

# [***Opinion: Biden needs to disavow the protesters***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXP-S101-DY7V-G0WF-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*College quads have been turned into tent cities*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-30-24/index.html), university buildings have been taken over by groups of students unfurling [*banners supporting intifada*](https://www.timesofisrael.com/intifada-anti-israel-protesters-break-into-columbia-campus-building-and-seize-it/), and campus protests are pockmarked with [*calls for violence*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/21/us/columbia-university-jewish-students-protests/index.html) and [*antisemitism across the country*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/opinions/columbia-university-protests-greenblatt/index.html). This gives Republicans an easy argument to make about why voters shouldn't place Democrats in charge of our key civic institutions. The attack ads write themselves: If they can't keep their ivy-covered campuses safe, how can they protect you?

The GOP coalition is increasingly attracting voters [*without a four-year degree*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/changing-partisan-coalitions-in-a-politically-divided-nation/), who may have little sympathy for young people treating their time on campus as an opportunity for anti-Israeli activism rather than education. Voters who didn't go to elite schools and see a Democratic coalition reluctant to criticize its unruly campus wings may find themselves culturally more at home with the party seen as favoring civic peace. So far, the Democratic Party hasn't risen to the political challenge of disavowing the left-wing activists who could hurt them this fall.

House Speaker Mike Johnson is one Republican who senses the political opportunity. On Wednesday, he led the House in a vote on the [*Antisemitism Awareness Act*](https://www.axios.com/2024/04/30/house-democrats-mike-johnson-antisemitism). On Tuesday, he [*announced*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-30-24/h_3ee299d0767d6cb6c4180b31acc21a08) that [*House committees*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-protests-israel-hamas-war-bffc50377785364ffaa71b4efb770a1e) would [*investigate*](https://www.speaker.gov/speaker-johnson-launches-house-wide-effort-to-crack-down-on-antisemitism-on-college-campuses/) university policies around protecting Jewish students, including whether institutions should continue to receive federal funds if they haven't taken sufficient measures to stop the harassment.

In the Senate, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has [*blasted*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-30-24/h_2eb0326ad15b5a9dbd3c8de994cc8d77) students' "dangerous, radical ***politics***," asking whether universities see their mission as education or consciousness-raising. Republican Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance has renewed his [*push*](https://x.com/PTBwrites/status/1743027460294185333) to tax the endowments of elite universities, [*calling*](https://x.com/JDVance1/status/1785316436635795565) higher education "expensive day care centers for coddled children."

Former President Donald Trump also senses the political blood in the water. On Tuesday he [*posted on Truth Social*](https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112363516446864993) that President Joe Biden's voice is one "that nobody has heard" over a picture of police arresting students in New York.

That muted voice is likely a consequence of Biden's efforts to walk a political tightrope. As the head of a party that disproportionately represents [*college-educated voters*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/partisanship-by-race-ethnicity-and-education/), [*Israel-skeptical voices*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/politics/polling-democrats-divided-israel-palestine/index.html) and [*young people*](https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-are-not-monolith-how-different-young-people-voted-2022), he's trying to finesse a stance that expresses sympathy for the protesters' goals without seeming to sanction their obstruction and over-the-top rhetoric. His [*first statement*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/columbia-yale-protests-passover-04-22-24/h_dcdad971ef002f48e764c7e85248ef87) after the protests erupted last week sought to strike a balance in criticizing both sides: "I condemn the antisemitic protests ... I also condemn those who don't understand what's going on with the Palestinians."

But Biden's attempted balancing act is a mistake. The vivid imagery of students overrunning campus buildings provides the White House with a chance for a [*"Sister Souljah" moment*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/06/14/clinton-stuns-rainbow-coalition/02d7564f-5472-4081-b6b2-2fe5b849fa60/) - positioning itself against the far left to appeal to voters in the center.

For those who don't remember, Sister Souljah was a rap artist who had [*called for violence against Whites*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/at-the-congressional-black-caucus-obamas-sister-souljah-moment/2011/09/30/gIQAKoE9AL_story.html) in the wake of 1992's Rodney King riots. In his successful campaign for the White House, Bill Clinton scored political points by explicitly condemning her rhetoric before civil rights leader Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, risking his standing with some Black voters to appeal to more moderate and conservative White voters.

In today's electoral climate, forceful action from the White House - on par with Johnson's legislative push - could appeal to politically moderate, non-college voters (including Hispanic voters, who have been [*moving away*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/politics/nevada-hispanic-voters-republicans/index.html) from the Democratic coalition). Progressive voters might not like it, but elections are won by appealing to the [*median voter*](https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/07/business/economy/07view.html), not by exciting the base.

The White House seems to be awakening to the political dynamics. After the takeover of Columbia University's Hamilton Hall on Tuesday, the administration's rhetoric escalated. "Forcibly taking over buildings is not peaceful - it is wrong," said a White House [*spokesman*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-palestine-04-30-24/h_ebd5ad0bd15bfdc20c573ba170ed973f). Education Secretary Miguel Cardona on Tuesday called the antisemitic rhetoric reported at Columbia protests "[*abhorrent*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5115615/education-secretary-cardona-calls-antisemitism-college-campuses-abhorrent)" and said that [*civil rights investigations*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/30/us/politics/miguel-cardona-antisemitism-campus-protests.html#:~:text=Education%20Secretary%20Miguel%20A.%20Cardona,investigations%20into%20complaints%20of%20harassment.) of more than 130 campuses are underway.

But Biden could get more mileage by echoing Clinton and directly repudiating the protesters' excesses, backed up by executive action. Words alone won't convince voters in the middle that the administration is serious about standing up to the far left. A White House meeting with Johnson to hold schools accountable for allowing antisemitism to fester, or meetings with Jewish students who have [*experienced*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/business/antisemitism-college-harvard-upenn/index.html) campus hate, could be beneficial. And the president should publicly support administrators at schools, like [*Columbia*](https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/columbia-threatens-to-expel-students-who-took-over-building-210003525519), that have threatened to expel students who have crossed the line from protest into violence.

The campus protests also provide an opening for Biden to stand more broadly against his left flank after years of kowtowing. From allowing progressive voices to advance unnecessary culture war fights like replacing the term "pregnant mothers" with the gender-neutral "[*birthing people*](https://news.yahoo.com/biden-budget-proposal-replaces-mother-213406794.html)" or pushing [*economic policies*](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/09/how-bidenomics-got-a-lot-more-progressive-00055653), like massive electric vehicle credits or large child care subsidies, that sought to [*remake*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/11/perspectives/biden-build-back-better/index.html) the American economy along [*left-leaning lines*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/04/politics/democrats-economy-joe-biden-infrastructure/index.html), the Biden team has been captive to intellectual trends on the left.

Of course, opposing campus activists will not win the hearts of young people on elite campuses. In a statement released on [*Instagram*](https://www.instagram.com/p/C6YoY6aoIXi/?img_index=5) on Tuesday, the official student arm of the Democratic National Committee supported protesters on campus and criticized the president's handling of the war in Gaza. But it's unclear whether the youthful protesters at Columbia and other elite schools represent many voters other than themselves.

A [*recent poll*](https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/47th-edition-spring-2024#key-takeaway--id--1564) from the Institute of ***Politics*** at Harvard Kennedy School found that among 18- to 29-year-olds, issues that attract a great deal of elite attention, like student loan debt and the situation in Gaza, are much less important to determining their votes than bread-and-butter issues like inflation, health care and housing.

As CNN's Zachary Wolf [*recently wrote*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/29/politics/biden-young-voters-what-matters/index.html), polls suggest Biden is struggling to capture the support of younger voters. Misreading their interests could be part of the story. Youth outreach focused on issues that captivate college activists and recent graduates, rather than the majority of Americans who [*don't*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/12/10-facts-about-todays-college-graduates/) go to a four-year college, is unlikely to woo uncommitted voters.

At the same time, Republicans shouldn't be so eager to make political hay that they set the barn on fire. Videos of campus police manhandling protesters might backfire, as could statements like that of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who [*signed*](https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-fights-antisemitic-acts-at-texas-colleges-universities) an executive order calling for institutions to "establish appropriate punishments for antisemitic rhetoric on college and university campuses." Anti-Jewish slogans, however hateful, are [*free speech*](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-white-first-amendment-slogans-20170608-story.html), and Republicans shouldn't be cracking down on language [*protected*](https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/3873943-yes-hate-speech-is-constitutionally-protected/) by the First Amendment.

Republicans don't have to look far for examples of schools - like the [*University of Chicago*](https://president.uchicago.edu/from-the-president/messages/240429-concerning-the-encampment) and the [*University of Florida*](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/university-of-florida-comes-down-hard-on-protesters-not-a-day-care/ar-AA1nUJQc) - offering a better approach. Students are welcome to share their views, even vigorously, but may not disrupt colleges' missions of learning and developing a deeper understanding of complex issues.

Supporting universities' efforts to enforce public order on campus may be the first step toward the Biden administration triangulating against its progressive flank. With November looming, that strategy - backed up by meaningful action up to and including the loss of federal funding for misbehaving institutions - will be necessary to give independent voters confidence that they are not voting for a political party whose stances are dictated by campus radicals.

Opinion by Patrick T. Brown

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