

The Arrogance of Power - In Politics & Education

**Remarks by Robert P. Kraynak
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Thanks for inviting me to the Colgate Club of Fairfield, CT – it is great to see so many friends and former students who are still connected to Colgate.

My talk tonight is about politics and education. I would like to share with you some thoughts on the latest trends in American politics and some thoughts about intellectual life at Colgate (news from the ‘frontlines’). I hope you find my remarks interesting and provocative, maybe even a bit outrageous.

In thinking about the latest developments in politics and education, I have found a unifying theme in a phrase that keeps coming back to me in recent years – “the arrogance of power.”

By this phrase, I do not mean the misuse of power for personal ends – political corruption in the usual sense. I mean something that is often well-intentioned and even idealistic, rather than something sleazy and corrupt. I mean a certain self-righteous sense of superiority in those who hold power – especially in those who hold power for a long time – that makes them contemptuous of people without power whom they dismiss as “stupid” or somehow morally deficient in their motives. This type of arrogance has set a tone in our politics and universities that is disturbing and makes some people withdraw from public debate (and makes others shout even louder in public debate) with negative consequences for our democratic society. So, let me share some thoughts with you on this topic, and then invite your comments.

I. First Thought:

My first thought is that there is nothing new in this observation because the arrogance of power has always been with us. It is part of human nature. Or maybe I should say it’s been part of human nature since the “fall” of man from innocence, or ever since pride, egotism, and the desire for power entered the human heart.

St. Augustine, the great Christian theologian, had a striking term for this desire – the “libido dominandi” – the lust for dominating over others or the lust for power. He mentions it in his book, The City of God, where he distinguishes Two Cities, the city of God and the city of man; and he describes the “the city of man” as the political life of the Roman Empire and of all earthly cities, nations, and empires. St. Augustine said they are driven by the “libido dominandi” – which means they seek domination over other cities, but, ironically, it also means they are “dominated” by their own lust for power – creating a never ending source of unhappiness that will not cease until the world is fully redeemed by divine redemption.

So, in speaking about the arrogance of power today, I should begin by admitting that there is nothing new under the sun! Human nature is the same today, and politics in the earthly city is the same today as it was in the 5th century Roman Empire of St. Augustine: Rulers and nations grasp for power, they eventually over-

reach their abilities, and then they decline and fall. But those who think that a solution can be found in withdrawing from the world are mistaken. Isolationism is not a solution, because other powers will fill the vacuum, and they will dominate you and the world.

So, maybe you should say to me: Prof. Kraynak, stop whining about the arrogance of power! Rulers have always been driven by the “libido dominandi”—the lust for domination is part of life, and we just have to deal with it.

II. Second Thought:

My second thought is that we Americans have been lucky in one important respect: The American Founding Fathers were well aware of the “libido dominandi” as a permanent feature of political life, and they thought a lot about how to deal with it. They came up with the clever idea of using that very lust for power as the basis of our constitutional checks and balances.

This was the genius of James Madison and the Framers of the US Constitution: They reasoned that if you want to protect people from the arrogance of power and to protect liberty from tyranny, then you should divide power into many centers and let them compete against each other – which led to “the separation of powers” by dividing power into three branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial), to the division of power among three levels (federal, state, and local governments), and to expanding the sphere of liberty to include diverse economic and social groups. As Madison said in the Federalist Papers (10 & 51): Let ambition check ambition, let interest check interest in a large Federal Republic of limited powers that promotes and protects responsible freedom.

Now, you may ask, how well has the American Founders’ system of constitutional checks and balances worked? How well has it limited the arrogance of power and the lust for domination?

The complete answer is a long story, of course. But the short answer is that it has worked fairly well for 220 years. Yet, no system is perfect, and every generation of Americans has experienced some version of the arrogance of power that threatens to over-ride the checks and balances of our political system.

Here is where I would like to make some observations about recent trends in American politics that display the arrogance of power – provoking you to think about the problem with criticisms of both right and left, of both conservatives and liberals. Since we are now in a period of liberal ascendancy in politics and education, however, I will make a few more remarks about the arrogance of liberals.

1. First, we are certainly familiar with the arrogance of power by the right under the Republicans. I mean the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These wars were launched with the arrogance of believing that 130,000 troops in Iraq and 10,000 troops in Afghanistan were sufficient to invade and occupy distant countries, and then build new nations along democratic lines in a few years. Though I admit that I supported these efforts, I had very mixed feelings because I realized they were a dangerous gamble that could be tragic in many ways. I also thought that the arrogance of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was repulsive, especially regarding the over-deployment of our own troops; and the contrast to the present

Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, who displays realism and modesty, is striking. I truly appreciate President Obama's decision to keep Robert Gates at Defense as an antidote to arrogance. I also recognize that we might eventually see an "irony of history" (using Reinhold Niebuhr's phrase) in which the arrogance of the war in Iraq may lead to success in the long run, while the arrogance of the war in Afghanistan may turn out to be tragic – Afghanistan is a situation where we can't stay in and we can't get out, the very definition of a tragedy.

2. My second example of the arrogance of power in today's politics is more humorous – the outrageous behavior of the Democrats in Massachusetts, especially the arrogance of the Kennedy clan in changing the law for filling Senate vacancies. Their behavior is truly amazing – the Kennedy's behave like a royal dynasty in the midst of a 'socialist' republic! Five years ago, the Democrats of Massachusetts changed the law for filling a vacant Senate seat because a Republican, Mitt Romney, was governor – they wished to prevent him from naming a successor to Senator Kerry, if Kerry were to win the Presidency. This fall, the Democrats changed the law back at the personal request of Kennedy on his death-bed to give Duval Patrick, a Democratic governor, the power to fill the Kennedy Senate seat. And then the Kennedy family insisted that their personal favorite, Paul Kirk, should be selected over Michael Dukakis, the obvious choice on merit. And then the Kennedy's wanted the people of Mass. to sit and wait in order to see if a younger Kennedy might wish to "inherit" Teddy's seat. As they say: "Go figure it" about Mass. Democrats! Do they believe in the dynastic politics of a royal family, or socialist democracy, or both?

3. My third example is the stylish arrogance of Barak Obama. I call his approach the "the magic wand" approach to politics because it is based on Obama's belief that his charming personality and impressive rhetorical skills can change the world by a magic touch. For President Obama, intractable problems are simply due to the stupidity and selfishness of a conservative mindset. He seems to have a Messianic delusion – if you give him the power, he can save the world!

A few examples of Obama's arrogance: He demanded that Congress put a major health care bill on his desk by August 1st – and don't worry too much if you haven't read the bill, that's old-fashioned. In the meantime, let's solve all the other difficult problems in short order – like reviving the economy, closing Gitmo, ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ending the Iranian nuclear threat, ending the wars in Iraq, and, of course, eliminating nuclear weapons from the earth. These tasks should be handled all at once, in his first year as President! Then, there is Obama's strange attraction to "Tsarism" – creating thirty "Tsars" to run the executive branch outside the cabinet and outside the US Constitution (since "Tsars" are not approved by the Senate like cabinet officers, nor subject to Congressional oversight). And, of course, there is Obama's belief in Big Government and the attitude of "We know better than you." It includes the planned take-over of major sectors of economy – banking, the auto industry, health insurance, and energy with little concern about how to pay for it all. And, in a revealing incident, Obama displayed his arrogance to everyone by claiming a Boston cop acted "stupidly"

because he was insensitive to an arrogant Harvard professor – an incident that opened people’s eyes to Obama’s personality and set off alarm bells about the arrogance of power.

4. My fourth example is the arrogance of all incumbent politicians: Woe unto you! And especially woe unto Arlen Specter of PA for missing the mood of the people! There is a populist revolt stirring out there in America against all political and corporate elites. And it’s not driven by racism, as Jimmy Carter said, or created by Glenn Beck, who is just the mouthpiece for frustration. The populist revolt is driven by the real economic insecurity of the American middle class and their anger at the arrogance of power by Big Government and Big Corporations. I am certainly aware that populist anger can be dangerous, but the Town Hall meetings, the Tea Parties, and the popular demand to “Read the Bills, Congressmen!” are authentic expressions of grass roots democracy – of Jeffersonian democracy. Of course, it’s a new twist on rebellion: the rebels are not populist farmers or the student revolutionaries of the 1960’s, but the working-middle class and senior citizens. It’s your grandmother, not Jane Fonda leading the populist revolt and saying, Slow down to Big Government – one full year is not too long for deliberating about a huge piece of legislation like a health care bill.

My sense of American politics today is that the average American citizen has a better understanding of Madison’s check and balances and Jefferson’s grass roots democracy than the political and intellectual elites. The people understand the need to limit the arrogance of power, whereas the elites are captured by that arrogance – they are dominated by the lust for domination, as St. Augustine said long ago.

III. Turning from politics to education:

My final thoughts are about our universities, including Colgate. They too display the arrogance of power, with some similarities to government but with two major differences.

First, universities are run by “intellectuals,” and they are especially prone to intellectual arrogance – to dismissing others as “stupid,” “ignorant,” “unenlightened,” or “beyond the pale of educated people,” making intellectuals more intolerant of dissent than politicians, journalists, and businessmen. I know this sounds strange because intellectuals are supposed to be guided by reason and critical thinking, and to be open to revision based on facts and knowledge. But, in my experience, they take such pride in their ideas and theories that criticism is taken personally and deeply resented – the notion of the honorable opponent or the loyal opposition is not something that comes easily to university professors.

Second, universities are different from government because there are no institutional checks and balances in the universities that limit one-party dominance, so opposing voices have few resources to turn to for resistance to unjust power.

In my experience, this is the greatest problem of the universities: For the last 40 years, since the campus rebellions of the 1960’s, we have had one-party dominance by the “left” in most universities. The campus radicals of the 60’s control the universities with few checks and balances. The result is a huge intellectual imbalance in which most professors have the same left-wing ideology of

“political correctness” that they believe is self-evident to all educated people. As a result, they have become intellectually complacent: the left dominates the university without feeling the need to justify their ideas with arguments and reasons anymore. Instead, they dominate by a rhetoric of intimidation: if one can label a position as “racist, sexist, homophobic, or Western ethnocentric,” then no argument is needed – only a label. In On Liberty, John S. Mill called this type of intellectual repression “social tyranny” or “the tyranny of the majority,” resulting in a loss of moral courage and the suppression of legitimate debate for discovering the truth. Many topics have simply become “taboo” – like the causes of climate change (no one can dispute Al Gore’s thesis that human agency rather than natural cycles are to blame), the problems with gay marriage (the new “Queer Studies” at Colgate simply assumes the progressive view is correct), the real nature of Islam (Yale University, for example, will not publish the actual pictures of the Danish Cartoons in a recent book about the Danish Cartoon controversy), and women’s liberation (poor Larry Summers at Harvard learned that he could not even raise a question about whether sex differences are “natural” as opposed to “social constructions” without getting fired). Sadly, a very dull and cowardly kind of intellectual conformity dominates our universities today.

How did this happen? Once again, it is a long story, and many books have been written to explain the problem and to shock the public into reacting. I will mention six important books:

- William F. Buckley wrote, *God and Man at Yale* (in 1951) and this book sounded the alarm. It argues that the Yale faculty is biased against capitalism and Christianity, insisting that all educated people wind up believing in socialism and secularism.

- Alan Bloom’s, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) explains the campus rebellions of the 1960’s at Cornell University. Bloom criticizes cultural relativism and shallow utopianism for rejecting the Western ideals of Socratic philosophy in search of Truth through reasoned discourse and a political life of responsible freedom.

- Dinesh D’Souza wrote *Illiberal Education* (in 1991). It examines the “identity politics” of race and gender underlying affirmative action quotas and the new ideological studies – like women’s studies, African American studies, gay and lesbian studies, and victim’s studies.

- Roger Kimball wrote *Tenured Radicals* (in 1990). It explains how the 1960’s radicals took over of the humanities with political activism, emphasizing the odd combination of cultural “deconstruction” of the Western humanist tradition with radical, Marxist politics.

- Alan Kors’ book, *The Shadow University* (1998), is written from a libertarian point of view. Kors is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who focuses on the danger that “speech codes” and “hate speech” laws pose for civil liberties and academic freedom.

- Stuart Taylor wrote *Until Proven Innocent* (2007), about the Duke University lacrosse players falsely accused of rape. Taylor is an independent journalist, not a professor, who was shocked by the campus mindset of “academic McCarthyism” that led to a distortion of legal justice at Duke.

After listening to these accounts, you may be wondering – What’s it like at Colgate? In my experience, Colgate is about average on the university scale of Political Correctness – not as bad as Harvard, Columbia, Duke, or our sister school up the road, Hamilton College but lacking in genuine intellectual diversity and a broad range of views. Most of the Colgate faculty still believes in “classical liberal arts” education, and we still have the Core Curriculum. But recent developments in the Core revisions and new political programs show the arrogance of power by PC ideology that seeks to impose intellectual conformity, despite attempts by some faculty to raise critical objections.

For example, during the 1980 - 90’s, Colgate instituted a series of ideological political programs that dominate campus discourse – women’s studies, minority studies, peace studies, native American studies, and now gay and lesbian or “queer” studies along with environmental studies. They have created a whole parallel university to the majors based on branches of knowledge, such as natural science, social science, and humanities. The political majors institutionalize the ideology of left-wing identity politics and seek to “indoctrinate” students in a party line that few can oppose. Many students are cynical about the party line, but many others hardly know they are being indoctrinated: Are not “race, class, and gender” the only important issues to discuss?

A second disturbing development is the revised Core Curriculum that the Colgate faculty voted to begin this year. Its official title is “Crossing Boundaries” and its theme is what is fashionably called “multiculturalism” or global citizenship. While half the Core remains more or less the same, the new structure of five required courses is based on the premise that we should no longer teach that Western Civilization is a distinctive tradition of culture and learning – “Western” has become the new “F” word that may not be pronounced in the Core. The new politically correct view of Core is that one should not distinguish between Western and non-Western cultures because this is artificial construction that contributes to “us vs. them” or “clash of civilizations” mentality. But this point is not argued openly, it is just assumed as the new dogma. The result will be that our students will not learn anything about either Western or non-Western cultures because they will be told all cultures are merging and equally valid – producing a kind of multicultural mush, as one witty critic put it.

My view is that these academic trends reflect the arrogance of power because people are so used to the last 40 years of domination by the left in the universities that they simply assume the purpose of liberal arts education is political indoctrination of some kind. A surprising number of faculty, students, alumni, and parents are opposed, but the dissenters feel powerless to stop it – and so the dominance continues. The problem, to repeat, is that there are almost no checks and balances to the multicultural left in the universities – except for a few centers and institutes fostering “intellectual diversity” like the Center for Freedom and Western Civilization that I direct at Colgate (and similar centers at Princeton, Duke, Brown, and Hamilton College). Perhaps there is hope in the new campaign to have more accountability to the public by voting for the Board of Trustees or having an input in selecting a new Colgate President. But, the real change will have to occur among the faculty and their return to classical liberal arts education.

IV. Concluding Thoughts:

I began with observations about the arrogance of power as an inherent part of human nature that will always be present in politics and education. Since this drive will always exist, we need to be aware of it and to resist its worst tendencies. One of the new tendencies is that the intellectual arrogance of professors is spreading into the political world – something that used to be confined to universities. We can see in the push for Big Government – also known as the social welfare state or the nanny state and its new American version of Tsarist Socialism – the attitude “We know better than you how to run your life” because we are smarter and more enlightened than the ignorant masses.

This combination of intellectual and political arrogance is unhealthy for a democratic society. It undermines the core idea of freedom or liberty – it undermines the freedom of citizens who must take responsibility for their lives and the freedom of the mind among scholars in the university who must not be frightened by political correctness. My sense is that the American political system will correct itself because it has built-in checks and balances, but the universities are harder to correct because intellectual arrogance is more deeply entrenched and checks and balances are missing. I can only hope that students, parents, alumni, and new faculty will seek a genuine balance of ideas and restore the true spirit of liberal arts education – which is an education worthy of a free citizen and a free mind.
