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The Fall of Summers: Lawrence Summers Never Won Over Harvard's Faculty, and That Cost Him His Job

By [ROBIN WILSON](#)

Academe reverberated this week with the news that Lawrence H. Summers had resigned as president of Harvard University.

People inside Harvard and out wondered what the episode said about the question of whether an outspoken president can ever lead the nation's most famous university. And they wondered about the power afforded faculty members at Harvard. For in the end, it was the professors' vociferous complaints that brought down Mr. Summers.

Mr. Summers acknowledged that it was "a rift" with professors that led him to call it quits. "This is a day of mixed emotions for me," he said in a teleconference with reporters on Tuesday afternoon, noting that he could no longer withstand the "rancor that has emerged in parts of the faculty."

In conversations with academics, two tales of Mr. Summers's short tenure as president emerge. One is of a brash, imperious leader who ran roughshod over the nation's most-lauded faculty and got what he deserved.

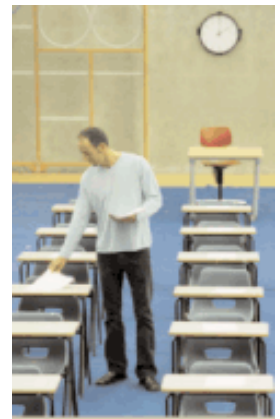
"It is a shame that somebody with his many gifts was unable to pull it off," says Robert H. Atwell, president emeritus of the American Council on Education. "But I don't just blame a recalcitrant faculty. In a place like Harvard, you can't just announce your vision -- you've got to sell it. He did this to himself."

The other is a tale of how a small group of professors, feeling threatened by the president's hard questions, conspired to force him out.

"This is a victory for stagnation, complacency, and political correctness," asserts Harvey C. Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard.

No More Hip-Hop

Undergraduates seem to adore Mr. Summers. They loved it



"Far too many students are not prepared to succeed."

—The Business Roundtable

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"Our nation is in a college readiness crisis."

—American College Testing Program

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when he joined them for pizza in Harvard's dormitories and autographed dollar bills that bore his signature from his time as U.S. treasury secretary in the Clinton administration. An editorial in *The Harvard Crimson* on Wednesday lamented Mr. Summers's decision to step down.

But the acrimony between President Summers and the faculty, particularly in the arts and sciences, was brewing from nearly the beginning of his presidency, in 2001. The president managed to offend professors early on by suggesting that they spend more time on scholarly work and less on outside activities that he deemed frivolous. One of his targets was Cornel West, a prominent professor of Afro-American studies, who was so offended when the president questioned the wisdom of a hip-hop recording he had made that he left for Princeton University.

In January 2005, Mr. Summers outraged professors when he publicly posited that perhaps relatively few women worked in science and mathematics because women lack the innate ability to achieve in those fields. The remarks prompted the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to pass an unprecedented no-confidence vote in the president's leadership last March.

Mr. Summers apologized over and over for his remarks about women, and Harvard's seven-member governing board stood by him throughout the controversy. He acknowledges now that he had hoped to repair the damage he had done.

"I worked very hard over the last year to build bridges to meet members of the faculty partway on issues of concern, on issues of control," Mr. Summers told reporters this week.

But by then, Mr. Summers had ruffled faculty feathers in other ways. He suggested that professors were giving students too many A's, and he argued that Harvard should allow military recruiters onto the campus.

Then, this month, the faculty revolted again when William C. Kirby, the respected dean of arts and sciences, resigned after being criticized by Mr. Summers for the slow pace of curricular reform at the university. Professors protested that the resignation indicated more about the president's mismanagement than about any problems with Mr. Kirby's performance.

Early in February, at a meeting of the Faculty Council, professors of arts and sciences told Mr. Summers that they planned to hold another no-confidence vote later in the month. At that meeting, professors say, no one spoke in support of the president.

Instead, professors raised even more questions about his leadership, including his close relationship with Andrei Shleifer, a fellow Harvard economist who had been sued by the federal government, which accused him of conspiracy to defraud the U. S. government in the course of his work to overhaul Russia's economy. Harvard has spent tens of millions of dollars to defend Mr. Shleifer and settle the lawsuit, yet the university has never disciplined him.

Mr. Summers, who started teaching in Harvard's economics department in 1983, taught Mr. Shleifer when he was an undergraduate there, professors say. The two have been close friends ever since. Mr. Summers told professors that he had recused himself from the university's investigation of Mr. Shleifer, but people at Harvard later said that he had asked administrators to protect his friend.

"Everyone believes that because of the friendship between them," says one senior professor, "Harvard ended up paying a lot."

Neither Mr. Summers's chief spokesman, nor the president himself, responded to *The Chronicle's* request for comment on his resignation, and the faculty's various complaints about him.

Campus Bully?

Even before the most recent Faculty Council meeting, professors at Harvard say they had come to believe that Mr. Summers was ill-equipped for the job. It wasn't only what he said, they argued, but how he said it. "If people got in his way, he wasn't interested in hearing their perspective," says Howard Gardner, a professor of education and cognition. "He didn't understand that around a university, getting angry, making veiled threats, or acting deviously was not going to be accepted."

The dissatisfaction with Mr. Summers was widespread, says Mr. Gardner. "I'm really annoyed that people think that it is just a bunch of pinkos on the arts-and-sciences faculty," he says. "There is unhappiness in several of the university's schools." As a professor in Harvard's Graduate School of Education, Mr. Gardner is not in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. He notes that while he heard many stories of the president's vitriol over the years, he was never a target himself.

One senior professor who was a target says that when Mr. Summers became president, several faculty members were "looking forward to having a very strong leader who would push Harvard forward." But it quickly became clear, the professor says, that Mr. Summers's agenda was "ill-planned" and based

on his "superficial understanding" of most issues.

"He was a not-doing-his-homework kind of guy," says the professor, who insisted on anonymity in part because Mr. Summers is still president through June and will assume a powerful faculty post at Harvard after that. "He thought, I'm so smart, I'm so arrogant, and I can walk in and assess the situation, and it'll be fine."

As a result, the professor says, the president frequently made "outrageous mistakes" in holding forth on matters with which he was unfamiliar. For example, during meetings with outside experts to assess whether Harvard should hire a particular scholar, President Summers "would pontificate with a popular-magazine-style knowledge of the field and spend the whole time talking," rather than listening to the experts, says the professor.

Mr. Summers relished his role as campus bully, the professor asserts, echoing stories told by other faculty members. "I was at one of these meetings, and he got so out of control bullying me that the dean just took his hand and put it on Larry's arm and said, 'Larry, stop. Calm down.'"

In the end, says Mr. Gardner, it was not one or two incidents that led to Mr. Summers's demise. "There is no single smoking gun," he says, "but innumerable brush fires, and eventually that becomes a forest fire."

'Parochial Interests'

Other professors at Harvard, however, say it is no coincidence that some of those who complained the loudest about the president were in departments that he valued least. The fights were partly about professors' protecting their own interests, says Claudia Goldin, a professor of economics there. "There is turf protection, and part of that is status-quo protection," she says. Unlike his predecessor, Neil L. Rudenstine, Mr. Summers didn't have "at his command ... 250 words he could use to make people feel that what they were doing was the most important thing in the world," she says.

Lawrence F. Katz, another professor of economics, agrees. "I do worry that if every little group is allowed to push for their own interests," Harvard could pay a high price, he says.

In a letter to the Harvard community that Mr. Summers released on Tuesday, he referred to that problem. "We cannot maintain pre-eminence in intellectual fields if we remain constrained by artificial boundaries of departments and schools," he wrote, arguing that professors need to "transcend parochial interests in support of broader university goals."

Mr. Mansfield, the professor of government (who has long railed against grade inflation at Harvard), describes faculty members who clashed with Mr. Summers as "the feminist left, plus other sympathizers who didn't like Larry's academic conservatism, his putting the brakes on affirmative action and diversity, on grade inflation, his intent to balance the faculty's political partisanship a little more, and what he was doing to relieve Harvard's hostility to the military and ROTC."

In his teleconference with reporters, Mr. Summers acknowledged that his prodding had rubbed professors the wrong way. "I sought to challenge and to always ask whether there were better ways," he said. "The only bad reason for doing something was that we had always done it that way before ... But I think ... that was threatening." In retrospect, he said, "it may well have been that I could more successfully have advanced the university's interests by showing more reverence for its traditions."

Despite his apparent contrition over his clashes with the faculty, some wonder what Mr. Summers's downfall says about higher education's appetite for a president who makes hard judgments and says what he thinks. "When he began to look at his faculty and investigate their achievements -- were they doing the job well? -- this was thought to be an outrage in and of itself," says Donald Kagan, a professor of classics and history at Yale University who, as dean of Yale College from 1989 to 1992, frequently clashed with professors there.

Mr. Kagan says the events at Harvard show that "the faculty has come to think that nobody has the right to tell it anything or express opinions of which they do not approve, and they need to be let alone to do what they like." Academic freedom, he says, "is for them and nobody else."

When presidents say or do things that campus constituencies do not particularly like, presidents should take those viewpoints into account and, in many cases, respond, says David J. Skorton, president of the University of Iowa, who was recently appointed as the new president of Cornell University. But sometimes, he adds, the president needs to take a stand, no matter whom it offends.

"The university is built around the people at the university," he says. "It's rude not to be responsive. Presidents who are open and honest need to make it clear under what situations there is healthy input into a decision and make it clear when a decision has to be made regardless of pushback."

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, says the Harvard Corporation will have to work hard to change the perception that what has happened at the

university means there is no room for a president who wants to make significant reforms. The governing board must make clear that it "will seek out and stand firmly behind leaders who ask hard questions about how well faculty are doing their jobs, who challenge faculty complacency and intellectual rigidity," she says.

Others, though, simply believe that Mr. Summers did not understand the parameters of the job.

"My analysis is, just as there is no such thing as the pope making an offhand comment -- he's always the pope -- I would say the president of a major university can never speak other than ex officio," says Robert M. O'Neil, who directs the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression, at the University of Virginia.

Mr. Summers failed to realize that the academic freedom he enjoyed as an economist -- for example, to say what he thought about women's abilities in science and mathematics -- was different from the academic freedom he enjoyed as Harvard's president, says Mr. O'Neil.

"Right down to the end," he says, "I'm not sure that Larry Summers ever really appreciated this distinction."

*Paul Fain and
Piper Fogg
contributed to
this article.*

WHO'S NEXT?

This week several search-firm consultants and sitting presidents speculated on who might make the shortlist to replace Lawrence H. Summers as president of Harvard University. The names of other Ivy League presidents were mentioned, including Shirley M. Tilghman, at Princeton University, and Amy Gutmann, at the University of Pennsylvania. Following are among the names that came up most frequently:

Lawrence S. Bacow President of Tufts University since 2001

Mr. Bacow, 54, a former chancellor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is a known quantity to officials at Harvard. At Tufts he has gained cultlike status for his morning runs with students, faculty members, and parents, an activity that allows him to carry on casual conversations with different constituencies important to the university. He has also been successful in fund raising. Tufts recently received a \$100-million

gift that will be used to make profitable "microloans" in the developing world. And he has the all-important Harvard credentials: a J.D. from Harvard Law School and a master's degree and Ph.D. from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Still, it is unclear whether Harvard's seven-member governing board, the Harvard Corporation, will want to hire a candidate from a less-prestigious institution nearby.

Lee C. Bollinger

President of Columbia University since 2002

Mr. Bollinger, 59, a former dean of the University of Michigan Law School, was a finalist for the Harvard job when Mr. Summers got it. While he was considered by some at the time to be the leading candidate, it was speculated that his lack of Harvard credentials may have weighed against him. Another big question is whether Harvard would poach a president from a fellow Ivy League institution. Mr. Bollinger has had a tough year, negotiating a dispute that arose over allegations that professors in Columbia's department of Middle Eastern studies had intimidated pro-Israel, Jewish students.

Robert C. Dynes

President of the University of California system since 2003

Mr. Dynes, 63, was chancellor of the system's San Diego campus for seven years. Before that he was senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at San Diego. He is a physicist and an expert on semiconductors who entered academe after more than two decades of working in research positions at AT&T Bell Laboratories. Mr. Dynes has been under fire recently from state lawmakers over the compensation paid to top employees in the system, so he may welcome a change, especially to a private institution.

Drew Gilpin Faust

Dean of Harvard's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study since 2001

Ms. Faust, 58, is a well-known and popular Civil War historian. She spent her career at the University of Pennsylvania before taking over as founding dean of the Radcliffe Institute, which was created when Radcliffe College, a women's college, merged with Harvard in 1999. Probably one of the leading internal candidates, she helped create two panels to develop proposals to aid the advancement of female faculty members at Harvard in the wake of Mr. Summers's controversial comments about innate differences between the abilities of men and women. As a dean, she lacks the broad administrative experience of a sitting president. If chosen, she would be Harvard's first female president.

Ruth J. Simmons

President of Brown University since 2001

If picked, Ms. Simmons, 60, would be Harvard's first black and

first female president. While her selection would very likely be popular with several constituencies, it is questionable whether she would want to leave Brown in the middle of a major capital campaign, with a goal of raising \$1.4-billion by 2010. Unlike some other candidates, she does have a Harvard credential: She earned her Ph.D. there in 1973 in Romance languages and literature. As associate dean of the faculty at Princeton University, she led its black-studies program and lured scholars including Toni Morrison and Cornel West, who later went to Harvard and had a bitter dispute with Mr. Summers that led to his eventual return to Princeton.

Mark S. Wrighton
Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis since 1995

Like other candidates, Mr. Wrighton, 56, has a Boston connection. He was provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for five years before moving to take over at Washington University. There he has overseen the completion of a \$1.55-billion capital campaign and taken a strong interest in international education. Last fall Mr. Wrighton announced the formation of an education-and-research program that will link the university with 15 higher-education institutions in East and Southeast Asia. He has also been active in national higher-education organizations, including as chairman of the Business-Higher Education Forum, which brings together leaders from the business sector and higher education to develop common positions on issues where their interests overlap. Some question whether Harvard would venture to the Midwest for a president

Source: *Chronicle*

reporting

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [A Quiet Day After: Harvard Returns to Business as Usual, With Friends, Foes, and Summers Himself Back at Work](#) (2/23/2006)
- [Summers Says Faculty 'Rancor' Led Him to Quit Harvard Presidency, as Professors Wonder What Comes Next](#) (2/22/2006)
- [Harvard President to Face Second Vote of No Confidence Amid Renewed Calls for His Resignation](#) (2/17/2006)
- [Harvard's President Wonders Aloud About Women in Science and Math](#) (1/28/2005)

- [Lawrence Summers and His Tough Questions](#) (4/26/2002)

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