

New York Times backs far-right campaign to oust Harvard's President Gay

Chase Lawrence, Clara Weiss
5 January 2024

The *New York Times* has joined in celebrating the ouster of Harvard University President Claudine Gay, who was forced out as part of a coordinated McCarthyite campaign based on fabricated plagiarism charges and ludicrous accusations that she supported “genocide of the Jews.”

Bret Stephens, a *Times* opinion columnist and NBC News contributor wrote on Tuesday, “The point may now be moot, but the important question for Harvard was never whether Gay should step down. It was why she was brought on in the first place, after one of the shortest presidential searches in Harvard’s recent history.” This line was echoed by other *Times* columnists, such as A.O. Scott and David Leonhardt.

Even while acknowledging the central role of far-right figures like Christopher F. Rufo, an adviser to the fascistic Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, the *Times* waited until January 4 to finally post one op-ed essay, by Tressie McMillan Cottom, opposing the campaign to oust Gay. More typically, a piece published Thursday that sought to portray her resignation as part of the “whipsawing argument over merit, rights and race that seems to have no end,” also denounced her “clumsy handling of the campus conflict over the Hamas attacks in Israel on Oct. 7 and the war in Gaza.”

In December, John McWhorter, a Columbia Professor and *Times* opinion writer, joined the chorus of far-right hacks and figures calling for her resignation. Even while acknowledging that allegations against Gay did not rise to the level of “plagiarism,” he said, “Harvard’s president, Claudine Gay, should resign.” Framing the campaign to oust her in racist terms, he wrote, “if Harvard declines to dismiss her out of fear of being accused of racism — a reasonable although hardly watertight surmise — Dr. Gay should do the right thing on her own. For Harvard, her own dignity and our national commitment to assessing Black people (and all people) according to the content of their character, she should step down.”

Times then, on the surface, anthe abo Gay. When Gay was named as president in 2022, the *Times* celebrated her as an “historic first,” the university’s “first Black leader, and the second woman.” It cited glowing reviews from several individuals on Harvard’s presidential search committee, such as billionaire and US Special Representative for Ukraine’s Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker, who proclaimed, “Claudine is a remarkable leader who is profoundly devoted to sustaining and enhancing Harvard’s academic excellence.”

But from a more fundamental political standpoint, the *New York Times*’ complicity in the far-right take-down of Gay is consistent with its record in justifying and spearheading attacks on democratic rights, preferably under the banner of racial and identity politics.

The *Times* produced the 1619 Project, a racist falsification of the history of the American democratic revolutions. The *Times* was also the main purveyor of the #MeToo witch-hunt, whose fundamental aim was to undermine basic democratic rights, such as the presumption of innocence.

At Harvard University, this campaign involved the attacks on John Comaroff, who was placed on unpaid administrative leave and barred from teaching required courses through the coming academic year. These disciplinary actions, taken while Gay was the dean of Faculty of Arts and Sciences, were based on phony claims that Comaroff violated the school’s sexual harassment and professional conduct policies. The *Times* and more openly right-wing outlets such as the *New York Post* signed onto the McCarthyite campaign against him.

Now, the very same newspaper denounces Gay for not being sufficiently aggressive in the prosecution of another McCarthyite campaign, this time against opponents of genocide in Gaza.

The witch-hunt which the *Times* has signed onto is led

by far-right figures such as Rufo. However, the Democratic Party has played a central role in it from the beginning. The December 13 congressional resolution calling for the resignation of Gay and the president of MIT, Sally Kornbluth, was supported by 84 Democrats, including House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

Moreover, had Gay, who, as president of Harvard University occupies not just a central ideological but also political position, received support from the White House or prominent Democrats, she would have likely refrained from resigning in the first place.

It is not a coincidence that the Democratic Party and Biden administration are working hand in glove with the fascist Republicans in this campaign. The Biden administration is supplying the weapons, logistics and political support that are indispensable for Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The public emboldening of the far-right and openly fascist forces is the mechanism through which the ruling class as a whole seeks to do away with "academic freedom" and "freedom of speech" on the campuses.

From the standpoint of this broader goal, the take-down of the president and restructuring of the leadership of Harvard University is of strategic significance. Harvard is among the most prestigious universities in the world. Its board includes many of the most important figures of the US state and financial elite, and its alumni staff the key economic and political institutions of the ruling class. The removal of Gay can therefore only be understood as the opening shot in a much broader and fundamental overhaul of higher education, which is to be placed entirely at the service of US imperialist and state interests.

At Harvard, the complete restructuring of Harvard Corporation, the university's governing board, is next. Rufo already announced provocatively that he would be happy to join the board.

An anonymous Harvard employee said that a senior Harvard leader told colleagues Wednesday, "I heard someone say at the Overseers meeting last night that there is blood in the water."

The employee also reported:

It seems that one of the first tasks of the interim president [Provost Adam Garber] is standardizing rules about protests, which vary across units. I wouldn't be surprised if it results in a further crackdown, with more of a police character as seen at Brown and other universities. The mention

was vague.

Gay and her family have received a torrent of death threats and racist abuse over the last several weeks, and Harvard has had to prioritize her safety. Experiencing it second-hand is clearly having an effect on staff, even the [senior colleague] with 40+ years in academia. They also don't see the threats to her or Harvard as being likely to decrease in the near term.

The announcement of the resignation was supposed to have been today, but was preempted by the media. Deans found out from the media instead of the university.

The ouster of the president of Harvard University through a concerted effort by the state, both bourgeois parties and their media appendages, marks a turning point in the assault on democratic rights. The goal is nothing less than the ruthless suppression of any expression of left-wing, anti-war opposition to genocide, fascism and war. This shift is taking place on an international scale. In Germany, even the carrying of a Palestinian flag at a protest has now been outlawed. Speakers at the most prestigious universities, such as Humboldt University, are not allowed to even utter the word "genocide" in relation to Gaza.

Youth, students and academic employees must oppose the ouster of Gay as a dangerous escalation of the attack on democratic rights and demand her immediate reinstatement. But this fight requires a clear political and class orientation. Both the international character of the attack on democratic rights and the sinister role played by the Democratic Party underscore that the fight to defend democratic rights and against war cannot be waged through appeals to the ruling class in the US or any other country.

The only viable social and political basis for the fight to defend democratic rights and put an end to the genocide in Gaza, imperialist war and fascism, is the international working class. It is to this force that all young people and academic workers determined to wage a serious fight for these principles must turn.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact