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Opinions

Liu | No more softballs for strongmen



Liu argues that we must ask public officials tougher questions. (Photo: BEN LEES/The Stanford Daily)

By [Robert Liu](#)
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"What's so important to our country is to find our disagreements respectfully, because when people stop talking, that's when you get violence," Charlie Kirk [said](#).

And Kirk was right.

College campuses are a space to have challenging discussions, and to make disagreements respectfully, we must ask people their thoughts on controversial topics and truly interrogate their values.

So, when a national conservative leader like Trump's Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum — a man who's [lauded Kirk specifically](#) — comes to our campus, one might assume he'd get the Kirk treatment: tough questions, difficult conversations.

And yet, this past Friday, that was not the case.

It's interesting. When public officials come to our campus, they do so not merely as academics or social commentators but as leaders. They are people in positions of power that can use their influence for good or for evil, and we can't accept anything but full-throated accountability for their decisions. If we hold a public official's feet to the fire, we can produce a rich and engaging conversation.

When Burgum came to campus Friday to give a talk on American energy dominance, I was excited to hear how he would address critiques of his energy policy from Stanford faculty. I disagree with Burgum vehemently, but I was open to hearing him out. Instead, I got a smoke and mirror show of a moderator too scared to ask the tough questions and of a guest whose blatant lies went unchecked.

First, the moderator failed to hold Burgum accountable for his choices as an executive cabinet member in charge of a \$400 billion agency. There was no question about why he had [given](#) Elon Musk's Department of Governmental Efficiency (DOGE) a complete green light to slash the agency he oversaw, despite Musk and his team of ragtag, [college goons having no experience](#) in public lands and resource management. No one asked Burgum why he thought it would be a good idea to [furlough](#) 24% of permanent National Park System (NPS) staff ahead of the peak summer season, [forcing](#) scientists to pick up tasks like bathroom cleaning. And then there was the elephant in the room: why did Burgum motion last month to [rescind](#) the Public Lands Rule, a groundbreaking policy that put conservation and recreational interests at the same level as developmental interests like drilling, logging, mining and grazing? I would imagine that these issues, ranging from administrative expertise to public land use, are all related to the talk's focus on the "Future of Energy."

But without effective pushback, Burgum was given free range to promote patently false claims that bordered on outlandishly comical conspiracy theories. Burgum, based on "confidential information" he received on the National Security Council, claimed that Iran and Russia were infiltrating social media to convince Americans to buy renewables. He went on to say that offshore wind turbines are preventing marine mammals from mating, echoing Trump's [claims](#) that windmills are "driving the whales crazy." This has been [disproven](#).

So, what did the talk end up being about? Among other things, I got to learn about Burgum's rural upbringing, his

transition from software CEO to governor of North Dakota, how AI requires an all-of-the-above approach to energy and the importance of cutting red tape. In between the lies and misdirections, I found a man that was surprisingly knowledgeable and competent on the subject.

I also think missing the bigger picture is exactly what Burgum intended for his audience. To borrow Ezra Klein's [analogy](#), Trump is corrupting the government the same way the mafia corrupted industries it controlled: by consolidating power and wealth. Trump's not shy about this either. At a meeting with oil and gas executives — a meeting where Burgum also spoke — Trump [said](#), "You all are wealthy enough that you should raise \$1 billion to return me to the White House."

This Friday, the Hoover Institution will welcome Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to a [fireside chat](#) with Former Secretary of State and director of the Hoover Institution, Condoleezza Rice. Like Burgum, DeSantis is in an active position of power, and both men are the chief executives of their respective governing groups. I predict that, like Burgum, DeSantis will run away from his record.

However, I would also hope that Rice, in her experience [negotiating](#) with strongmen like Vladimir Putin, will be ready to push DeSantis on hard questions, questions that should include why DeSantis [defended](#) a Florida school curriculum that said enslaved people developed skills that "could be applied for their personal benefit." Or why last May, the governor [backed](#) a bill banning Chinese citizens from owning property in Florida. And why just last week, DeSantis [dedicated](#) millions in state funding to support Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in a state-wide detention spree of 1,120 undocumented immigrants, only eight of whom committed a crime other than being undocumented. Secretary Rice, you played hardball with strongmen abroad — now it's time to play hardball with wannabe strongmen at home.

More than ever, we need to ask our leaders the hard questions. This is an administration that has time and time again obfuscated the truth, whether it be about offshore wind driving the whales crazy or the Epstein list that apparently [no longer exists](#). This is an administration that's openly admitted to a "[flooding the zone](#)" strategy to overwhelm critics and avoid any responsibility for their mistakes. In a Trumpian world of lies and deception, our ability to confront our leaders isn't just what's right: it's our responsibility as citizens.