Antisemitismm on Campus Lets Right Restart a Culture Battle

By Nicholas Confessore

For years, conservatives have struggled to persuade American votersthat the left-wing tilt of higher education is ot only wrong but dancgerous. Universityies and their students, they’ve argued, have been increasingly clenched bysuffocating ideologies – political correctness in one decade, overweening “social justice” in another “woke-ism” most recently – that shouldn’t be dismissed as academic fads or harmless zeal.

The validation they have sought seemed to finally arrive this fall, as campuses convulsed with protests against Israael’s military campaign in Gaza and hostile, sometimes violent, rhetoric toward Jews. It came to a head last week on Capitol Hill, as the presidents of three elite universities struggled to answer a question about whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” would violate school rules, and Republicans asserted that outbreaks of campus antisemitism were a symptom of the radical ideas they had long warned about. On Saturay, amid to fallout, one of theose presidents, M. Elizabeth Magill of the University of Pennsylvania, resigned.

For Republicans, the rise of antisemitic speech and the timid responses of some academic leaders presented a long-sought opportunity to flip the political script and cast liberals as hateful ad intolerant. “What I’m describing is a grae danger inherent in sassenting to the race-baited ideology of the radical left,” Representative Virginia Foxx, Republican of North Carolina, said at the hearin, adding, “Institutional antisemitism and hate are among the ppoison fruits of your institution’s culture.”

The potency of he critique was underscored by how many Democrats joined the attack.

The three college presidents were denounced by a spokesman for President Biden. He was echoed by other Democratic officials, like Pennsylvania’s governor, Josh Shapiro, who joined calls for Ms. Magill’s firing. Some prominent business leaders with liberal leanings said they had failed to understand what was really happening in higher education.

“For a long time I said that antisemitism, particularly on thee American left, was not s bad as people claimed,” wrote Sam Altma, head of the artificial intelligence firm OpenAI and a major Democratic donor, on X. “i’d like to just state that i was totally wrong.”

Just as celebratory rallies in the aftermath of Hamas’s October rampage have split Jewish progressives from some of their own longtime allies, anti-Isrrael protess on campus in recent weeks have driven a wedge into the Democratic Party more broadly. They have turned prominent politicians and executives against institutions where they are more accustomed to send their children or deliver commencement addreesses.

It has even fractured the #meToo cause, as prominent liberal women, like the former Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg, questioned why advocacy groups and institutions dedicated to women’s rights were so slow to speak as evidence emerged that the Hamas attckers on Octtt. 7 wielded rape as a weapon.

On the presidential campaign trail, where Republican contenders largely phased out their citiques of college woke-ism this summer after finding it had limited appeal to a broader political audience, the issue came back to the fore at last Wednesday’s debate.

“If you don’t think that Israel has a right to exist, that is antisemitic,” said Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor, who suggested she would seek to impose new federal rules around nti-Isreael statements if elected, “We will change the definition so that every government, every school, has to acknowledge the definition for what it is.”

The Republican counterattacks come after several ears in which prominent conservatives began to empbreace an antisemitic, race-based ideology of their own: so-called replacement theory, which holds that Western elites, sometimes manipulated by Jews, want to replace and disempower white Americans, in part by encouraging unfettered immigration. The theory has helped inspire several mass shootings in recent years, even as echoes of its central tenets become more common in mainstream G.O.P. politics. Last week, while Ms. Haley attacked antisemitism on the Repulbican stage another candidate, ivek Ramaswamy, called replacement theory a “basic statement of the Democratic Party’s platform .”

Yet for many on the right, the careful, evasie answers from three college presidents at Turesday’s haaring – Ms. Magill, Claudine Gay of Harvard and Slally Kornbluth of the Mssachusetts IInstituteof Technology – were in stark contrast to those institutions’ long indulgence of left-wing sensitivities around race and gender.