

OPINION

BAGLEY'S VIEW » "OPEN SEASON ON REASON"



EVERY UTAH REPUBLICAN CAMPAIGN AD

Recent protests, including those in Utah, point to a major culture shift.

On April 29, leaders at the University of Utah sent riot police against student-led protests. Hours earlier, the protesters had raised an encampment at Presidents' Circle in solidarity with the people of Palestine.

As a member of the U's faculty in writing & rhetoric studies, my research focuses on the ways that campus activism is talked about by both insiders and outsiders to higher education. From California to Texas to New York, recent discussions about student protests have been inflamed by violent police escalations like the one at the U.

The way our culture views and imagines today's college students greatly influences what actions done by or to them we'll find permissible. My research on the past 10 years of rhetoric around campus activism shows that "today's students" (even though they are very different in 2024 than they were in 2014) are made out to be coddled, entitled and overly sensitive.

Could this wave of encampments and clashes with police be a turning point in the way we think and talk of college students?

Clearly, university leaders no longer seem to buy the argument that students' sensitivity makes them too shy and weak to face conflict. At the U, a police force that included members of the University of Utah Police, Salt Lake City Police, Unified Police, Utah Highway Patrol and West Valley City Police convened to disband the encampment. The protest was peaceful, raising questions about why four outside police forces were called in to reinforce — or supplant — the campus police. When protestors see officers in riot gear, they know that they are risking discomfort, injury, arrest, legal charges and other disciplinary action for standing their ground against

genocide in Gaza. There is nothing weak-willed about these activists.

And yet, student activists can be called "sensitive" in one important way: They are deeply affected by the suffering of others. This sensitivity moves them to action to end their own complicity. The demands of student activists at the U include: disclosing and divesting from financial ties to Israel and firms profiting from the war in Gaza, granting amnesty to student organizers, and keeping police away from peaceful protests. When critics call students "too sensitive," they overlook or even diminish the way such sensitivity grounds us in our humanity.

Some object to the students' tactics, feeling that an encampment is too disruptive to be considered peaceful. Yet, occupation of public space — including campus lawns and buildings, is a time-honored American protest tactic. From the 1977 disability rights occupation of a federal building that lasted 25 days, to the 2011 Occupy movement (which gave rise to the viral image of a police officer indiscriminately pepper spraying seated student protesters at UC Davis), to the 2015 antiracist encampment at the University of Missouri that forced the school's president to resign, occupations are effective when and because they are both disruptive and peaceful.

Yes, the U told protesters they were prohibited from camping overnight. But back in October, the U encouraged overnight camping (on the same site of this week's protest) in advance of ESPN's College GameDay, an action that demonstrates how rules can be selectively enforced. Prioritizing obedience over listening and responding to the students' message is a choice, and it's one that could be made differently.

In the wake of the police's clash with

protesters, the University has said that they support free expression. A letter signed by members of the faculty and sent to President Taylor Randall aims to ensure that police presence is not used to intimidate or to chill free expression.

The mission of the U declares that the institution "fosters student success by preparing students from diverse backgrounds for lives of impact as leaders and citizens." We should not be surprised when our students put their leadership skills to use. We should welcome their impassioned civic engagement.

To be sure, faculty, administrators and the public at large will not always agree with the positions that students advocate for. But faculty and other leaders in the university are entrusted with the responsibility of defending our students' rights all the same.

All over the country, university leaders are grappling with the same crisis of values presented to President Randall. Some (like Wesleyan) have chosen not to confront protestors who have remained peaceful thus far. Some (like Northwestern, Brown and Evergreen) have reached agreements to deescalate the encampments and allow students to present arguments for divestment. The U does not have to lean on the police; we are capable of engaging and responding to our own students.

The wider public also has a decision to make. Will we accept a popular story that paints college students as sheltered and over-sensitive — and somehow at the same time, violent and threatening? Or will we recognize them for the courage of their commitment to democratic deliberation and justice, on their own campuses and around the world?

Kendall Gerdes, assistant professor of writing and rhetoric studies at the University of Utah, is the author of "Sensitive Rhetorics: Academic Freedom and Campus Activism."

The Salt Lake Tribune, Inc.

In its 154th year of keeping Utahns informed, now as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Board of Directors

Tessa Amerson
Randy Dwyer
Fred Esplin
Jorge Fierro
Sarah George
Tom Love, Chair
Ashish Patel
Dave Patel
James E. Shelley

Executive Editor

Lauren Gustus

Chief Revenue Officer

Chris Stegman

Editorial Board

Pat Bagley
Albina Gonder
Lauren Gustus
Tom Love, Chair
Dave Patel
George Pyle
James E. Shelley

Volunteer Editor

Lauren Weber

Past publishers »

John F. Fitzpatrick
(1924-1960)
John W. Gullivan
(1960-1983)
Jerry O'Brien
(1983-1994)
Dominic Welch
(1994-2002)
William Dean Singleton
(2002-2013)
Terry Orme
(2013-2016)
Paul Huntsman
(2016-2020)

THE PUBLIC FORUM

email: letters@sltrib.com

Skewed representation

I'm writing in response to the Tribune article, "Environmentalists excluded from speaking at congressional hearing in southern Utah," published April 24.

I was at the April 22 field hearing organized by the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, including Mr. Celeste Mayo. I was not permitted to speak, but here's what I would have said if I had the opportunity.

The hearing titled, "Empowering local voices and stopping federal overreach to improve the management of Utah's public lands," was an intentionally skewed representation of "local voices." The five witnesses invited to speak by the subcommittee supported the Northern Corridor Highway. There were no voices on stage that represented my vote of no highway through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area.

I live in Green Springs, and I say that the Northern Corridor Highway is a bad idea. I'm asking Rep. Mayo to listen to my voice and many others in my neighborhood and in Washington County.

Many people in Utah's District 2 do not want this highway.

The Northern Corridor will affect our property values, our neighborhood's health and our family's safety. This is not a joke! These are the types of things that Rep. Mayo is tasked with ensuring. The word conserve (e.g., National Conservation Area) means: "to protect (something, especially an environment) or culturally important place or thing) from harm or destruction." The land in question needs to be conserved; the title is self-explanatory. There are other alternatives for this highway that can, and need to be used.

I am a local voice, and this voice is saying no Northern Corridor Highway.

Ken Bouvier

Washington, Utah

Believing tabloid stories

I'm not at all surprised by the tactics used by the National Enquirer as detailed by David Pecker during his testimony at Trump's trial. Their "catch and kill" behaviors and knowingly publishing false stories are reprehensible, but something I always suspected.

It occurs to me, however, that these tactics would not affect the public's opinions without a huge audience buying up these newspapers and believing what is reported in them.

It would be nice if Pecker's testimony made people less likely to believe tabloid stories in the future, but I am not hopeful.

Nancy Cantor

Salt Lake City

There really is a deep state

I read with interest the recent Tribune article about fringe politics and the participation of the Utah Eagle Forum in some of those activities here in Utah. The article spoke with disdain about the Forum's emphasis on the "deep state."

It's easy to disparage the idea of the "deep state" because, as often, the misinformed insist that it refers to virtually anything they do not like, e.g., liberals. That paints with far too broad a brush, of course, but the reality is that there really is a "deep state."

I know because I used to be a part of it, and it consists of the federal government civil service bureaucracy. Many of the employees in that bureaucracy, even at fairly low levels in the hierarchy, wield enormous power, and their civil service status largely protects them from being removed — even when serious mistakes are made.

During my early employment with the Office of Chief Counsel for the IRS in Washington, D.C., for example, I had fairly unrestricted discretion to determine which of our losing cases would be appealed to a higher court, and I thus had substantial power to shape tax policies for the entire nation, alas.

There are no doubt serious difficulties with this approach, but I have no good ideas for any solution.

It does seem clear, however, that the deep state will live on.

Thomas H. Thompson

Salt Lake City