



Essay by Thomas D. Klingensteiner

A GOLF STORY



IN HIS CONVOCATION ADDRESS AT THE start of this school year, Barry Mills, the president of Bowdoin College, raised an important concern facing all elite liberal arts colleges, though he spoke specifically of his own school. A number of parents, he said, are unwilling to send their children to Bowdoin or to its sister schools because they are perceived to be too liberal, too out of touch with mainstream America.

To his credit, Mr. Mills acknowledged this concern as legitimate. Bowdoin, he said, would benefit from a greater "diversity of views," though, as he candidly admitted, he was at a loss as to how to make it happen.

Perhaps I can help. He didn't exactly ask for my help, but he inadvertently provided me with some clues to the answers that elude him when, near the beginning of his address, he told a golf story...about me.

Mills's story is meant to illustrate the general problem of why certain conservative parents are unwilling to support Bowdoin:

Then there was my day on the golf course a few weeks ago up north.... I was playing really well (at least, really well for me) and my partner in the match was very happy. At the tenth hole, I hit a fantastic drive that travels about 220 yards. I'm about 180 yards from the green, and as I take my backswing with my six-iron, my opponent announces mid-swing:

"I would never support Bowdoin—you are a ridiculous liberal school that brings all the wrong students to campus for all the wrong reasons."

Zing! My shot goes directly sideways into the woods. I will spare you the golf details, but right in the middle of my next backswing, the guy declares:

"And I would never support Bowdoin or Williams (his alma mater) because of all your misplaced and misguided diversity efforts."

At this, I feel myself turning bright red. I swing wildly, nearly hitting my partner in the head with the ball as it squirted to the right. I lost the hole, but no worries, I'm a bit competitive and so was my partner. We won the match and the money. But I walked off the course in despair and with deep concern.

Not a very flattering portrait. Mr. Mills doesn't mention my good name, so there's no need to defend it. But it seems to me his rendition of our conversation reveals something important about why he doesn't have the answer to the lack of intellectual diversity at Bowdoin.

SO I TAKE THE LIBERTY AND THE TROUBLE of correcting the record. Taking the most serious charge first, I did not interrupt his back swing—not twice, not once. I made no reference to Bowdoin at all—much

less the rather insulting remark attributed to me.

The actual scene, as I recollect it, opens, pleasantly enough, on a golf course in Maine, where I played in a foursome that included Mr. Mills, whom I had never met. Over the first nine holes I learned, among other things, that he had taken up the game of golf as part of his fundraising duties, and that he had been a corporate lawyer and a Bowdoin trustee on a presidential search committee that eventually persuaded him to take the job. I don't remember telling him much about myself, but, for the record, I am a Wall Streeter, a resident of the Upper West Side of Manhattan where I find plenty of opportunity to examine the workings of the liberal mind, a philanthropist of moderate capacity with an interest primarily in issues of American identity, and a grateful, though parsimonious, alumnus of Williams College.

This last item Mills apparently had learned elsewhere because on the tenth hole, he asked why it was that I did not give generously to my alma mater. I told him that Williams is, by my lights, too liberal. By way of example I explained my disapproval of "diversity" as it generally has been implemented on college campuses: too much celebration of racial and ethnic difference (particularly as it applies to blacks), and not enough celebration of our common American identity. I told him that I wholeheartedly support reaching out to those who have traditionally been excluded but



that I prefer to call such outreach “inclusion” (not “diversity”). He pushed back some, making clear that we were not, as they say, on the same page. But the exchange, which occurred between shots over a matter of perhaps two or three minutes, was all quite civil.

In what I took as an attempt to find common ground, he then raised the controversy surrounding (former) Harvard president Larry Summers’s speculation that innate ability might explain at least part of the absence of women in the highest reaches of science and math. Mills seemed to expect me to agree that Summers deserved the public thrashing he received. I did not. I said that Summers deserved a respectful hearing. Mills forcefully rejected this claim saying, in effect, that Summers’s contention was based on junk science. Because his dismissive certainty did not encourage a reply, I moved the conversation to less contentious matters. The friendly golf game continued. That’s all there was to it.

OVIOUSLY, BETWEEN MILLS’S DRAMATIC account and my mundane one there is a chasm. Did he embellish for dramatic effect? Embellishment, I readily concede, is a legitimate literary device. But even if the story were consciously embellished, its meaning is not much changed: he merely told his Convocation audience what I effectively said. Did he make up the story out of whole cloth, using a detail or two from our golf encounter? Also fair play. But that wouldn’t change the essential meaning, either; it would only mean he was describing what he *imagines* conservatives like me say. For what I want to make of the story it makes no difference which is the case. (But whatever the case, he should get a better dialogue writer. Does anybody talk like that?)

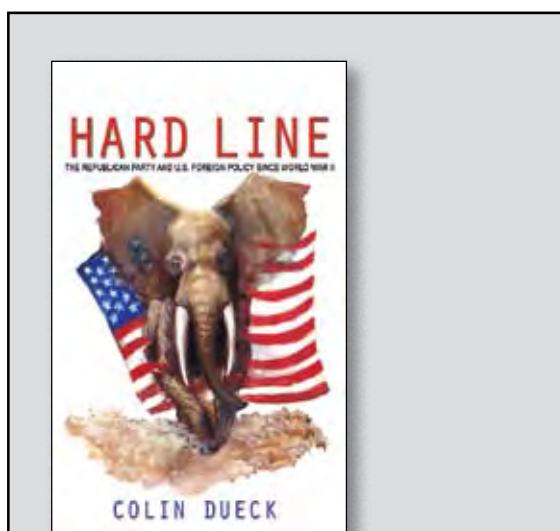
He had me saying that Bowdoin “brings all the wrong students to campus for all the wrong reasons.” Who exactly are these “wrong students?” One can’t be absolutely positive, but in the context of a discussion on diversity the almost unavoidable conclusion is that the reference is to blacks and other minorities. I cannot quite fathom what he means by “all the wrong reasons,” but perhaps the sentence can be translated: “you are a ridiculous liberal school that admits all these unqualified blacks based on quotas.” The second sentence, where he had me objecting to “misguided diversity efforts,” seems to point in the same direction. It appears that Mr. Mills’s Neanderthal golf opponent objects to so many blacks on campus.

Mr. Mills confessed he was angry at what I said (he turned “bright red”). And the angry words he put into my mouth confirm it. They

reflected his anger, not mine. He didn’t like my views, so he turned me into a backswing interrupting, Bowdoin-hating boor who wants to return to the segregated days of Jim Crow.

Mills then warned his audience not to dismiss folks like this golfing “guy”: “My guess,” he said, “is that some among you think what I describe is a non-issue. It is my overreaction to this ‘Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin moment’ in our history.” I hardly need to observe that by making me a racist (or at the very least a buffoon) he did just what he warned his audience against: he dismissed me. Similarly, on the golf course he had dismissed Larry Summers, who had advanced a highly qualified, tentative suggestion based on solid (even if not airtight) evidence. Note also how he took for granted that the Tea Party (Palin and Beck) is nothing more than a momentary aberration in an otherwise healthy republic. Would it be uncharitable to suggest that, in a speech calling for more sensitivity to conservative views, he might have shown some? Overall, I take Mills’s golf tale to be a retraction of his stated desire to increase the diversity of views on campus. After all, how can Bowdoin reasonably be expected to accommodate the unsavory views of the unsporting jerk he described? Mills proceeded in this retracting fashion throughout his address: first saying that the lack of diversity of views on campus is a problem, then on second thought concluding that it wasn’t really a problem after all. A few more examples will suffice.

At one point in his address he conceded that Bowdoin indeed is, “in the main,” liberal. This, he admitted with what looks to be commendable directness, was borne out by a study of “elite liberal arts colleges” (he was mistaken about the study’s universe but no matter). If we assume that the categories used in the study (“liberal” and “conservative”) translate roughly into Democrat and Republican, then the most reasonable inference from his presentation of the study is that about 30% of the Bowdoin faculty vote Republican. But after a bit of sleuthing, I found that the actual figure is closer to 4%—making Bowdoin not “in the main” liberal but almost antiseptically so. Here again Mills acknowledged the problem of liberal bias but then issued a retraction. As an aside, I suspect that most alumni and parents don’t realize just how much the college leans left. And I further suspect, here taking my cue from my upper west side friends, that even liberal Bowdoinites would regret such ideological uniformity, on the grounds that it deprived students of the intellectual diversity necessary for the development of critical thinking.



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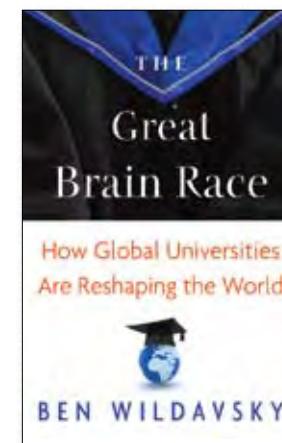
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Near the end of his address, Mills affirmed one of the purposes of a Bowdoin education:

Let me be explicit that, in my view, a Bowdoin education is at the heart of this nation's democratic traditions and central to our democratic future. We should reject with confidence any assertion to the contrary.

I am pleased to say that I'm with him in thinking American college education ought to preserve "the nation's democratic traditions." But I reserve full-throated approval until I learn what he considers these to be. He says nothing in his own words, leaving it entirely to the influential Martha Nussbaum, a distinguished professor in the University of Chicago's Law School, Divinity School, and philosophy department, to speak for him. After quoting at length from her most recent book, he said, "Simply stated, this [referring to the Nussbaum quotes] is what a Bowdoin education is about—the preservation of our tenets of democracy."

Having no detailed knowledge of Ms. Nussbaum, I read two of her books, including the one Mills cited, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010). I found that she proposes radical surgery on the American republic. She would retain America's political superstructure, but remove its soul (i.e., its identity and character) because it is here that patriotism lives. And patriotism, according to Nussbaum, is the primary source of hatred and conflict in the world. She therefore insists that a person's primary allegiance be not to America, but to the community of human beings.

Whatever the merits of her views, one would be hard pressed to characterize them as part of "our nation's democratic traditions" or the "tenets of our democracy." It seems that Professor Nussbaum, not *The Federalist* or Abraham Lincoln, is Bowdoin's guide to the nation's "democratic future." Is it unreasonable of me to doubt whether Mr. Mills really means what he says about increasing "the diversity of views" on campus? Is this not still another retraction?

Wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt (perhaps Mills was not all that familiar with Nussbaum's views), I took a look at Bowdoin's American history offerings. I am

sorry to have to report they are right out of Nussbaum's playbook. There are any number of courses that deal with some group aspect of America, but virtually none that deals with America as a whole. For example, there is African-American history from 1619 to 1865 and from 1865 to the present, but there is not a comparable sequence on America. Every course is social or cultural history that looks at the world through the prism of race, class, and gender. Even a course on the environment (offered in the history department) "examines the links between ecology and race, class, and gender." Do Bowdoin alumni know their alma mater offers not one history course in American political, military, diplomatic, constitutional, or intellectual history, and nothing at all on the American Founding or the Constitution; that the one Civil War course is essentially African-American history (it is offered also in Africana Studies); and that there are more courses on gay and lesbian subjects than on American history? Is it possible this is one reason why some conservatives are disinclined to send their children to Bowdoin? Mr. Mills did not inquire.

THOUGH MILLS ADMITTED HE DIDN'T HAVE any answers to the problem of liberal bias, he did offer an "idea" (as he put it), a rather obvious one at that: more conservative professors. (He didn't actually say "conservative," but clearly that's what he meant.) But then he issued another of his retractions:

There should never be a time when we have a political litmus test for faculty or even inquire about political persuasion. In my view, this is simply not relevant to the intellectual enterprise of the College.

Yet deciding to hire more conservative professors would be no more of a litmus test than deciding to hire, say, a social historian rather than a political one. And what could be more "relevant" than increasing intellectual diversity, arguably the most important thing on a campus that is committed to freeing young minds from prejudice and bias? Bowdoin had the resolve to diversify the campus racially. With similar resolve it could diversify the campus intellectually.

Mr. Mills does not have the answers to the problem of liberal bias at Bowdoin because he's not really convinced there is a problem. When he summarily dismissed me, the Tea Party movement, and Larry Summers, or reflexively embraced Nussbaum, or grossly understated the number of liberal faculty at Bowdoin, he demonstrated an unwillingness to take seriously the conservative perspective. This, I propose, is why he was unable to see any way to address the problem that he posed.

I have been hard on Mr. Mills, but, I hope, justly hard. I have done it for a purpose: to encourage him and the Bowdoin family to take seriously their goal of increasing the diversity of views on campus. Mr. Mills really does deserve credit for raising the issue. Now he ought to follow through. I would like to offer a helping hand. I realize that Bowdoin doesn't need my money or my advice (which I'm sure he's heard enough of)—still I mean the offer most sincerely.

Most of my conservative friends will, with good reason, doubt the efficacy of my effort. Most have decided that it's impossible to correct the liberal tilt in the academy. Some, therefore, have decided to build and support conservative colleges. Perhaps that is the best we can do, but it is not ideal insofar as it seems to promote the notion that there can be no honest inquiry, no objective search for the truth. There are only warring perspectives, like warring news stations.

Other conservatives have tried to influence the elite schools by giving money in exchange for a more conservative curriculum. Here too the urge is understandable, but are conservatives really comfortable endorsing the principle that he who has the gold controls the curriculum? For the sake of America and the liberal arts, elite colleges need to reform themselves. From the inside, led by those who understand that their right to speak freely implies my right to do so, and further understand that our freedom, our very capacity for self government, depends, in significant part, on the liberal arts.

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