FROM THE FRONT

"It was a crush, I kept saying, imma stay in touch. But that thing went bust, so I gave it up"
LUSH LIFE ZARA LARSSON

Trump and rules chill protests two years after arrests

PROTESTS FROM PAGE 1

as many as 500 people, according to the News' estimate.

In the two years since the encampment, Israel and Hamas have reached a ceasefire, but Gaza's future remains uncertain. In February, Israel and the United States attacked Iran, starting a new war that has also spread into Lebanon.

Yale has not divested from weapons manufacturers, nor have administrators made any public indication that they intend to do so. Yet the coalition that emerged as the encampment's leaders — the Sumud Coalition, which includes Yalies4Palestine, Jews for Collective Liberation in Palestine and the Endowment Justice Collective — has not since organized any protests that matched the levels of energy and disruption that appeared on Beinecke Plaza in spring 2024.

Pro-Palestinian sentiment has continued to influence student politics. Last fall, the Sumud Coalition pushed for a Yale College Council referendum on the question of whether Yale should divest from military weapons manufacturers.

On the first anniversary of the encampment, students protesting the visit of a far-right Israeli minister set up tents on Beinecke Plaza once again. But that time, the encampment lasted less than three hours before students dispersed and Yale police dismantled the tents. In February this year, 100 students gathered outside University President Maurie McInnis' office to present letters urging divestment from companies with ties to ICE.

Student protesters say the Trump administration's targeting of universities and student activists — and Yale's changes to enforcement of public gathering policies — have prompted protesters to change tactics. Some protesters have moved their advocacy from Yale's campus to New Haven's public spaces.

Meeting the moment

The campus encampments in the spring of 2024 arrived around the sixth month of Israel's war in Gaza, which was launched after Hamas' Oct. 7 terrorist attack against Israel which killed over 1,200 people. At that time, the Gaza Health Ministry reported that more than 33,700 Palestinians were killed in the war.

Students at Columbia, who had protested the war in Gaza since it began, were first to set up an encampment in mid-April. The New York Police Department arrested over 100 protesters for their participation in this encampment, making national headlines. After that, Craig Birckhead-Morton '24 recalled, Yale activists felt the time was right to escalate their movement.

Pro-Palestinian Yale students had already started a daytime presence on Beinecke Plaza. On April 15, pro-Palestinian protesters erected wooden bookshelves on the plaza, which were dismantled that day by Yale workers. On April 19, the day after the Columbia students were arrested, Yale activists set up tents and began staying the night. After three nights of overnight encampment, Yale police arrested 44 students early in the morning. Those students were charged with criminal trespassing.

Within a month after the arrests, most Yale students had left campus for summer recess. The encampment did not resume when they returned.

Daniel Karell, a Yale sociology professor who studies social movements, culture and technology, said that social movements have had a tendency to wax and wane in accordance with national trends.

"There is research that has noticed, over generations, that a lot of protests happen in kind of waves or cycles because there is this dynamic of observing other people, observing from them, learning their strategy," Karell said, adding that the activity may then "dissipate" over time.

A referendum — and a brief response

The next semester, the day after President Donald Trump was elected to a second term, about 200 students gathered on Beinecke Plaza for a rally organized by the Sumud Coalition, which was announcing its upcoming referendum. Organized through the Yale College Council, the referendum asked the undergraduate student body to vote on whether the University should disclose and divest its investments in military weapons manufacturers and invest in Palestinian scholarship.

Despite the election of Trump, who told donors to his campaign that he planned to deport student protesters, the feeling at the rally was far from dire, Karsten Rynearson '26, who attended, recalled. To some protesters, the referendum felt like a chance to take action.

"It was nice to remember democracy doesn't end with an election. It's something you practice," Rynearson said.

Rynearson said that the rally and the referendum campaign that followed had "a certain energy" that was characteristic of the days of the Beinecke encampment. The mobilization felt ripe with potential for a real impact, he added.

Just under half of undergraduates voted in the referendum. 76.6 percent of those who voted said "yes" on the question of whether Yale should divest from military weapons manufacturers. When accounting for the entire undergraduate student body — including students who did not vote — 37.9 percent of students voted in favor of divestment.

To members of the Sumud Coalition, the success of the referendum was confirmation of what they already felt was true: Their views were popular on campus.

Despite the energy of the campaign, the results did not sway the University. In a five-sentence reply to the referendum, Yale President Maurie McInnis pointed to Yale's existing policies and procedures for presenting divestment requests to the Advisory Committee on Investor Responsibility, which makes recommendations to the Yale Corporation. McInnis said that she did not see the referendum results as representative of campus opinion.

Yale's new rules

In April 2025, pro-Palestinian protests seemed, momentarily, to resurge. Tents appeared briefly on Beinecke Plaza on April 22, 2025 — exactly a year after the wave of arrests — in anticipation of the far-right Israeli minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's visit to the Yale-adjacent Jewish society Shabtai.

"The playbook for a very long time had been that publicity in any way, shape or form, is the solution. If you can get the University in the news, you're doing a good thing, because you're putting attention on the issue."

But students said in interviews this school year that in 2025 it was hard to maintain the type of momentum they achieved the spring before because of Yale's stricter enforcement of disciplinary measures for student protesters.

During the protest, organizers assembled eight tents and announced at the time that they planned to stay the night on the plaza. Two administrators distributed cards with QR codes linking to Yale's free expression policies. They also informed students that they were in violation of the policies and could potentially face arrest or disciplinary action from the University if they did not leave.

About two hours after the tents went up, the protest disbanded, with organizers "citing threats of 'retribution' from administrators'" in an announcement to the crowd.

The next day, Layla Hedroug '25 and at least three other students were referred to the Yale College Executive Committee by Assistant Vice President for University Life Pilar Montalvo, Hedroug said.



Ellie Park / Senior Photographer

In April 2024, students slept on Beinecke Plaza to protest Yale's investment in weapons manufacturers. Now, a government crackdown on student protesters and Yale's strict campus gathering policies have led some activists to change tack.

Yalies4Palestine, a group that had posted about the protest on social media, lost its official Yale club status.

According to Hedroug, the University's reaction to the protest went beyond their reactions to earlier student activism. Before, activists did not expect the University to discipline a student for participation in a protest of that caliber, Hedroug said. Hedroug added that the protest was "not nearly as disruptive as the previous year." Hedroug said that she felt she was being used to "set an example" and discourage future student activism.

"Their ability to arbitrarily pick and pinpoint students for their involvement," Hedroug said, "it's demotivating, honestly." She added that she suspects she was singled out because an administrator knew her identity from other contexts. Hedroug said that she had worked with Montalvo on the Belonging at Yale and Muslim Life at Yale student committees.

To questions about why Hedroug specifically was referred to the executive committee, Montalvo wrote that she "cannot discuss individual student matters."

After the protest in April 2025, Harmeet Dhillon, the assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's civil rights division, reposted a video of the protesters on Beinecke on X and wrote that her department was "tracking the concerning activities at Yale."

A day later, in a news release entitled "Yale maintains calm campus and takes disciplinary action," the University announced its response to the protest, which included taking disciplinary action against students. The Justice Department's Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism then released a statement which wrote that "we are cautiously encouraged by Yale's actions" in its response to the protest.

"Honestly, I think it's primarily rooted in fear from the pushback of Trump's administration," Hedroug said about how Yale handled that encampment.

University Spokesperson Karen Peart declined to answer a question about whether the University response to the 2025 protest was motivated out of fear of a reaction from the Trump administration.

She wrote in a statement that Yale "maintains clear free expression and peaceable assembly policies and guidelines" and that Yale security and free expression facilitators "are present at on-campus demonstrations" to give guidance and "prioritize the safety of all involved."

Free expression facilitators are administrators "who work collaboratively to manage and support free expression on campus following university policies and guidelines," Montalvo wrote.

Free expression facilitators were present at the encampment in April 2025 and have been present at many protests since their creation in mid-August 2024.

Hedroug said that the presence of the free expression facilitators can actually be "threatening" to activists, who believe the facilitators'say that it seems like their job is to write down the names of students present at the events and threaten them with arrest and disciplinary action.

A change to the 'playbook'

The University's crackdown on campus gatherings was only one reason why activism began to falter, protesters said. Soon after Trump took office, the executive branch began to fixate on the campus encampments of 2024, withdrawing federal funding from various universities including Columbia and Harvard on the grounds of uncontrolled antisemitism. So far, Yale has avoided Trump's targeted funding revocations.

In March 2025, Mahmoud Khalil, a graduate student affiliated with pro-Palestinian campus activism at Columbia, was arrested while Yale students were on spring break. Some of Yale's pro-divestment activists said that upon returning to campus, they realized that the Trump administration — and its ability to target international students and withhold federal funding — had to factor into their organizing strategies.

"The playbook for a very long time had been that publicity in any way, shape or form, is the solution. If you can get the University in the news, you're doing a good thing, because you're putting attention on the issue," Rynearson said. "And then after the Columbia situation, it doesn't completely invert the equation, but it really changes everything."

Diego Loustaunau '27, an organizer for the Endowment Justice Collective, agreed, saying that the detainments of Khalil and Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish graduate student at Tufts University, made the federal government seem "kind of hell-bent on repression and on suppressing dissent," which affected activists' senses of safety.

Norah Laughter '26, who was involved with labor activism in New Haven and ran to represent Downtown on the Board of Alders, said that as someone who frequently organizes protests, she hears from people who tell her they are scared to participate in protests due to concerns about the new stakes of participating in activism.

"It's gotten way riskier to be a student activist, especially if you're a student activist who isn't white, especially if you aren't a citizen or you're on a visa here. I think that that also has made it really hard for activism groups on campus to kind of build a lot of momentum, which is really frustrating," Laughter said.

Yale College Council senator Joseph Elsayyid '26, who has authored several bills related to Yale's policies towards student protests, agreed that Trump's crackdown on student protesters has chilled campus speech. Senators have also brought up concerns about keeping Yale out of the national spotlight in their debates, Elsayyid said, and senators and student participants have at times argued that controversial actions and statements, if publicized, could invite retaliation from the Trump administration.

"It's preemptive censorship," Elsayyid said.

A 'chilling effect' and a move off campus

Jameel Jaffer, the executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute, a First Amendment policy group at Columbia, said there has been a "chilling effect" on free speech at universities across the country.

"Students and faculty too are much more reluctant today to participate in protests or to speak out publicly on controversial political issues," Jaffer said. "Not just because of the policy that targeted pro-Palestinian foreign students for their pro-Palestinian advocacy, but because, more broadly, there is a sense or a recognition that the official and unofficial consequences of speaking out can be severe, and even life-altering."

Laura Beltz, who works with colleges to reform free expression policies at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a national organization focused on defending free speech rights, said she's seen a tightening of restrictions at universities across the country.

Now aware of the risks of holding demonstrations on campus, some Yale activists are moving their protests off University grounds.

Two weeks ago, Arjun Warrior '26 said he helped organize a rally urging Yale Hospitality to commit to sourcing from suppliers that adhere to fair labor standards. Warrior said that the rally was initially planned to take place on Cross Campus, but that organizers received an email from administrators saying the event "couldn't be held there since we hadn't registered the event," which they couldn't do because they aren't registered as an official student group. Peart confirmed that the group couldn't use University space for the event because it isn't an official student group.

The event moved to the New Haven Green, where 70 people attended. The cause caught the attention of Democratic Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, who sent the University a letter urging it to support the initiative.

Still, the fact that it was easier to host a protest on the New Haven Green rather than on campus was "jarring" to Warrior.

"Every time that speech is restricted, that protests are repressed, that students are prevented from sharing their ideas and beliefs with one another, Yale becomes less of a university," Warrior said. "And I think that's a real tragedy."

Jaffer and Beltz both said that private institutions have no legal obligation to the First Amendment in the way that public state universities do. Still, both said universities should be accountable to their own stated commitments to free expression.

"All these private and public universities that have cracked down on protests are very publicly committed to free speech and to allowing the broadest possible range of voices in their public discourse," Jaffer said, adding that he believes most universities are "sincere" in their commitment to free expression.

In a recently released report, the University's Committee on Trust in Higher Education, which was assembled by McInnis in April 2025, emphasized Yale's public commitment to free speech and open discourse.

"Protect free speech," the report says in its "recommendations" section before reaffirming the centrality of the 1974 Woodward Report, which "recommended that Yale treat free speech as a first principle."

The report praised what it described as Yale's recent progress in enforcing those standards.

"We applaud Yale's recent progress in enforcing these rights, and in clarifying sanctions for those who attempt to curtail free speech on campus," the report says.

The report makes sweeping recommendations to other University policies, including proposals to change Yale's mission statement and establish a 3.0 mean grade-point average.

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