

THREE SUGGESTIONS FOR CAMPUS PROTESTERS

“What are you afraid of—her ideas? Ask her the hard questions. Confront her intellectually. Booing people down, or intimidating people, or shutting down events, I don’t think that that works in any way.”

-- [Bernie Sanders](#)

While driving to work last week, I happened to catch a segment on NPR’s *On Point* about “Higher Education and the Free Speech Debate” ([link](#)). The catalyst for this particular discussion was Ann Coulter’s scheduled talk at UC-Berkeley, which had been hovering in limbo as the university weighed the security risks posed by protesters (it was eventually cancelled). Other recent protested (and in some cases, shut down) lectures included Milo Yiannopolous’s talks at Claremont McKenna and Berkeley, Charles Murray’s event at Middlebury, and Richard Spencer’s address at Auburn (which had been cancelled by the university out of fears of violence, only to have a federal judge grant him an injunction to speak).

The broadcast played audio of Murray’s talk, where a huge contingent of Middlebury students stood up, turned their backs, and started shouting so loudly that Murray couldn’t be heard. Later, in moving the event to a safer location, protesters got violent and a professor (a liberal professor, they specified) had her hair pulled so hard she wound up in a neck brace.

Listeners then heard the voice of Jose Diaz, president of the UC-Berkeley College Republicans (who’d sponsored Yiannopolous’s February talk, which had to be cancelled after protests turned violent): “this underscores what we know to already be here at UC-Berkeley – that this is a very intolerant, progressive, left-wing culture ...” And here’s the part where I’m going to get in trouble, because as obnoxious as that comment was, in listening to these stories unfold, I get his point.

Let me be clear: I’m not advocating the fake fairness of television news (e.g. bringing in a flat-earth lunatic to balance out a panel of scientists); there’s nothing sacrosanct about “fair and balanced” and not every opinion is valid. (To put it another way, a world with fewer Ann Coulter speeches is a better world, in my book.) But shouting down a dissenting voice treads a little too close to Bill O’Reilly demanding, “[cut his mic!](#)” when a guest disagrees with his opinion, while threats and mob violence are the [language of a Trump rally](#). Bill Maher recently called this trend “the liberal version of a book-burning,” and it’s hard to argue that he’s wrong. This kind of behavior cedes the moral high ground, and isn’t that the point of opposing these assholes in the first place?

Before we go further, let me admit: I get the protests. These are terrible people. And they’re invading a space these students feel (with good reason) is theirs. It’s perfectly natural to say, “we’re going to show them their kind of hate isn’t welcome here.” But don’t forget that College Republican’s smug comment: “this underscores *what we know to already be here.*”

When these Alt-Right types are brought in to a liberal college campus, the event is not about exchange of ideas; it’s about eliciting a response – about goading liberal students into making a

scene. These speakers aren't just political dissenters; they're schoolyard bullies, doing everything they can think of to get a rise out of you. When the student body freaks out, they're giving the bully the exact reaction the bully wants. As self-described "media manipulator" [Ryan Holiday recently wrote](#), liberals are playing right into the Alt-Right's hands. "When protesters try to revoke someone's right to speak... you're not intimidating anyone – you're emboldening them."

That's not a recipe for success.

In that light, I have a couple of suggestions for better ways to handle these confrontations. I've got three thoughts below, but if there are more that people can think of, please feel free to add to the conversation.

1 – Bring in speakers of your own to compete for bodies the same night.

None of these people – Coulter, Milo, Murray, Spencer, and the rest – are coming to Berkeley unannounced. They're getting paid, scheduled, and advertised. That's their whole point – to be heard, preferably by people who hate them. So instead of rallying the troops to put on a massive, 60s-style protest at Milo's site (just like he wants), rally the troops to bring in a counter-weight across campus. Then advertise the hell out of it, make it huge – like Bernie Sanders-level crowds if possible – and let Milo speak to an empty house in a dead corner of campus.

Let *that* be the story in the morning: two events last night, one a huge success, the other a complete dud.

Note: I'm not suggesting "ignore the bully and he'll go away." I understand not being able to just boycott events like these. Not only is it unsatisfying to just stay home while you know a jerk like this is barking in your back yard, but it's hard to pull off – some people won't be able to stop themselves, and their vitriol will feed the troll anyway, even if you stay away.

But how different would the situation be if the College Republicans brought Milo to your campus, expecting 500 spectators and 5000 protesters, and instead, he found himself giving his little hate pageant to 75 Alt-Right die-hards, while, on the other side of campus, 6000 people packed, standing room only, to see Jon Stewart do a live interview with a Q&A [like this one](#) – (perhaps paid for by several student groups pooling their money with a local business or two)?

John "Johnny Rotten" Lydon of the Sex Pistols (another reviled provocateur, though of very different politics) once supposedly said, "I think the most boring thing that could ever happen to me would be polite response." I suspect Milo feels the same. He loves the vitriol. He feeds on the controversy. So instead of playing into his hands, underwhelm him, frustrate him. Bore him.

It's hard to just ignore someone so wretched. So don't ignore him; reject him. Choose someone else, make it attractive, and leave him squealing into the void, "hey – someone notice me!"

2 – Buy the tickets up, then leave as soon as he starts talking.

This probably sounds similar to the Middlebury students who shouted down Charles Murray, but there's an important difference. I'm not suggesting this as a loud, sigh-waving, slogan-chanting protest. Instead, I'm suggesting that the left organize like crazy, and do this calmly, coolly, and completely.

Start by packing the house. Show up early, or if there are tickets to buy, make sure you get them. If there are 1000 seats, bring 1500 people. Make it an overflow crowd. Let the fire department declare that the hall is at capacity. Let them shut the doors and send the rest of the people home. Then, when Murray comes out, as soon as he starts talking, everyone calmly, quietly stand up and file out.

Importantly, there shouldn't be a uniform – no anti-Nazi imagery, no placards, no hollering slogans as people walk. This should not look like a protest. Why? Because he's come in the hopes of getting protested. Don't give him what he wants. Don't let him control the narrative by making a scene. Just vacate. Leave him talking to an empty house.

He'll certainly try everything in the book to drag you back into the argument. He'll yell hateful things at your backs; he'll get smug and snide. He'll try everything he can to provoke you. But that will be the sound of desperation. "Hey – someone notice me!" And you won't look back.

As a side note, I realize this suggestion may entail giving money to these assholes by purchasing tickets. My response is that civil disobedience almost always entails a trade-off – you accept something distasteful in service of accomplishing a bigger goal. Besides, these people are going to get paid anyway – none of them are coming to your campus uninvited, which means none of them are coming unpaid. As long as they're getting paid anyway, the ticket sales are a small price for the frustration a controlled, orderly exit would engender.

Moreover, the embarrassing anti-climax of their empty auditorium would likely convince whoever paid their advance speaking fees to think twice before shelling out top dollar to bring in a vacuous loudmouth next time.

3 – Challenge these people to moderated debates, instead of just letting them give talks.

This might be the hardest to pull off, since people like Milo know they don't stand for anything, so a debate (where ideas and issues are at stake) is meaningless to them. But especially with a figure like Ann Coulter (who fashions herself an intellectual), it might be possible.

There are two stipulations I'd add to this:

(A) The debate ought to be moderated. That is, it ought to have time limits, there ought to be a figure who MC's the show, and it ought to have some content they're going to take on. Lose these, and the whole event will turn into a put-down competition against people with no moral center. Unless you've reanimated [George Carlin to grind them to pieces unequivocally](#), you would have set the thing up to be a draw, and validated Coulter as a worthy adversary. Don't let that happen.

(B) More importantly, you have to have opponents that are smart enough, quick enough, fearless enough, and charming enough to handle this kind of fight. People who can argue about social politics at a high level, who have a moral framework that matters to them, and who, when pressed, can get super-nasty while still coming off likeable. That is, people who can expose the Alt-Right's ideas as vacuous and backward, while making the Alt-Right figures look clumsy and uncool. I mentioned Jon Stewart above, but what I'm really picturing is the late Christopher Hitchens. (Hitchens highlights can be found all over YouTube, [including here](#).)

Build a rolodex of charming pit-bulls that can be called up whenever you catch wind that the Alt-Right is coming to campus; then start challenging the Coulters of the world to put their ideas (and egos) on the line. Issue the challenge publically – in fact, publicize the hell out of it. Be fearless. Either she'll decline the challenge (exposing herself as the frightened bully we know she is), or she'll accept it (exposing herself as the intellectual fraud and unlikeable jerk we also know her to be). In either case, that persona – *the fearless trickster troublemaker, who drives the rigid, closed-minded, temper-tantrum left out of their minds* – will be shattered. Nothing shuts up a loudmouth quite like being made to look foolish.

There are probably a dozen other ways to push back against the rising tide of hate making its way to campuses (and elsewhere) this year. Silencing it through brute force, though, is a dangerous option. As [Keith Ellison recently pointed out](#), it normalizes a brick-wall response to disagreement: “the solution to bad speech is good speech, the solution to bad speech is more speech. Once you start saying, ‘You can't talk,’ then whoever's in power gets to impose that on whoever's not in power and that's not good.”

But force is also clunky and graceless. If college ought to teach us anything, it's that a vibrant intellectual community can bear dissent without collapsing; that the answer to irresponsible use of power (such as bad acting from a bully pulpit) isn't greater force but persuasion. It should teach us to be the types of leaders we want to have (i.e. [smart](#), [organized](#), [brave](#), [stylish](#), [thoughtful](#), [take-no-shit adults](#)), not the types of leaders 2016 stuck us with (i.e. [angry](#), [simple-minded trolls](#)).

Play these hands correctly, and the university will again be a locus for debate, intellectual diversity, and free thought, rather than a laboratory for the worst people on earth to manipulate the rising liberal generation into an illiberal mob.