

Lawrence Summers resigns as Harvard president

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The resignation this week of Lawrence Summers from the post he has held for the last five years as president of Harvard has provoked an extraordinary firestorm of political controversy far from the ivied halls of what has long been considered one of the premier US universities.

Summers, who served as Clinton's treasury secretary before taking the helm at Harvard, announced on February 21 that he will resign at the end of the current school year. The decision came on the eve of a "no confidence" vote called by the faculty and amid widespread demands within the university for him to step down.

The *Wall Street Journal* lamented the fall of an individual who, during his eight years in the Clinton administration, had identified himself fully with the interests of American corporations and financial institutions. The *Journal's* right-wing editorial board portrayed him as the victim of a "largely left-wing faculty that has about as much intellectual diversity as the Pyongyang parliament."

The ostensibly more liberal *Washington Post* published an editorial with the provocative title, "Prejudice Wins." It referred to the university faculty's "complaints that he was acting like a corporate chief executive—as though there were something wrong with that." The paper warned, "Because of the prestige of Harvard, his defeat may demoralize reformers at other universities."

Even the *Financial Times* of Britain weighed in with a mournful editorial entitled "Larry Summers Concedes to his Foes." The voice of the City of London praised him for "challenging established fiefdoms and implementing uncomfortable changes," while declaring his "blunt style of management" a "virtue" necessary for pursuing such a struggle.

The reaction indicates that the departure of Summers represents for decisive sections of the ruling elite, in the US and beyond, a significant setback. Clearly, major political issues are involved in the so-called "reforms" and "uncomfortable changes" that these forces deem to be necessary in American academia.

Summers was brought in as Harvard's president in 2001 with a mandate from the university's governing body to "shake up" the institution. While he had taught economics at the school in

the 1980s, his subsequent career left little doubt as to what kind of changes were contemplated.

In 1991 he left for Washington to become the chief economist at the World Bank, where he oversaw the implementation of "structural adjustment" programs that meant the impoverishment of masses of working people in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere around the globe.

It was during this phase of his career that Summers drafted an infamous secret memo proposing a "free market in toxics." He wrote that the World Bank should be encouraging the "migration of dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]."

"Health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages," he declared. He continued by arguing that the low life expectancy in impoverished countries meant that people would not live long enough to contract diseases from pollution.

The memo provoked worldwide outrage and calls for his resignation. Brazil's secretary of the environment, Jose Lutzenberger, wrote to Summers that his proposal was "perfectly logical but totally insane" and reflected the "social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional 'economists' concerning the nature of the world we live in... If the World Bank keeps you as vice president it will lose all credibility."

That such an individual was tapped by President Bill Clinton for high office was testimony to the right-wing character of the Democratic administration. Clinton first attempted to install Summers as the head of his Council of Economic Advisors, but was forced to withdraw the nomination in the face of protests. Instead Summers was appointed to the Treasury Department, where he was mentored by former Wall Street financier Robert Rubin, whom he succeeded as Treasury Secretary in 1999.

As Harvard's president, Summers deliberately staged a series of provocations that were clearly designed to shift the university's political atmosphere to the right and to more closely align the institution with the political philosophy of the Republican administration of George W. Bush.

He staged a confrontation with African-American Studies professor Cornel West, browbeating him for spending too much time on political activism. West responded by leaving Harvard

for a post at Princeton University.

By 2002 he had made a well-publicized denunciation of the campaign, in protest against Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, for Harvard and other universities to sell off investments in companies with significant holdings in Israel. Smearing the students and faculty members who had supported the campaign, Summers declared that the demands for divestment were "anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent," and linked the movement to "disturbing evidence of an upturn in anti-Semitism globally."

He called for the reintroduction of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at Harvard, a program for training military officers that was closed down on the campus by the protests of the Vietnam War era. The proposal, which was not implemented, was widely seen as an attempt to curry favor with the Bush administration.

Indeed, the series of provocative acts on Summers's part led the right-wing *Weekly Standard*, the house organ of the Republican neo-conservative right, to declare him its "favorite university president."

The affinity of the most predatory sections of the American establishment for Summers has a definite social content. Summers is representative of an avaricious social layer that enriched itself off of the economic transformations—many of which he helped direct—that have led to a lowering of the living standards for the vast majority of the world's population, including the American working class, over the past two decades. His tenure at Harvard exhibited the repugnant characteristics of the social type that has risen to the summit of the ruling elite and its institutions: shallowness, arrogance, egotism.

As university president he was paid an annual salary of \$563,000. He was provided a chauffeur-driven black stretch limousine. In one of his first appointments, he hired a former press secretary of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to serve as his own spokesman.

His interactions with the university's faculty were frequently described as bullying and autocratic.

Resentment and opposition boiled over following a speech that Summers delivered at a January 2005 conference on workforce diversity, in which he attributed the underrepresentation of women in science and engineering to gender differences in "intrinsic aptitude," describing "socialization and continuing discrimination" as "lesser factors."

While he at first attempted to defend this ignorant contention, he was subsequently forced to acknowledge that his assertions were unsupported by research or scientific evidence.

The controversy and protests that followed the speech led in March of last year to the first faculty vote for a motion expressing a "lack of confidence" in the Harvard president. Presenting the motion was J. Lorand Matory, a professor of anthropology and also of African and African-American studies. As Matory told the *Washington Post*: "When a person

with great economic and political power consistently advocates the interests of those who are already powerful and prosperous and [supports] actions that are highly injurious to people who have been injured historically... it is very, very important for us who care about justice to criticize those points of view."

This was followed in July of last year by the resignation in protest of Conrad K. Harper, the only African-American board member of the Harvard Corporation, the university's governing body. Harper cited not only Summers's comments, but also an increase in his more than half-a-million-dollar salary. "I could not and cannot support a raise in your salary," he wrote in his resignation letter. "I believe that Harvard's best interests require your resignation."

Summers also came under fire over a scandal involving a close friend, economics professor Andrei Shleifer, who headed a US government-funded project to help the government in Russia set up financial markets. The university was compelled to pay nearly \$30 million to settle a lawsuit brought by the government charging Shleifer with violating conflict-of-interest regulations by investing in Russia. No disciplinary action was taken against the professor.

The recent resignation of the dean of arts and sciences, William C. Kirby, further stoked faculty opposition to Summers. The resignation was widely seen as having been forced by Summers and many believed that, adding insult to injury, Summers sought to embarrass the dean by leaking news of the resignation to the press before Kirby could make his own announcement.

While Summers's tenure at Harvard will end with the current school year—making it the shortest for any president in the university's history—the political and social pressures that his policies expressed will certainly persist.

These pressures are directed at subordinating academic institutions and intellectual inquiry as a whole to government policies and the corporate economic interests which they defend. It is a process that inevitably involves the shattering of humanities programs that do not directly further these interests.

Under conditions of aggressive war abroad and increasing social and economic polarization at home, the drive to ideologically discipline academia becomes all the more acute. This is why the failure of Lawrence Summers at Harvard has provoked such cries of outrage from the establishment press.



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