



Conversations Across the Divide

On March 20, a public conversation took place on campus between Goldman Professor Robert B. Reich and Heritage foundation economist Stephen Moore, an economic advisor to President Donald Trump. Moderated by Dean Henry E. Brady, this was the first in a series of “conversations across the divide,” an initiative of Chancellor Carol Christ as part of her efforts to promote free speech on campus and to educate students and faculty about the importance and complexities of free speech.

By Dan Lindheim *Faculty Director for the Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement and Assistant Professor of Practice*

Chancellor Christ has proclaimed this year as the Free Speech year. In addition to responding to inherited plans by student groups to bring controversial speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos and Ben Shapiro to campus, she planned a series of free-speech-related events, including numerous public panels and talks on free speech and First Amendment law, as well as meetings which brought together key student organizations on the issues of free speech.

Of particular interest to the Chancellor was bringing to campus prominent people with disparate views and from various parts of the political spectrum to engage in meaningful and substantive public conversations. She reached out to me as Faculty Director of the Goldman School Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement and after meetings about this proposal, she asked me to head up a faculty/student committee to plan a series of such events.

I felt it important to make the committee as representative of campus interests as possible and spent considerable time reaching out to a wide range of students and administrators. I met with the conservative students from Berkeley College Republicans and the Berkeley Patriot, the students who had sponsored Milo and Ann Coulter last spring and were planning on bringing Ben Shapiro and Milo in the early Fall. I met with elected student leaders and leaders of campus organizations from across

the political spectrum. I also met with students and faculty strongly opposed to bringing conservative voices to campus. From this process, a faculty student committee was created that spanned the political spectrum.

The idea of bringing left/right conversations to campus did not enjoy universal support. Some felt that whatever the importance of the First Amendment, this was time for active resistance to the Trump administration and not the time for balanced discussion and debate. Many saw Milo and Shapiro as analogous to the marchers in Charlottesville, and felt betrayed by the University for what they saw as complicity in bringing to campus people who they felt challenged their basic right to exist. Many felt that hate speech of any kind had no place on campus, regardless of whether it was permitted speech under the First Amendment. Many opposed the campus incurring massive security expenses to protect the free speech rights of those they found offensive.

Despite serious difficulties in bringing together students and faculty with highly incompatible schedules, the Committee held various meetings and a series of potential speakers and pairings were suggested. We have invited Supreme Court justices, former Secretaries of State, major economic figures, Silicon Valley leaders and political figures who have been successful in working together across the partisan aisle.

Regarding the latter, we are trying to schedule Governor John Kasich and former Congressman and Armed Services Committee Chair Ron Dellums to discuss how they were able to create left/right coalitions in Congress to oppose wasteful and purposeless weapon systems. We are finalizing for the Fall Berkeley Congresswoman Barbara Lee in conversation with Republican members of Congress about her proposal to repeal the AUMF (the justification for all uses of military force since 9/11) that passed the Republican controlled Appropriations Committee. We also hope to bring Cornel West and his conservative Princeton colleague Robert George in the Fall.

Interestingly, while such conversations take place with some regularity in Washington DC venues, it has proved difficult to get two discussants to Berkeley at the same time. In part, this is because prominent people are busy with tight schedules. It has also been particularly problematic getting Republican Congressmen to Berkeley in an election year.

Three brief comments:

First, Berkeley took a major hit in the national press last spring from the last-minute cancellation of Milo and the supposed blocking of Ann Coulter. Much was made of the apparent irony that this opposition to Milo and Coulter was occurring in Berkeley, the home of the Free Speech Movement. Whatever the rights of Milo and Coulter to speak at a public campus, and their right is almost absolute, the 1964 FSM was not about letting a thousand clowns speak their minds. Rather, it was about changing the world — primarily about the right to organize on campus to fight for civil rights (both in the South and in the Bay Area) and to organize for the 1964 Johnson/

Goldwater election. It was about the free exchange of ideas and about hearing from controversial speakers, but people who stood for something, albeit something controversial. Also, everyone with even minimal contact with the FSM understood that under Supreme Court interpretations of First Amendment law, any speech or organizing was subject to “reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions.” In particular, campus free speech advocates from the FSM period understood that Coulter’s assertion that she had such an absolute right to speak whenever or wherever was clearly incorrect.

Second, The Reich/Moore conversation was highly successful in allowing the Berkeley audience (and those who watch the event on UCTV) to hear the viewpoint of a Trump economic advisor — one who claims responsibility for much of the Trump tax bill. It was successful in showing the many areas where people of “left” and “right” actually agree — in this case, primarily in opposition to trade tariffs. It was less successful in getting real discussion about the merits (or lack thereof) of supply side economics, the value of tax relief for large corporations and the richest Americans, particularly in a period of “boom” and heated economy. While the conversation was generally of good humor, friendliness, and civility, it proved difficult to pursue issues of fact and evidence.



Third, interestingly, there is seemingly a marked student preference for hearing from cable news pundits rather than more “serious” political actors. Many, whatever their political views, see pundits as purveyors of ideas, while politicians are seen as part of the Washington morass. I asked conservative students why they wanted to bring pundit provocateurs like Milo and Coulter to campus rather than conservatives with real power — especially since Republicans control all three branches of the Federal Government. They offered two responses: (i) students prefer entertainment (i.e., verbal conflict); and (ii) serious Republican politicians don’t want to come to Berkeley. Now that President Trump is filling his cabinet with pundits, maybe students are on to something. **G**