leave without it.” He says that’s why President Obama wants more kids to go to college - to convert them to moral relativism.

It’s not just Santorum. From Newt Gingrich to Bill O’Reilly, the right says that elite universities are harming America because they substitute doubt for faith. Pluralism is Satan’s game. Considering a “balance of divergent views” - Harvard’s mission, and the creed of liberalism - is an assault on moral certainty. (The reason that the “balanced” in Fox News’s slogan doesn’t also harm America must be that it’s just a slogan, not an epistemology.)

Elite, like liberal, was once a quality to aspire to. You’d think that conservatives would welcome the enforcement of standards like intellectual excellence. But it’s clear why they don’t. What elites call excellence entails an open-mindedness that questions everything; free inquiry doesn’t put yellow tape around any kind of orthodoxy or assumption.

If that were categorically true, then a balance of divergent views on the comparative intellectual capacity of various racial groups would be welcome on campus, because both sides could freely make their cases. Instead, it’s not, because there aren’t “both sides.” Sez who? Well, sez science, a method of understanding the world that elite universities aren’t embarrassed to privilege. An exploration of the pros and cons of creationism is similarly beyond the academic pale, as is debating the existence of the holocaust, whose reality has been established by the fact-checking protocols that reasonable people use, which constitute a kind of science.

Whether Israelis and Palestinians could share a liberal democratic state that would still be a national homeland for the Jewish people: that’s a political question, not a scientific one. I have a view about it (it can’t), which at least on that point puts me on the same side as the ADL. I’m also dubious that the Harvard conference will present a balanced point of view. After all, its stated goal is “to expand the range of academic debate” to include the one-state solution and “the challenges that stand in the way of its realization.”

But that agenda, with all due respect to the ADL, doesn’t make the topic taboo. If Harvard were to cave on this, the Santorums win. Universities can’t adjudicate political conflicts, any more than they can exempt their students from defending their beliefs. The danger here isn’t delegitimizing the Jewish state. The danger is undermining the democratic freedoms that Israel, the U.S. and American universities all rely on.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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