



Violence Is Not Free Speech

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In American society, especially on college campuses, there is a dire misunderstanding about the nature of free speech. Progressive university administrators and students seem to believe that certain forms of free speech—such as expressing ideas that dissent from the mainstream narrative—are tantamount to violence, while also behaving as if violence itself—physical threats, harassment, and assault—somehow counts as "free speech" when directed at ideological foes. The upshot is clear: Civil discourse in America is in grave danger of ceasing to exist.

I witnessed this for myself on Tuesday night, when protestors at the University of Pittsburgh tried to shut down the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's (ISI) debate between Michael Knowles and Brad Polumbo (who stepped in after Cato's Deirdre McCloskey backed out) on the resolution: "Should Transgenderism be Regulated by Law?"

When we arrived, there were over 175 protestors surrounding the building where the debate was staged to take place. These protestors were chanting "F*** You Fascists" and burning an image of Michael Knowles in effigy. There were reports of multiple fires on the streets. According to the ISI student leader on campus, Dylan Mitchell, protestors lit fireworks and smoke bombs and threw them at students trying to enter the event. As the violence spread, local police declared a public safety emergency and shut down much of the campus. In the debate room, a protestor had snuck in before the event and intentionally vomited on the floor.

As I took the stage to give opening remarks, an explosion hit the outside of the building. I had to leave the stage and wait in the secure green room for police to issue an all-clear. During the debate, protestors assaulted three police officers outside the building. The police then urged us to end the event early. After the speakers were safely escorted out,

students and attendees were trapped in the venue for over 30 minutes because it was not safe for them to leave.

Downtown Pittsburgh skyline at night with the Fort Pitt Bridge spanning the Monongahela River to the right, and the Fort Duquesne Bridge spanning the Allegheny River to the left as photographed from Mount Washington in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on August 26, 2016. RAYMOND BOYD/GETTY IMAGES

The University of Pittsburgh is directly culpable for fostering a campus culture that is so deeply hostile to the free exchange of ideas. Administrators sent several campus-wide emails denouncing our speaker's views as "repugnant" and encouraging students to engage in a "peaceful counter-demonstration." But these protests turned violent, and students were prohibited from safely entering (and exiting) the venue to hear the debate.

In the weeks leading up to the debate, the media repeatedly raised the question of whether ISI was creating a dangerous environment for LGBT students by inviting Michael Knowles, a popular conservative podcaster, to debate the "forbidden" topic of what it means to be a man or a woman. Ironically, it was the protests organized by left-leaning students that created a dangerous environment, threatening the physical safety of conservative students and speakers.

Campuses are supposed to be places where students pursue truth and virtue through vigorous debate and discussion of ideas—an intellectual community where young people encounter unfamiliar viewpoints and learn to navigate life with intelligence, honesty, and courage. Instead, the culture on campuses like the University of Pittsburgh teaches students that free speech is deadly, and that viewpoints dissenting from left-wing orthodoxy justify a violent response.

Constitutionally protected free speech is the means to a free and virtuous society. It is a way for diverse groups to pursue the common good together, and to explore various assertions about what is best for society and for individuals. When students—or universities—use assault, harassment, threats, or violence to shut down differing viewpoints, they are not engaging in "free speech." They are merely using crass intimidation tactics to coerce their peers into upholding progressive pieties—at the threat of their own physical safety.

Free speech is not violence; and violence is not free speech. By blurring the distinction between the two, the protesters at the University of Pittsburgh undermined the foundations of academic life on campus and made a mockery of their own university's motto: *Veritas et Virtus*.