

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and this afternoon it is our great privilege and honor to have with us Ambassador John Bolton, who later this afternoon will address the Palm Beach Synagogue audience about the most urgent questions in the Middle East. But for Higher Ed Now, we have the opportunity to speak with Ambassador Bolton about higher education in America, the strengths and weaknesses, the challenges before us.

And so with that, I want to begin our conversation. I want to start, Ambassador Bolton, with a general question, and I should preface this by saying we were at Yale University at about the same time. You graduated some five years ahead of me. I think 1970 was your graduation year, a different time. And so I ask this question, what should it mean to be a college educated person in the 21st century, especially for a selective elite university like the one that we had the privilege of attending? Not that every student at Yale now recognizes what a privilege it is to be there. How should that be reflected in admission standards, in curriculum, graduation requirements? And indeed, as we've sometimes seen, the bestowing of university honors?

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, thanks for having me. It's a great privilege to be here. I think the most important thing that happens at university, at the undergraduate level is to enable the students to learn how to think on their own, get beyond high school and lower education where you're trying to learn things to increase the information that you have. But in college, and particularly schools like Yale, I think this is such a unique occasion that people can say what they think, they can read what they think, they can take teachers and argue with them in class, they can read beyond the required reading. They can debate at the political union. They can do any number of things like that. That's what it should be, but it clearly is not.

I went to school in the late 60s in one of the most radical times in American history, the turmoil over the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement. I was the first of admissions Dean Inky Clark's. We were supposed to be the most diverse class in Yale history. It doesn't look that way today, but we were at the time, and we were the last all-male class to graduate from Yale. So a lot of things have changed, but what I remember about that time with the campus torn apart by riots in my senior year over the Bobby Seale trial and other things, you could argue with anybody about anything and nobody told you to stop, and nobody said they were offended. You could make friends with people whose politics were totally different from yours. The best bridge hand I ever played was with a fellow who was later arrested and put in prison for bombing a university in the northeast. He bid seven, no Trump, and he made it. We were bridge partners.

It's almost inconceivable that would happen on college campuses today, and there's so much you can learn even in the short space of four years that for people to be cutting off debate and trying to suppress speech at that time of your life in that kind of environment is a huge tragedy for them and for the country.

Michael Poliakoff:

I was so shattered, I can't think of another word, when I saw the video of students surrounding Nicholas Christakis, who was then the Master, we can't even use that term anymore, the Master Silliman College, trying to reason with and get a discussion going with students who were angry because his wife, Erica, really quite distinguished teacher, had said that it would be better if students would choose their own

Halloween costumes and accept the consequences if they gave somebody a fence than to have essentially administrators telling them what they could wear or could not wear.

And the sight and the sound of students, including four letter words hurled at Professor Master Christakis just stunned me. And of course, I understand a couple of those students got awards at commencement and I had to ask myself, "What's happened? Who raised these kids and who so miseducated them?"

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, as I also recall in that confrontation, they were saying, "We want to be protected from some of these things." I don't know if they use the phrase safe spaces, but that's what they were talking about. When I was an undergraduate, if somebody told me they wanted a safe space, I'd tell them to get lost. That's not what you're at the university for. If your mind isn't open enough to take on even ideas that you find repellent and examine them and find the reasons to reject them, you're not getting an education. And we see the manifestations in the students, but I blame the faculties and the administrations. They've got to make stronger statements about why this is probably the only time in your life you can say almost anything you want and people should challenge you on. They should argue with you. They should try and convince you that you're wrong, but they shouldn't shout you down and they shouldn't shut you up.

Michael Poliakoff:

I still sometimes shudder to think what would've happened to me nowadays for some of the conversations that I remember having over the dining room table in Saybrook. I was a Saybrook resident, Saybroogian I think is the term you were at. What is no longer Calhoun College. We can talk a little bit about the renaming of the college, but now I think the whole table would've been hauled before the Dean of something or another. And of course, just tracking as we do in our howcollegeofspendmoney.com website, the amount per student spent on student services, some of them masquerading as therapeutic services. It's really obscene use of money and it just troubles me. Getting back to what you said about the Christakis confrontation, to have heard the students shouting, "This is our home. Don't you understand that?" To which I would've responded, "No, it's not your home. It's one of the greatest universities in the world and you were privileged to be here. If you don't like it, you can go home."

Ambassador John Bolton:

Right. Well, in my day, students were fighting against the concept of in loco parentis, which is exactly that the university took responsibility as parents for the students, and I thought one of the things we were supposed to be doing in college is growing up and we objected to parietal hours. For example, one of the great causes of pre co-educational Yale, people wanted to be freer and what I see on universities' campuses today is people want to be less free or certainly, they want to say to other people, "You're going to be less free if you disagree with me." That's a huge mistake.

Michael Poliakoff:

Let's explore a little bit the pathology. How did we get into this situation? Clearly, the 60s were a big part of it, and there are several manifestations of the pathology, the decline in standards. I don't know what it was like for you, but by the time I got there, there were simply rather lax distribution requirements. I did okay because my father, may he rest in peace, whom I adored and respected, wanted me to be a doctor. So I did the pre-med courses along with the Greek and Latin that I really

enjoyed and which became the basis of the first part of my career, but that element of academic rigor seems to have slipped the most common grade. Indeed, I think the average grade now is an A, and the level of freedom is simply not what we experienced, but the cost is off the charts. It was a scandal my senior year when tuition room and board hit \$5,000. The Yale Daily made quite a point of that. Where are we now? How did we get there?

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, I think there has been a long decline, and I think part of it is because the universities have lost their way and the purposes that motivated them for centuries really have slipped aside, and I attribute that to the baby boom generation entering the faculties of universities and getting tenure. I think what many of them went through in the 60s never quite left their mindset, and so they were perfectly prepared to see the standards changed and lowered, and the deference that faculties and administrations have paid to students for the last half century has been stunning to me. It's the students who are coming to learn. I remember once one alumnus said, "I care no more for the opinions of the undergraduates than I do the grass I tread beneath my feet," which actually, in retrospect looks pretty smart because they weren't educated enough.

That's part of the process of the give and take of an undergraduate education and people should not be afraid of having standards imposed on them, but this idea that we're all together and it's one big project and you don't want artificial distinctions. When I was an undergraduate, we still had in the first few years, grades were zero to 100 and professors would post your final exam mark or your final semester mark on a sheet of paper on the door of their office with your name on it. So not only did you get to go and see what you did on the final exam, but what all your classmates did. Now, that's terrible. You think of the humiliation for somebody who failed. That's right. I think if you're going to have standards, you should enforce them, but I know that would be a terribly unpopular view today.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, actually, as I think about it, after I graduated, I was fortunate to receive a Rhodes Scholarship and went over to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where I read the classics degree, nerve-wrecking set of exams over the course of 10 days, and that alone determined the final grade. And there was that terrible moment when you walked to see the list of people who got firsts, seconds or thirds. Again, it was very public, and for those who didn't do well, it was a grade that would follow them around for the rest of their lives, and I think at times, much to the detriment of British society, it's one of those curious things that A.E. Hausman became an extraordinary scholar, got a third. He had some twisted romance and he didn't do well on the exam, so he had to work his way back in from a job in the post office.

That was the rare exception. For many others, it really meant that what their academic aspirations might be would be blighted, but here we are now with... I can't remember the latest thing I read, 87% of the Yale students get A's now.

Ambassador John Bolton:

When I was there, Margaret Mead came to teach for a semester and she had a huge class, I think 600 students, probably the biggest class in Yale college history, and she gave out a lot of very high grades. I don't know if we'd gone away from numerical grading at that point. I don't think so, but lots of grades in the 90s. And asked, "Why did you give so many high grades?" She said, "Well, we're at Yale. These are smart people. They should get high grades." That is the kind of loss of standard setting that corrupts everything, and I think that influences... It makes it very hard for graduate schools, professional schools to know who's really done the work and makes it hard for employers to know who the best students

are, and that is to the detriment of society. Ultimately, you have to perform. Some people perform better than others. It's not a disgrace and they shouldn't be afraid of it. It should be an incentive to work harder on the next test.

Michael Poliakoff:

I think we've lost that sense. It goes back even farther than the decline of the 60s that we're all worthy in the sight of God. That doesn't mean that all of us are going to get A's.

Ambassador John Bolton:

It's a good way to put it.

Michael Poliakoff:

There's no shame in it.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Right.

Michael Poliakoff:

I have to confess that I'm in some awe that you graduated Summa in 1970 when Summa really meant a lot. I didn't quite get there. To paraphrase Lyndon Johnson, I did a little too much wrestling with my headgear off, but it was a great education. I feel very fortunate to have had it. I want to delve a little more deeply into something that touches base with the extraordinary service that you have rendered to this nation, which is what President Reagan called informed patriotism. And there again, I think our colleges and universities, including our alma mater have let us down.

I don't remember an American history requirement when I was an undergraduate there, and when we do our, "What will they learn," survey of core curriculum requirements around the nation, only about 18% of the colleges and universities have one of those basic fundamental courses in American history. How do we get back, particularly for private institutions? The publics have had the benefit of some state legislatures that have simply said, "Do it," like the REACH Act in South Carolina. And tell me if you think I'm connecting too much, but when I saw the Quinnipiac survey right after the Russians invaded Ukraine. What rattled me the most was the result of a question, "If the United States were invaded by Russia, would you stay and fight or would you flee?" Only 45% of the respondents aged 18 to 34 said they would fight for this nation. Is this the inevitable result of what we're doing in higher education?

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, I think it's certainly an unsurprising consequence. It's not unprecedented. In the 1930s, I think it was at the Oxford Union in Great Britain, they had a debate on the resolve that, "This House will not fight for king or country," and that resolution passed. It was a pretty sad commentary on elite opinion at that time, but I think American private universities in particular have forgotten that they're American. I understand why we want more foreign students. That's a plus for America too. Undergraduates, graduate and professional schools, but we should not be embarrassed that these universities are American institutions and that the students, part of what they need to gain in the course of their four years as an undergraduate is a sense of citizenship of what it means to participate in a free society.

Yale's founding document was to train men as it was at the time for service in church and civil state. That doesn't mean you have to do that for everybody, but some sense of what it means to be a citizen of

the country you live in is an important part of anybody's education. You don't get it in the lower educational levels at university. Maybe the time when people appreciate it best, but very hard to find anything remaining of that long tradition. There used to be in the 60s, one of the things people campaigned against at UCLA was a required course in western civilization chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go," and it did go and the university was not better for it.

Michael Poliakoff:

No, not in the least. I wonder, I pause and ask, if we actually had real intellectual diversity in the faculties, now they've become so overwhelmingly left wing, would there have been more challenge to students who have simply swallowed the whole notion of oppressor, oppressed, post-colonialism, which manifested itself so horribly on October 8 and thereafter when crowds of students would give their chants and shouts in support of Hamas, an organization that not only has pledged to destroy Israel but to destroy the United States, and again, I wonder who raised them and who so miseducated them?

Ambassador John Bolton:

Yeah, I think that the most important form of diversity in the university is intellectual diversity, and of all the different kinds of diversity universities now trying to achieve, that's not even on the list. But to me, it goes back to the basic idea that you learn in college by being challenged by views with which you disagree. You don't learn if you're simply hearing something that you're already inclined to believe. You need people who will very forcefully present alternative views.

Even the method of teaching I think in colleges these days needs to be looked at. I'm not sure that the lecture is what it used to be. We don't have the great lectures anymore. In law school, I like many in schools around the country had a lot of professors who used the Socratic method. They never told you what they thought. They only asked you questions and it didn't matter what position you took on this legal issue or that legal issue. They would basically try and beat you into the ground to show that you hadn't thought it through enough. So extraordinarily good training, but if you're just part of a hive of people who all think the same thing, you will not emerge from four years of undergraduate education as a more educated person.

Michael Poliakoff:

I actually want to spend a moment now reminiscing. I had the enormous privilege of studying with Donald Kagan, the late Donald Kagan, who remained a lifelong friend. May he rest in peace. He was a wonderful, wonderful mentor. Who were the people that influenced you so much in both your undergraduate training and in your legal training?

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, I was very blessed with extraordinary professors when I was a freshman and I took an international relations course from Karl Deutsch, who was really one of the leading scholars in decision-making and his book, *The Nerves of Government* that describes how government decisions are made. I still look at today, I had a fellow in Calhoun College where I was, was Robert Dahl, one of the great theorists of American democratic politics. David Nelson Rowe was somebody I took courses on Chinese communist history from, one of the few conservatives on the faculty of Yale then.

And then in the law school, it was like an oasis. Bob Bork was my antitrust professor. Ralph Winter, I was his Research Assistant. We worked on things that Ralph was writing that eventually led to the case of Buckley against Vallejo, which challenged the post-Watergate campaign finance laws, Ward Bowman,

the first economist to be a tenured member of any law school faculty, a great Chicago school economist. And last but certainly not least, Alexander Bickel from whom I learned constitutional law in my first year there. It was really, there were more conservatives on the law school faculty than on the faculty of Yale College, and it was again, a place... This is now in the early 70s, but we argued with everybody all the time and it was the right thing to do and it was okay to disagree.

Michael Poliakoff:

That is, of course, one of the conundrums now that really does weigh on us. In the good old days, faculty tended to get hired regardless of their political viewpoints on the basis of their scholarly qualifications. Right or left, Republican or Democrat, didn't matter. "Who's the best candidate to teach mathematics and to do higher level research biology classics?" I'm afraid that with the aftermath of the 60s and the wave of faculty who typically did lean very far left, they haven't returned the favor. And hence it seems to be a self-replicating process where the echo chamber will only grow more deafening. I'm not at all sure how we solve that unless we think of different ways for bringing in faculty, whether through the board of trustees, the board of visitors or the president having the authority to make the kinds of appointments that ought to be made.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, it's a big problem and not one that's readily solved, but I do think it's important because faculty changes take a long time to have programs at universities that have speakers from the outside. Some universities have political debating societies and so on, but others, I know some alumni have created endowments that bring speakers to the campus who reflect views that the bulk of the faculty don't adhere to. And the most important thing is to get the individual students thinking, and once you ignite that fire, it can have enormous consequences.

In law school, for example, through the Federalist Society, you've had enormous successes that will reflect themselves later in the legal profession of people who think through these legal issues while they're still in school in ways that some of their professors just would never cover.

Michael Poliakoff:

That does bring back a lovely Yale memory. As a freshman, I went to a political union program and there was William F. Buckley Jr, talking about what we really didn't know about China, and it was quite a revelation. Again, I was rather blessed with really great faculty. I don't think it was nearly as much of a monoculture as it is now, but still in all to have heard the eloquent William F. Buckley Jr as a freshman was one of those pivotal experiences for me.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Yeah, no, I think that kind of thing has enormous impact. When I was an undergraduate, there was a debate between William Sloane Coffin who was a very left wing Chaplain of Yale at the time and Buckley, and the debate topic was resolved that the government has a duty to promote equality and Coffin took the affirmative and Buckley took the negative, and while Coffin, we took a vote at the end, Coffin won the vote. It was like 220 to 201. Buckley almost won that debate. One of the most contentious topics you can imagine. They won't allow you to debate that topic on the university campuses today.

Michael Poliakoff:

That is, of course, the great failure and it's a great failure of institutions that they don't have the will to punish those who deplatform, those who shout down. I was there when Shockley visited or tried to speak once and then finally was given the opportunity on a second visit, and that's what prompted the C. Vann Woodward report. It's still on Yale's website. Is it internalized? No.

Ambassador John Bolton:

No. I think it's still happening and I was gone by then, but I remember seeing the film of it, Shockley wrote on the blackboard in back of him, "Shame on Yale."

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes.

Ambassador John Bolton:

And it was exactly correct.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes.

Ambassador John Bolton:

You don't have to agree with somebody. In fact, you should go to hear speakers that you don't agree with and test your ideas against them. If you're afraid of testing your ideas, education really hasn't succeeded with you.

Michael Poliakoff:

It was, again, a privilege to get to know both Charles Murray and Allison Stanger, and of course, the shout down of Murray and the mugging of Allison Stanger are notorious. She spoke to us at one of our conferences and recounted that in her own education, although she's a person more on the left than the right, she sought out the people that would disagree with her. She actively sought out a course with Harvey Mansfield, and that is the mind that we really want.

I want to move to your former college, Calhoun College, which has now been renamed to Grace Hopper College. And in your book, *The Room Where It Happened*, which is a wonderful book, thank you for writing that and making it available, you point out Riley, that in all of the celebration of Grace Hopper, they've neglected her military service, which again, seems to be one of those terrible breakdowns of culture.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, she was an expert. She was the first woman to get a PhD in mathematics from Yale, and like many in that field in World War II, she turned her skills toward crypto analysis, decoding enemy transmissions to help win the war and was a legend in the Navy throughout the rest of her career, and yet this extraordinary service to the country in uniform at a time when there were very few women and very few women rising to higher and higher levels is something that somehow gets lost.

So my remedy was to get a painting from the Defense Department. They do this, they have paintings of our worship steaming away at sea, and they named a destroyer, the USS Grace Hopper. And I wanted to get a picture of that destroyer, an oil painting, large painting, and put it in the Grace Hopper Common

Room so that every student who came in would have to look at that and appreciate what she had done for the country.

Michael Poliakoff:

That actually is giving me a somewhat mischievous idea for ACTA, somehow to leaflet Yale with the kind of admonition that they're neglecting while being so focused on what we should call political correctness, actually neglecting the real autobiography of an American hero.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Yeah, it would be a good idea.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, Ambassador, thank you for taking time to share thoughts with us. We're deeply appreciative. And of course, moving on to the program that we're going to have in an hour or so, thank you for all the things that you do for the United States and protecting its values.

Ambassador John Bolton:

Well, thank you so much. Thanks for having me today.