

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and it is an enormous privilege and pleasure to have with us as our guest, Dr. George Will. We're here at the Palm Beach Synagogue, where Dr. Will is going to address the community on matters of political philosophy, and we're very much looking forward to that. For over 50 years, Dr. Will, whose career began as a university professor, has been an educator for the nation at large with 16 books and over 6,000 newspaper columns published. His Washington Post columns, familiar to I am sure the whole Higher Ed Now audience, are syndicated in nearly 450 newspapers.

He's been a panelist on ABC's This Week with David Brinkley and This Week with George Stephanopoulos, and a panelist on Meet the Press. He's the winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the Bradley Award, the Champion of Liberty Award, and the Ernie Pyle Lifetime Achievement Award among many others. Dr. Will, it is just such an honor and privilege to have you with us.

I'd like to jump right into the current crisis in higher education. In your December 13th op-ed, which is titled "Cheering Hamas on campus, too uneducated to grasp how grotesque that is", you excoriate, I'm quoting here, "the moral cretins in academic cocoons". So, the question I'd like to start talking about is, "How did American universities that once could indisputably be called the envy of the world descend to this level of intellectual and moral degradation?"

**George Will:**

That's a question of national urgency, because it took the Western world 800 years to evolve through thickets of ecclesiastical and political interference, the great research universities. It turns out you can kick that all away in a generation by getting the wrong people in charge of the institutions who then reproduce themselves through the tenure system. This can be irreversible for that very reason that the people who are the problem have a group that can't be pried off these institutions. The problem today in our country is that while we complain about elites and elitism, we don't have any real elites. Elite normally means someone of exemplary distinction and virtue. Elites are a minority and one that society's glad to have.

Today's elites aren't elite. That's our principle problem at this point. We don't have exemplary people in high places. Higher education today is run by uneducated people. We always talk about prestigious universities and academically superior universities. What most prestigious universities do, and I'm a Princeton PhD and a former Princeton trustee, so I'm biting some of the hands that have fed me. Part of our problem is it seems to me that when we say highly educated, we mean expensively credentialed. People are paying enormous amounts of money rationally in a sense to buy the momentum that a Princeton, Harvard, Yale degree can give them, but it's perfectly possible to emerge from these universities unscathed by education.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Of course, we can see that reflected in something as dare I say perfunctory as the core curriculum. I don't mean to in any way suggest that's not important, but just a glance at what is required now as opposed to what used to be required is breathtaking.

**George Will:**

You can get an English degree from Yale without reading Shakespeare. You can graduate from many American colleges and universities without ever having taken an American history course. I have said over and over again that when I'm dictator of America, the only permissible college major is going to be

history. I'm just so tired of having to reinvent the wheel every generation by teaching people the humility that comes from studying history properly taught. Properly taught history says, "Look at what other people have surmounted. Look at the desperate ambiguities of the situations they were born into. Think of a southerner in the 1850s." Instead today, history teaches arrogance.

People read history and say, "How could they have been so much inferior to me?" History is used by someone who can say, "Well, I'm only an adjunct professor of media and gender studies at Siwash Community College, but I'm a superior person to Winston Churchill, because I am smart about the liberation of India and he wasn't." People sip from history to slake their thirst for ersatz distinction.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

I think about that line from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones", and wonder what a century from now people will say about these same people who feel so morally superior. The term you used, humility, is so very, very appropriate that it's easy to judge. It's much harder to have that sense of moral terror about how one day history will judge us.

**George Will:**

As Lincoln said in one of his great speeches to one of his northern audiences, do not look down upon, do not judge and disparage our southern fellow citizens, because they were born into this. If you and I had been, how different would we be? It takes an enormously large man to think that way.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

I remember an address that the late Bernard Bailyn gave about the really awful untoward things that happened to the American Indians as we settled this country, and I loved the way he put it without making any excuses for the pilgrims as we call them. Try to imagine you can't do it. The cold, the starvation, the stench, the feeling of indebtedness, of real financial indebtedness that weighed upon these people and then try for a moment to put yourself in that position, which is not for a moment to ignore the moral failures that they had. I've always carried that with me, which is not to become a relativist in any sense of the word, but to do my best to understand what these things were like.

**George Will:**

These moral dilemmas that people had is one thing, but there's another. I mean Americans today have a ridiculously low pain threshold. I just traveled from Washington, D.C. to Palm Beach in two hours. We are the descendants of people who walked to Oregon, who carved sod huts literally out of the Hilux in Nebraska where the wind howls 12 months a year. We have no idea how tough the people were who made our soft lives possible.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Yes, being the child of people who grew up during the Depression, I think about that all the time. Well, I want to move to a topic that flows out of the degradation of our universities. What are the admonitions, indeed the exhortations you would give to boards of trustees? They hold the power. They often ignore that. They often ignore their duty and their responsibility as fiduciaries. What's the message you'd like to share with them?

**George Will:**

Well, they have to assert themselves and they should not count on the donors to do it. Particularly at the most prestigious university, Harvard has an endowment of \$51 billion. No donor, however wealthy, can threaten Harvard and say, "I'll close my wallet." I'll say, "So what?" Princeton's is \$34 billion in on a per-student basis. It's probably the highest in the country. Princeton in some ways is a hedge fund with a library. I mean this is just so the idea that financial pressure can be put on the elite universities is fanciful, but trustees and alumni are not powerless. First of all, they can embarrass and that's a good thing to do. They can embarrass an institution when the institution becomes wavered and they should.

Part of the problem is that the accretion of bureaucracy in the universities now about twice as many administrators as faculty are parasitic off the higher education system and most of these are there to massage the students and make sure they have a nice, as we say, college experience, climbing walls in the Mongolian barbecue in the student union and all the other essentials of academic life. As this bureaucracy of student management and student cossetting grows, the trustees might understandably feel that they're marginalized but they're not. They can push back by saying, "We are the defenders of the university against this new class of bureaucrats who are parasitic off the scholarly enterprise themselves, not a particle of scholarship in them."

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Truth be told, a board could indeed pass a resolution to redirect and repurpose the funds that get poured into their DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion, now it's DEIB, and belonging offices and say for example, "That's all going into need-based scholarships." They could with a board resolution say, "It is shamelessness for us to graduate students without requiring at least one foundational course in American history. That's going to change. We're going to repurpose funding." Is that so hard? Apparently, it is. Certainly, a number of college presidents have demurred and said, "Well, the faculty wouldn't go along with that", but the board is in charge.

**George Will:**

The board is in charge, and the board should understand that after the trustees have had the thrill of being named trustees, then there's work to be done. I'm afraid for many of them, it stops with the thrill of being trustees, because they want to be collegial. What we need is less collegiality in higher education.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

I do remember this from my days as Vice President of Academic Affairs and Research at University of Colorado, the anxiety that the regents might in a public meeting have disagreements and have a split vote. My response was, "Would you tell the Supreme Court that it needs to have a unanimous vote?" It's the sign of a vibrant free society to have split votes.

**George Will:**

Yeah, no, you're precisely right. What we need is a healthy, robust argument about the purpose of a university. For example, the University of Chicago has shown the way, they showed it decades ago with the Kalven Report, Harvard and Yale and all these others have got into terrible trouble, because they haven't taken the right position on Israel's war with Hamas. There is no right position for a university to take. A university should say as University of Chicago did in 1967 when students inflamed about the

Vietnam War and rightly so, said, "University of Chicago should take a stand." University of Chicago said, "Nope. We're here not to tell people what to think but how to think."

We've gone so far now, so that when the Dobbs decision came down, overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the entire University of California in an instant denounced that. Now, what that said was anyone who disagrees, which is that anyone who agrees with the Supreme Court majority, is really out of place here in the California system. You're marginalized, you're out of step. Well, I think being out of step is a very good thing to be a good bit of the time in life. It's so interesting.

The University of California has set the pace for the nation with this disgusting requirement that anyone applying for a faculty position in the system or even a promotion within the system, say from assistant to associate professor, must submit a DEI statement, diversity, equity, inclusion about how important this is to him or her and what he or she has done and promises to do in the future to advance this agenda. Now, I'm old enough to remember vaguely I was a child, but I remember the hoo-ha about it when the University of California system in the McCarthy era had loyalty oaths. You had to sign to say, "I will not overthrow the government by force and violence from the anthropology department."

Well, what's the difference? The fact is so many college presidents would be so much happier if their institutions adhered to this. You are not expected, because the country doesn't give a damn on what you think, but partly because the country knows full well what you think. Your politics are utterly predictable. You're welcome to them, but don't think the country's hanging on your every word. You're not that interesting.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

A terrible irony there that so many presidents, not all, but so many of them, felt that they had to comment on a Supreme Court decision, essentially a political matter on which American citizens differ, which is of course perfectly reasonable, but they couldn't come up with a full-throated denunciation on October 7th of the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, which is not to take a political position, but simply to say this is appalling. That seemed to be a remarkable disjunct that on the one hand, to be so political about something that really wasn't going to be an inappropriate campus concern.

**George Will:**

At Harvard, you can be disciplined for abuse if you use the wrong pronoun. At Harvard, you can't be disciplined for saying, "We should globalize the intifada, meaning have open season on Jews worldwide." Now, again, if you're going to have a large architecture of endorsements and disapprovals about fatness and skinniness and sexual preference and all this other stuff, then you're going to have to live with this. You're going to be expected to declaim about all kinds of things about which you know nothing.

The interesting thing about the Dobbs decision or let's take an even better one, students for fair admissions, the Harvard case on affirmative action, it is unquestionable that a large majority of Americans in every conceivable cohort are opposed to race-based admissions in college. We know this for example, because in California where one in eight Americans happens to live, they passed by referendum many years ago a ban on race-based admissions college. Then a few years ago, they tried to repeal it.

The advocates of repeal outspent the advocates of keeping the ban on race-based admissions, outspent them about 20 to 1 and lost overwhelmingly. A majority of African-Americans are opposed to race-based admissions. In some sense, that's a sign of hope that the country still thinks for itself.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Yes, I want to come back to the aftershocks of October 7th on two Ivy League presidents have now resigned under pressure. I wonder, you of course have made it clear that you're ultimately optimistic, although realistic in seeing the problems, are we getting close to a course correction? Is this the T.S. Eliot moment virtuous thrust upon us by our impudent crimes course correction before us in process?

**George Will:**

Here I'm not as optimistic as you might suggest to listeners that I am, because again, these people have a way of replicating themselves and there is now a common academic educational culture from Harvard to kindergarten in Flagstaff, Arizona. When these kids come to Harvard and all of a sudden they're saying, "Palestine free from the river to the sea", you say, "Where did they learn this stuff? Did they learn it at the dinner table at home in Columbus, Georgia and Columbus, Ohio and Fort Wayne and Fort Worth?" I don't think they learned it at the dinner table. Did they learn it in high school? Well, yeah, they learned some of it in high school.

Where they were taught among other things, the 1619 curriculum by which the New York Times who one would've thought had quite enough to do trying to be a good newspaper, has decided to reframe as they say, American history by teaching that racism and structural racism define our country. Once you accept the binary way of looking at the world, that the world is divided between oppressors and the oppressed, then in this simple-minded way of binary thinking, you have to put everybody in a group and we know where they're going to put the Jews. It is stunning after 2,000 years of Jewish history, the last 2,000 years to think of the Jews as oppressors, somehow advantaged, but they do it and that's how it came to this.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

I was privileged to attend the notorious Ben Shapiro presentation at Berkeley, the one that needed \$600,000 worth of security. As I came into Sproul Hall, there was a banner that stretched over a number of classrooms that overlooked the plaza that said, "We don't need your white supremacist bull obscenity here." Ben never missing such a wonderful irony said to the audience, "Can anybody see what's on my head?" He was of course wearing a kippah, a yarmulke. He said, "According to the white supremacists, I'm not white. So, what exactly is happening here?" Yes, I've often thought in the last few weeks what would happen if we went out to one of these demonstrations with a few simple questions. Can you locate the Gaza circle?

**George Will:**

Someone did that. Wonderful. Someone had the brilliant idea to get a poll taker to go out and ask these people who were chanting, "Palestine free from the river to the sea," what river? The answers included the Nile and the Euphrates. What sea? The answers included the Atlantic Ocean and the Dead Sea, which is not a sea. It's a lake. But I mean the almost pristine ignorance of these students.

One of the reasons we have so much turmoil on campus is people aren't working that hard. A lot of people, they get into Harvard or Yale or Princeton. They say, "Well, that's the finish line, not the starting point. I'm going to grind through high school. I took seven AP courses. I took calculus. I took linear algebra. Now I'm in. So, let's party. Let's have fun and let's change the world and do all this other stuff."

**Michael Poliakoff:**

That brings us back to the core curriculum. I remember a little debate I had on NPR with the dean of Amherst who said, I'm still staggered by this, "If you don't like science, why should you ever have to take science in college?" I thought to myself, the illiteracy and approaching everything from when life begins to changes in climate would necessitate someone actually understanding something about empirical metrics.

**George Will:**

Never mind when life begins and never mind the climate. We've just passed through the worst pandemic in a century in which the public health authorities thoroughly disgraced themselves and forfeited public trust in the public health system, because they couldn't talk sense to the American people about science. Do masks work or don't they work? Hello, let's talk about this. Is herd immunity possible? If so, how do you bring it about? Is that a good thing? Let's talk about it. Instead what we got was the default position was to go directly to censorship, unleash federal officials to pressure social media platforms to censor people who are dissenting from the shifting and remarkably malleable pronouncements of the public health authorities.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Yes. What a change the topic slightly, although still higher education, you've been a fierce critic of the abuses of the sports establishments, especially conference football. Do you see a way out of the quagmire? I realize your undergraduate experience was not with a D1 school, but one that probably actually had teams where a great number of students could participate without it particularly affecting their GPA or their health. But the conference bowl football and many of the other cash sports are an entirely different phenomenon. Do you see a way forward?

**George Will:**

Look, what has come to college football is a rationality. We long ago grafted onto higher education. Higher than what is another topic for another day. But we'd long since grafted onto the university system a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry and the absurdity of these billions of dollars being generated to pay \$8, \$9, \$10 million a year coaches who have \$1 million a year assistant coaches and \$600,000 a year strength coaches. Nothing trickled down to the students who are generating all this wealth. So, finally, the absurdity caught up with this, and now we have free agency. We have bidding. It takes really \$2 million to have a good D1 quarterback, and this is organized by what are called collectives, organized by or even administered by athletic departments.

I saw this morning a story about someone is transferring to Notre Dame after four years at another school. There's a Utah quarterback's in for his seventh year. There's so many loopholes in the eligibility rules if we can call something this poor as a rule. No. I mean, I grew up on the campus of the University of Illinois where my father taught philosophy for 39 years. I grew up in Memorial Stadium watching the fighting line. I played football. I sold programs to get in there. Think about this. They had 10 members of the Big 10 and then they admitted Penn State, which I thought was a mistake and became the Big 11. It used to run from Columbus, Ohio to Iowa City.

Now, if I've got current sorting out of teams right, it goes from Pasadena and Westwood, California, UCLA, and Southern Cal to Rutgers and Maryland. So, they can get the Washington and New York television markets for the Big 10 network. I understand this, perfectly rational. I'm a capitalist. Go for the money. It doesn't bother me a bit, but stop already with the nonsense about student-athletes

please. People say this helps the university's winning football team, makes the state legislature more generous, and makes the alumni open their wallets. Maybe, maybe not, but I'm not going to get upset about the fact that amateurism is no longer something you can say without laughing.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Certainly that maybe around the margins we can do things like clean up some of the academic corruption, the UNC Chapel Hill paper courses, and perhaps regain a little smattering of integrity at least in the classroom part of it, but I think we are stuck with something that has that catalyst for corruption. Well, I'd like to just end on the note, going back to your optimism, we've got a lot of political, social, and indeed educational ills, some of which as in the case of big cash sports are going to be pretty intractable. Where do you see hope in the various challenges that we have to confront?

**George Will:**

Well, the market helps. The market is helping now, because academia has been churning out PhDs for which there is no job market and this is going to come back to bite them. All kinds of English departments are saying, "Gosh, it's terrible. No one wants to take English." Well, of course not, because if you're a young person and you love English literature, you wouldn't want to take English from these people who are going to spoon feed you with unintelligible theories and propaganda. Want to hear my immigration policy for the United States? For every 10 immigrants we admit and we ought to admit lots of them, we deport one tenured professor of English. We get wonderful immigrants who know why they're here and we get rid of these people.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

There was a time when an English major was a reliable, accurate writer, somebody who could read difficult texts, Shakespeare, Chaucer, and interpret them, read between the lines, would be attentive to nuance. That is gone.

**George Will:**

That is gone. Now the humanities departments look around, they say, "Gee, no one wants to come in and not read Middlemarch, heaven forbid, but read the sexual communication between the lines of George Eliot and all that rubbish that now passes for studying literature." So the market's working. The humanities are losing positions because they've lost students. As they lose position, a doom loop sits in. There are no more teaching positions for these PhDs and postdocs that we're churning out. So, over time, it'll take a little bit of time, but over time, the market will correct and these people who are now running our universities and running them down are going to look around and say, "Hmm, we've lost our constituency."

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Which brings us back, of course, to trustees. If we could get trustees who are bold enough, who are willing to take the heat, who perhaps might even not be able to wear the beautiful robes at commencement and get those prime seats at the football games, if they're willing to speak up, we might actually see ourselves out of the quagmire a little faster.

**George Will:**

Well, trustees are entrusted with something and they have to live up to that.

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Dr. Will, this has been a joy. Thank you for being on Higher Ed Now. You've been very generous with your time.

**George Will:**

Glad to be with you.