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Claudine Gay's 'My Truths' v. the Declaration's 'Self-Evident Truths'

by

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Shortly after her resignation as Harvard's president, in an [interview](#) with the [Harvard Crimson](#), Claudine Gay said: "Words matter." This is true.

On February 16, the House Education and the Workforce Committee [subpoenaed](#) Harvard for alleged obstruction of its investigation into antisemitism on campus. Now, two months after the fateful [testimony](#) that precipitated her resignation, it's still worth contemplating the way in which Gay's Crimson interview reveals a mindset that reflects America's deep philosophical divisions. And exacerbates them in a troubling way.

To recall, at the December congressional hearing, then-President Gay was asked by Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York, herself a Harvard graduate, this question: "At Harvard, does calling for the genocide of Jews violate Harvard's rules of bullying and harassment?" Gay's response: "It can be, depending on the context." When Rep. Stefanik asked whether calling for the genocide of Jews violates Harvard's code of conduct, President Gay responded: "Again, it depends on the context."

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By way of explaining in her *Crimson* interview what she wished she had said in her congressional testimony, Gay declared: “Substantively, I failed to convey what is my truth.” She added that she should have had the presence of mind to return to “my guiding truth.”

The resort to “my truth” is now an all-too-common formulation employed to avoid personal responsibility for one’s words or actions. There are many examples, ranging from Lindsay Lohan (“This is my truth.”) to Lady Gaga (“I spoke my truth on that stage.”), both of which were posted—where else?—on X, formerly Twitter. It’s not surprising to find notorious celebrities like Lindsay Lohan and Lady Gaga invoking their personal truths. But the president of Harvard, a university whose motto, “Veritas,” Latin for Truth, was first adopted in 1643? Well, that ought to be different.

Contrast personal claims to “my truth” with the language in the [Declaration of Independence](#): “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

There is a yawning gap between the philosophical foundation upon which claims to “my truth” rest and those self-evident universal “truths” proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. That such a yawning gap exists in today’s divisive American culture goes a long way towards explaining the difficulties faced by our country today.

As William Galston put it in his recent [Wall Street Journal column](#), the phrase “my truth” is “the tip of an epistemological iceberg.” When invoked, “[i]t stands for the proposition that the truth doesn’t exist and that the quest for it is futile. Instead, there are multiple ‘perspectives,’ each rooted in the position, experiences and sentiments of individuals or of groups in similar positions.”

If truth is conceded to be dependent on the predilections of individuals, or groups of individuals with the same predilections, then it necessarily will be more difficult to reach common ground on deep-seated issues that divide Americans. This is because all too often “my truth”—concededly contingent, circumstantial, context-dependent—is intended to be a conversation-stopper, wielded as a sword in ideological battles. And this is certainly the case regarding sensitive matters of race, religion, sex, and gender identity, where taking a position at odds with a claim based on “my truth” can be intimidating.

In Book V of the *Republic*, Plato describes a conversation between Socrates and his friends in which Socrates says a philosopher is one who loves “truth.” This raises the question: What is truth? In parrying that question, Socrates suggests that those “who see the *many* just, and not *absolute* justice . . . such persons may be said to have *opinion* but not *knowledge*.” In contrast, “those who see the *absolute* and *eternal* and *immutable* may be said to *know*, and not to have *opinion* only.”

To be sure, discovering absolute, eternal, and immutable truths is not nearly as easy as creating a personal “narrative” and calling it “my truth.” Under natural law theory, to which most of our

nation's Founders subscribed, disciplined rational thinking, or what Thomas Aquinas called "right reason," is required to comprehend universal truths.

The Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal" is not understood as Thomas Jefferson's version of "my truth," but as a universal truth discovered by virtue of right reason under natural law. That it took the Civil War to abolish the evil of slavery so flatly inconsistent with the Declaration's equality principle does not diminish the power of its truth. Indeed, in making the case against slavery, it is the rightness of the Declaration's statement of truth to which Lincoln constantly resorted, for example, in his too-little-known 1854 Peoria oration and his famous 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas.

We now know that a key element of Claudine Gay's "my truth" was her unwavering commitment to advancing the "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" cause. The obvious problem is that, as practiced by many, if not most, of its adherents and enforcers like Gay, DEI is fundamentally at odds with the Declaration's foundational equality principle. By design, and as practiced, DEI necessarily prefers members of a favored group over individuals who are not members of the favored group.

As long as Gay, and those like her, continue to see the world primarily through the lens of personal "my truths," rather than through the lens of universal self-evident truths that are not context dependent, they will fail to comprehend why they are an impediment to addressing America's deep philosophical divisions in a principled way.

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