

OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST
ARI SHTEIN

Je suis Christakis

The email heard 'round the world, the one Erika Christakis sent her students in October 2015, is one of the most tame and inoffensive documents I have ever come across.

Sure, it criticizes the oversensitive approach that administrators on Yale's Intercultural Affairs Committee had taken — their suggestion that students religiously avoid Halloween costumes “based on ‘making fun’ of real people, human traits or cultures.”

But it's also got disclaimers about not wanting to “trivialize genuine concerns” that anyone might have had about classmates “wearing feathered headdresses” or turbans. Its closing line is a suggestive question: “Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people?” Not a condemnation, nor a slogan.

Yet the campus backlash was immediate and fiery. The very next day, an open letter appeared calling Christakis' message “jarring and disheartening.” On Nov. 5, around 100 students surrounded her husband, Nicholas, in the Silliman College courtyard. Some demanded he resign over his wife's email.

Video of the courtyard mob went viral, receiving breathless coverage in national outlets, and even sparking a brief debate in the pages of *The Atlantic*. But for all its immediate notoriety, the Christakis affair only became legendary as a harbinger of a new age. A decade where lukewarm appeals to “free speech and the ability to tolerate offence” would be considered literal violence by progressive mobs.

Today, that era — the one ushered in by the Christakis affair — feels like it's drawing to a close.

And the data agrees. Since 1998, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, or FIRE, a campus free-speech watchdog, has documented the deplatforming attempts at American universities.

According to FIRE's database, every year from 1999 through 2015 featured more right-wing cancellation attempts than left. But, after Yale's Halloween kerfuffle, between 2016 and 2024, that trend precisely reversed: each year, leftist activists, students, administrators and faculty tried to cancel speakers, professors, performances and art installations nearly twice as often as right-wingers did.

Left-wing censorship was the mundane reality of life in higher education. Prospective faculty were subjected to ideological litmus tests; speakers considered controversial were barred from campus or shouted down. The Christakis' critics got what they wanted — Erika left her teaching role in December 2015, and in May the next year, both Nicholas and Erika stepped down from their positions in Silliman College.

By 2024, the deplatforming attempts reached a fever pitch. That year, according to FIRE, 104 came from the left, and 65 from the right — the highest total in FIRE's records. And then the vibe shifted. In 2025, right-wing cancellations are up to a count of 77 — and the left is down all the way to 47.

The change coincides with the Trump administration's crackdown on left-illiberalism in academia. But Trump isn't advancing a classically liberal commitment to free expression in its stead. He's instead eager to enforce right-illiberalism. His administration has proposed ideological litmus tests

too — only for conservative values — and they're leaning on university officials to suppress progressive campus speech.

In 2015, when censorial “antiracist” agitators had the might of all the professional-managerial class behind them, Yale relented and relented. In May 2017, it gave awards to two of the students who told Nicholas Christakis he was “creat[ing] a space for violence to happen,” according to a column in *Tablet Magazine*.

Today, the entire apparatus of the federal government stands in the way of free expression on campus. To stand up and fight it head-on would certainly be noble — but also foolish, and most likely doomed.

So what can we do? Just wait until the next Halloween scandal and twiddle our thumbs as the federal shitstorm rains down?

Pretty much! It's better to be cowed than bankrupted — I'd rather not risk our near-billion dollars' worth of federally-funded research.

IN 2015, WHEN CENSORIAL “ANTIRACIST” AGITATORS HAD THE MIGHT OF ALL THE PROFESSIONAL-MANAGERIAL CLASS BEHIND THEM, YALE RELENTED AND RELENTED.

And if the Christakis affair has taught us anything, it's that the cowing is deeply impermanent. Nicholas and Erika stepped down, sure — in a sense, they surrendered to the mob — but their retreat was measured, tactical. They kept working: researching and writing. They opined on the controversy, too, but non-confrontationally, and sparingly.

The restraint paid off: in 2018, Nicholas was quietly named a Sterling Professor — the highest honor granted by Yale to its faculty. In 2020, he became a leading soothsayer of the COVID-19 pandemic. FIRE put him on its Advisory Council.

Not every academic who fought the illiberal left made it through so unscathed.

Bret Weinstein was a professor at Evergreen State University, until he resigned in 2017 — a principled stand against antiracist illiberalism had earned him violent threats too. Weinstein refused to be cowed. He made a new career as an outspoken opponent of left-wing identity politics. And then, in 2020, became a leading anti-vaccine crackpot.

This isn't close to a conclusive proof or anything. But, when Yale finally must meet the Trump administration's illiberal gaze — well, I think I'd rather we make like a Christakis than a Weinstein.

ARI SHTEIN is a first year in Saybrook College. He can be reached at ari.shtein@yale.edu.

STAFF COLUMNIST
RICHIE GEORGE

The Christakis scandal was about Yale's future

The narrative usually starts like this: a day before Halloween, Associate Master of Silliman College Erika Christakis writes an email to her students, arguing that culturally insensitive costumes are legitimate expressions of youthful exuberance. Protests led by angry, “woke” students spark in reaction to Christakis' email. The wise administrators respond with appeasement. “Good job, Yale Corporation; you handled the crisis with grace and wisdom.”

Halloween 2015 was about more than an email. It was an expression of decades of student struggle — visible and invisible — and a demonstration of the university's uneven and incomplete transformation.

In the past 60 years, minority students at elite universities have found themselves in a precarious position. The '60s, with its revolutionary fervor and its student organizing, wrought profound changes to the university that has created America's political, academic and cultural elite. New departments, namely Black studies, came into existence; entire demographics, from Blacks to women, were admitted to the university; and cultural centers were created to furnish spaces for minority students.

The '60s brought with it a new social contract between the nation and the university. The university would insulate the decade's revolutionary possibility by including historically marginalized groups within its hallowed halls. The university's mission was reimagined, but only up to a point.

Nevertheless, the racial divide persisted. It reached a tipping point in 2007 when some Yalies took to blackface and defaced Pierson College with the words “n***** school,” presumably with no concern for their Black classmates. Although Blacks joined Yale's graduating classes at increasing numbers, inclusion was not enough to build care or

even respect.

Whether Black lives mattered — both at Yale and in America — remained the central point of contention in 2015. The Ferguson riots had just elapsed, and the Movement for Black Lives was full steam ahead, demanding that the nation value Black Americans in life and in death. This fight

2015 WAS ABOUT MORE THAN AN OFFENSIVE COSTUME OR TWO; IT WAS ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY'S LEGITIMACY AS A SYMBOL OF THE NATION'S FAILURE TO COMPLETE THE HARD-FOUGHT PROJECT OF RACIAL JUSTICE.

for justice and love prompted Yale students to reconsider the university's handling of the “race” question and its historic and foundational tie to slavery.

2015 was about more than an offensive costume or two; it was about the university's legitimacy as a symbol of the nation's failure to complete the hard-fought project of racial justice.

The university has always been a site of struggle, over who gets to define what it is and

why. It has always been a place where students, faculty, and administrators deliberate and stake their position in a fight over the future of the university, as to whether it could be more than just an artifact of slavery and its accumulation over time.

2015 was, like years prior, a crisis of legitimacy, during which a new contract was drawn up. “Master” became “head”; new faculty arrived to join Yale's ranks; and the ER&M department was revitalized. Advocacy group Students Unite Now's fight to eliminate Yale's student income contribution — a known barrier for FG/LI students at Yale — began in earnest. 2015 marked another moment when we reimagined the university and defined what it meant for us.

2025 marks another crisis of legitimacy. The Trump administration has pulled billions of dollars in federal funding from public and private universities, using the promise of research as leverage to marshal his racist, sexist and fascist campaign to silence all thought he dislikes.

It would be a mistake for the university to turn back now, to concede to the worst underbelly of American racism and fascism. If 2025 is the last staging ground for America's future, let the university be a shining example for an America otherwise, a nation built on a shared commitment to a better world.

So let us imagine something different now. Let us continue the work of the thousands before us, those who have entrusted us with the promise of a world and a university that are truly emancipatory.

RICHIE GEORGE is a junior in Grace Hopper College studying history and philosophy. They are the Editor-in-Chief of *DOWN Magazine* and can be reached at richard.george@yale.edu.



Illustration by Sudarshan Krishnan

Editor In Chief & President
Ariela Lopez

Managing Editors
Carter Cashen
Lily Belle Poling
Ethan Wolin

Publisher
Alyssa Chang

Project Editor
Farced Salmon

Editors
Mia Rose Kohn
Dani Klein
Nora Moses

Maia Nehme
Ximena Solorzano
Zachary Suri
Chris Tillen
Luciana Varkevisser

Reporters
Kiva Bank
Olivia Cyrus
Jerry Gao
Sofia Gaviria Partow
Anyu Geist
Adele Haeg
Jacha Jang
Aria Lynn-Skov
Recti Malhotra
Michelle So
Sabrina Thalcr
Jolynda Wang
Olivia Woo

Illustrators
Beatrice Barilla
Sudarshan Krishnan
Sebastian Woods
Serina Yan

Production & Design
Dani Klein
Timothy Leung
Lucy Bland

Copy Editors
Isobel McClure
Leandro Menchu
Jack Tomprois

EDITORIALS & ADS
Content on this page with bylines represents the opinions of those authors and not necessarily those of the Managing Board. Opinions set forth in ads do not necessarily reflect the views of the Managing Board. We reserve the right to refuse any ad for any reason and to delete or change any copy we consider objectionable, false or in poor taste. We do not verify the contents of any ad. The Yale Daily News Publishing Co., Inc. and its officers, employees and agents disclaim any responsibility for all liabilities, injuries or damages arising from any ad. The Yale Daily News Publishing Co. ISSN 0890-2240

SUBMISSIONS
All letters submitted for publication must include the author's name, phone number and description of Yale University affiliation. Please limit letters to 250 words and guest columns to 750. The Yale Daily News reserves the right to edit letters and columns before publication. E-mail is the preferred method of submission.

ISSUES PRINTED BY: Valley Publishing Co, Derby, CT
DIGITAL ARCHIVE: YDNHistorical.Library.Yale.edu

ADVERTISEMENT
(203) 432-2424 (before 5 p.m.) / business@yaledailynews.com

Direct all letters, columns, artwork and inquiries to:
Contact the Opinion Editors at opinion@yaledailynews.com

Direct all comments regarding the fairness or accuracy of stories to:
Ariela Lopez, Editor in Chief & President
editor@yaledailynews.com



YALE DAILY NEWS PUBLISHING CO., INC. 202 York Street, New Haven, CT 06511 (203) 432-2400
Editorial: (203) 432-2418 editor@yaledailynews.com Business: (203) 432-2424 business@yaledailynews.com