

## Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest

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### Play-Doh, Puppies, and Presidential Elections

The results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election took most of American higher education by surprise. Judging by campus reactions, it was an unpleasant surprise to many. Significant numbers of college presidents, faculty members, and students issued dire warnings, protested, or found other ways to express displeasure.

The Heritage Foundation's *Daily Signal* posted a round-up on November 14: Cornell hosted a “cry-in”; students at UCLA staged a street protest in which they “ripped open a Trump piñata and burned the remains”; Yale students held a “primal scream” event; American University took the traditional path of burning the American flag. (Jamie Gregora, “How These 7 Colleges Reacted to Trump’s Election,” <http://dailysignal.com/2016/11/14/how-these-7-colleges-reacted-to-trumps-election/>.)

The *Wall Street Journal* reported other forms of campus solace on November 9. In “Colleges Try to Comfort Students Upset by Trump Victory,” we learned from Melissa Korn and Douglas Belkin that the University of Kansas offered the intervention of “therapy dogs.” The director of multi-ethnic student affairs at the University of Michigan supplied Play-Doh and coloring books. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/11/09/colleges-try-to-comfort-students-upset-by-trump-victory/>)

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In the November 16 *Daily Beast*, “Elite Campuses Offer Students Coloring Books, Puppies to Get Over Trump,” Robby Soave scrounged up a few more details. Barnard College at Columbia supplemented the coloring books with hot chocolate. Soave also repeats the astonishing confession from the editors of the *Harvard Crimson*, who wondered aloud whether exclusion of conservative views from campus had been such a good idea: “Ultimately, this week’s surprises have underscored Harvard students’ need to understand those who disagree with us, however strongly we feel that their views would lead to catastrophe or injustice.” Note the blandly exclusive “us.” (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/16/elite-campuses-offer-students-coloring-books-puppies-to-get-over-trump.html>)

On November 17 on *In These Times*, Olivia Adams observed that if only millennials had voted, Clinton would have won in a 473 electoral landslide. “‘The Death of the Optimism of an Entire Generation’: College Students React to Trump’s Election” compiles laments from millennials, mainly at the University of Chicago. (<http://inthesetimes.com/article/19644/optimism-generation-millennials-students-donald-trump-hillary-clinton>)

Tuyaa Montgomery, a Siberian indigenous woman and twenty-year-old junior at the University of Chicago, is a woman of color whose mother is an immigrant. “I’m scared about the aggressive rise in white supremacy and nationalism that I think has always existed in our country, but Trump gave them someone to rally behind,” she says. “Trump and Mike Pence’s policy on Planned Parenthood and reproductive rights are abysmal. I’m worried about my reproductive rights in this country as well as my racial identity.” Montgomery voted for Clinton but was a Bernie Sanders supporter in the primaries.

The danger that President Trump poses to indigenous Siberian women has, needless to say, been underreported. But Montgomery’s concerns are shared by other University of Chicago students, including Isaiah Newman, who contributed the “death of optimism of an entire generation” that *In These Times* picked for the title.

In some cases, the students’ fragility led to misunderstandings. *Inside Higher Ed* ran a story on November 29 by Scott Jaschik, “When Art Offends (and Isn’t Understood),” about an art exhibit at Salem State University in Massachusetts that opened after the election. Because it showed photographs of KKK members and Nazi round-ups of Jews as examples of oppression, befuddled students complained. The artist said his work was intended as “warning about the dangers of Trump’s rhetoric,” but the university nonetheless closed the exhibit. (<http://ihenow.com/2hmGTOL>)

Earlier, on November 18, Jaschik reported on the “Presidents’ Message to President-Elect,” in which 110 college presidents urged President-elect Trump to “condemn and work to prevent the harassment, hate and acts of violence that are being perpetrated across our nation, sometimes in your name.” (<http://ihenow.com/2hmDvmD>)

The NAS was not silent on these matters. On November 22 our research director, David Randall, published “Paying Students to Protest Trump,” an account of how Pomona College paid for buses to send students to a post-election anti-Trump rally and offered to cover the expenses of those who missed the buses as well. On November 21 our executive director Ashley Thorne critiqued twenty-six letters and e-mails that college administrators and faculty members sent to students in an effort to validate their post-election grief in “In College Students Need Better Lessons Than ‘All of Your Emotions Are Real.’” ([https://www.nas.org/articles/paying\\_students\\_to\\_protest\\_trump](https://www.nas.org/articles/paying_students_to_protest_trump); [https://www.nas.org/articles/college\\_students\\_need\\_better\\_lessons\\_than\\_all\\_of\\_your\\_emotions\\_are\\_real](https://www.nas.org/articles/college_students_need_better_lessons_than_all_of_your_emotions_are_real))

NAS members no doubt represent a spectrum of views about the outcome of the election. I have spoken to NAS supporters of Sanders, Clinton, Trump, Johnson, and many of the Republican hopefuls who fell by the wayside. We might have had Jill Stein supporters as well, though I didn’t meet any. We had some Never-Trumpers. I would be surprised, however, if I learned that NAS members had retreated to Play-Doh and puppies as proper therapeutics for any disappointments they suffered.

I would be interested in hearing from readers of all political leanings how they pursued solace or celebration after November 8. A leisurely rereading of Oswald Spengler? An exuberant climb into the Cascades?

## Peripeteia

The NAS mailbox had slim offerings this quarter. I’ll mention three books that caught my attention. The creators of a new “Classical Learning Test” have devised an examination to compete with the College Board’s SAT. Its target test-takers are students graduating from the burgeoning number of “classical” schools around the country. The designers of the CLT have an uphill battle to convince colleges to accept the CLT as a substitute for the SAT, and to that end they assembled a group of writers to speak to the need for their invention and its splendid qualities. *A Better Admissions Test: Raising the Standard for College Entrance Exams* (Mud House Art and Literature, 2016), edited by Brian G. Daigle, is an infomercial, but because the authors are immersed in classical

learning, it is an exceptionally well-written and witty infomercial. I especially recommend a dialogue by William Fahey, a fellow of Thomas More College, who creates a conversation between a Babbitt-like father of a prospective student and the president of a small liberal arts college.

## Incriminating

Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper, 2015) has burned up the international best seller lists—translated into twenty-six languages, beautifully printed and illustrated, on paper heavy enough to make the book serviceable for deadlifts and bench presses. I find myself getting so lost in its incidental pleasures that I haven't gotten very far in a consecutive reading of the pages. But early on in the book it becomes clear that Harari just doesn't care much for the species he has set out to chronicle. Contemporary humans, *Homo sapiens*, we now know were but one version of humanity (broadly speaking) walking the Earth in the last 50,000 years. We have what Harari calls "lost siblings," including Neanderthals, but also *Deisovans*, *Homo floresiensis*, and others still unnamed.

The loss of these others hangs over Harari as a cloud of regret. "It's our current exclusivity, not the multi-species past, that is peculiar—and perhaps incriminating." The regrets don't stop with the hint that we are the descendants of a murdering tribe. Harari also sees us as creatures that properly belong lower down on the food chain, but having bested our predators, we knocked the normal "checks and balances of the ecosystem" out of whack. It has not had "time to adjust."

On one hand, our species may well have a history of "incompatibility, revulsion, and perhaps even genocide," and on the other, we have used our "better technology and superior social skills" to despoil the planet. Harari sees the likely explanation of all this in our "unique language."

I'm not disposed to pick an anthropological argument with Harari—at least not here—but simply to comment on the astonishing success of a book that expresses such profound anti-humanism. Is the end of all our science self-hatred?

## The Unbuilt University

Many years ago I read about George Washington's failed hope to create a national university. It was a dream shared by several of the other Founders but it never succeeded in gaining a critical mass of support

in Congress. At times I consider this was a happy outcome. It meant American higher education grew up without an official, state-approved form. But it has meant that some hard and important questions got brushed to the side. What kind of college curriculum best befits our representative democracy? What ought to be the place of classical learning, from which so many of the Founders themselves benefited? What should we expect from college instructors as people charged with forming the minds and temperaments of many of those who will emerge as state and national leaders?

George Thomas in *The Founders and the Idea of a National University: Constituting the American Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) supplies no easy answers to these questions, nor would I expect him to, but his book brings the connection between higher education and national identity into beautiful focus.

## Rolodex

When Steve Balch left the National Association of Scholars to take a professorial position at Texas Tech, I inherited his file of contacts. It is a nine-inch-tall wheel of two-by-four-inch manila cards full of names, addresses, and phone numbers. Hundreds, perhaps even a few thousand, of these cards are attached to a wheel, and one can flip through the alphabetical sequence in seconds. It is, of course, a Rolodex, a once near-ubiquitous item in a busy office, and now a relic of another age. Nowhere in this Rolodex is there an e-mail address or a Twitter handle. Many cards sport a fax number—itself almost a relic—and a handful have web addresses.

I slip through the Rolodex today and see many names of those who have passed away, as well as businesses, academic centers, and organizations that have been filed for eternity. Once in a while I find a lead to a long-lost friend in these cards, but mostly I keep the Rolodex as a small memorial perched atop a bookshelf. Microsoft, Google, and other servants/masters of the digital age have rendered poor Rolo redundant, but he has a lasting place in my fondness.