OPINION

GUEST COLUMNISTS

SAM CALLAWAY AND STUART WREDE

Lipstick ascendant through history

On May 15, 1969, hundreds of students gathered in Hewitt Quadrangle to watch and cheer the assembly of a monumental sculpture, a 24-foot tall inflatable lipstick perched atop tank treads, designed by artist Claes Oldenburg '50. The monument "Lipstick Ascending on Caterpillar Tracks" was a surprise gift to Yale from the Colossal Keepsake Corp. Commissioned and installed by a group of students and faculty, the Lipstick protested the ongoing Vietnam War as well as a perceived overly conservative society. It quickly became a symbol of creative, peaceful dissent, gathering support from the women entering Yale College for the first time that fall and from the campus gay rights movement.

57 years later, on Oct. 2, 2026, students defied Yale's new restrictions on free assembly without the University's consent. Students held demonstrations on Hewitt Quadrangle to call for free speech, academic freedom protection and a democratic Yale that stands for diversity. As part of their protest, they constructed a cardboard replica of the Lipstick in Beinecke Plaza.

We, Sam Callaway and Stuart Wrede are the surviving directors of the Colossal Keepsake Corp. We are thrilled by and support the initiative the students and faculty are taking to champion free speech and expression against a newly censorious Yale and are touched that Oldenburg's Lipstick has become an important symbol of the movement. Freedom of expression should not be limited to verbal and written work and must include art as well.

That Yale's policies today ban such work as part of peaceful protests without the University's express permission is both sad and outrageous. What is Yale afraid of?

A brief history of the original Lipstick indicates Yale's schizophrenic attitude towards the Lipstick and what it represents. Our Deed of Gift specified that the monument must stay in Hewitt Quadrangle and that Yale must maintain the sculpture. Yale seemed less than happy with the gift, leaving it in place and not maintaining it. After months of vandalism and graffiti, we revoked the gift and removed the Lipstick. Yale presumably heaved a sigh of relief, but three years later the University came to us, hat in hand, and asked for it back. The Lipstick and the happenings around it had become internationally famous, and pressure from the Yale Art Gallery and the History of Art Department convinced the University of the monument's importance and value.

Yale agreed to restore the Lipstick but refused to return it to its original location. Instead, it would be placed in Morse College, tucked away off the beaten path. We the students, while happy Yale wanted the Lipstick back, reluctantly agreed. We were concerned, however, that if removed from its original site in Hewitt Quadrangle, the Lipstick would lose its significance as a symbol of dissent. The passage of time has proved us right.

Over time, the Lipstick has become little more than a mascot for Morse College. Much of the Yale community was unaware of its history, and its recent relocation to the Art Gallery's back garden further obscures that history. The sculpture belongs in its intended public setting, Hewitt Quadrangle — not secluded in a museum as a pop-art trophy.

The president of Yale and the curators of the Art Gallery — all art historians — know the significance of an iconic sculpture monument such as the Lipstick is inexorably tied to the site it was designed for and the event that brought it into being. They loudly complain in their academic capacities when an historic artifact has been removed from its original site and context, yet have collectively committed the same sin with the Lipstick through their decisions. Beyond its powerful imagery and evocations, the Lipstick most importantly is iconic as a combination of event, place and the object itself. Removed from its original site, the significance of the Lipstick as a symbol of dissent and its important connection to the cultural and political context of the late 1960s has suffered a historic amnesia. Yale must take full responsibility for that.

We, who initially took the initiative for the gift of the Lipstick, are pleased that its essence as a symbol of dissent has been resurrected by the current generation of students and faculty in circumstances not dissimilar to those of 57 years ago. Nothing could be clearer evidence of the Lipstick's lasting relevance than if it were returned to its original location. We call on the University administration and the Yale Art Gallery to restore the Lipstick permanently to its original and rightful place, as intended by the artist, in Hewitt Quadrangle, in a way worthy of a great university that values free speech, dissent and an openness to its own significant history. We hope the Yale community will support our call.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

ELIZABETH SPAHN

We have never been neutral

When the historian of the Yale Women's Center contacted me last year about administrative pressure to be "neutral" in the face of conservative pressures on the University, I was concerned. The Yale Women's Center, founded in 1971, is perhaps the oldest still-operating center on the campus of a major university.

"We have never been neutral," I told Zoe Kanter, current historian of the Yale Women's Center. From the beginning, women at Yale have stood together — with Ericka Huggins, for instance, leader of the New Haven Black Panthers, unjustly framed on homicide charges. We sponsored "Speak Out Against Rape" together with women from New Haven, some of whom, some of us, had been sexually abused with impunity by Yale men in fraternities or secret societies. We served as peace marshals during the May Day 1970 demonstrations against the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. We mourned the students shot and killed during peaceful demonstrations at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi.

In the 1960s, when birth control for unmarried people was still criminalized in Connecticut, Yale Women proudly joined the legal coalition fighting for liberty and bodily autonomy in Women v. Connecticut. We welcomed lesbians, gay men and bisexual people — the respectful nomenclature of that era. The Women's Center has always been a haven, a respite from the unrelenting pressures of McCarthyist conformity, silencing difference and dissent.

Today, people at Yale are again facing enforced silencing, enforced conformity in the name of preserving Yale's money — the fear of losing federal grant money.

> TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT I SAY: YALE CANNOT BE BOUGHT. WE ARE NOT FOR SALE. YOU MAY TRY TO GRAB US BY OUR PURSES, BUT WE WILL RESIST. TO THE CURRENT CROP OF ACTIVISTS, I OFFER A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE BASED ON A LIFETIME OF ACTIVISM.

To the federal government I say: Yale cannot be bought. We are not for sale. You may try to grab us by our purses, but we will resist.

To the current crop of activists, I offer a few words of advice based on a lifetime of activism.

First, remain peaceful. Do not let agents or provocateurs — trolls — trick you into violence.

Second, frame your issues carefully. Folks will try to hijack your Yale activism to serve their own agendas. If we are discussing genocides and war crimes, be sure to include Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, both of which are devastating genocides. Do not ignore issues because people are in Africa or Asia. Crimes of humanity against non-white people matter too; be inclusive.

Third, follow the money. I'm embarrassed to confess it took me more than 30 years of human rights activism to discover that folks who violate human rights are shameless. Naming them publicly will not change their ways.

I profess to you that behind every human rights atrocity in history is a group trying to profit. The profiteers use nations, states, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation — the X factor — any idea that will divide people against each other.

I'm proud of current Yale activists protecting free speech and academic freedom. I stand with Yale even though I now need to bring my cane.

The kids are okay.

ELIZABETH SPAHN '72 *is the co-founder of the Yale Women's Center and a professor of law emerita at New England Law Boston.*

GUEST COLUMNISTS

DIEGO LOUSTAUNAU AND KAITLYN SMITH

Yale should take this opening

Harmeet Dhillon is out as head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. Her legacy — like those of countless others in the Trump administration — will be a track record of illiberal, callous and anti-intellectual attacks on students, workers and immigrants. She pursued public universities like the University of California and the University of Virginia in a crusade against diversity, targeted international students while refusing to investigate civil rights violations perpetrated by ICE agents and used the Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism as an excuse to amplify vile Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism.

Her legacy also includes an ongoing investigation into alleged racial preference in admissions at Yale. Rather than stand against these baseless, racist allegations, as our peer institutions have and as countless legal experts implored the University to do, President McInnis and the Board of Trustees have played into the lie. Before negotiations were made public, The New York Times reported that Yale had made two settlement offers, despite no legal obligation to do so.

Dhillon's successor, whoever they are, has a hard path to office. After two years of authoritarian cruelty from the Trump administration, voters around the country resoundingly rejected the Republican party on Election Day. The new Congress is likely to challenge Trump's appointments, complicating the path to power for a nominee seeking to continue Dhillon's destructive agenda. Make no mistake: Yale is not in the clear. While Dhillon is gone, the Trump agenda remains and many of its fiercest proponents within the Justice Department do too.

But to the extent Yale may be shielded, it is because of voters who made their disapproval of Trump loud and clear. That opposition is far from limited to his overreach onto university campuses. The slate of Democrats voted into office include an attorney fired for solidarity with Palestine, a Senator-elect who in her victory speech vowed to "rip ICE apart" and Senator-elects from Maine, North Carolina and Michigan who defended gender-affirming healthcare.

When Yale students, faculty and staff raise our voices against Yale's investments in ICE technologies or military weapons, its arrests of pro-Palestine students and its abrupt termination of legal gender-affirming care for children and 18-year-old adults, we have no ballot box. When students do vote on questions like divestment, our president brushes us off, citing her obligations to dollars and donors, rather than coherent ethical standards. These positions are widely held among students, yet whether or not one shares them, Yale's president and trustees routinely decline to take part in one of the most essential functions of the University community: dialogue on difficult issues. Simply put, our president and trustees see strategic value in pre-complying with the Trump agenda, and none at all in listening to dissent from the University's own community members.

> MAKE NO MISTAKE: YALE IS NOT IN THE CLEAR.

Engaging a diversity of opinions has more than symbolic value, especially if these University community members have a real say in electing trustees, and thus genuine mechanisms for accountability. Legal theorists David Pozen '02 LAW '07 and Daniel Hemel LAW '12 write in "In Search of University Democracy," that policies of shared governance — "even assuming implausibly no difference in the individuals selected for the board" — fundamentally alter the resiliency of universities in negotiations with bad-faith actors advancing broadly unpopular policies. Applying game theorist Thomas Schelling's observation that negotiating power drives from "a manifest inability to make concessions," they write that trustees of truly democratic universities "might have been able to say to a domineering regulator: 'We cannot agree to all of your demands because our hands are tied.'" The Trump administration's campaign to re-segregate higher education has relied on quick wins, and on the assumption that by and large universities will surrender without so much as a squeal. Pozen and Hemel argue that universities with leaders accountable to their stakeholders would be "less tempting targets" in the first place.

With Dhillon gone and her office now possibly headed towards a softened stance, Yale is better poised than ever to exit settlement negotiations and publicly affirm it will fight any further investigations in court. This moment presents an opportunity to right the ship, not because friendlier faces will soon control Congress, but because the American people have shown what Yale has ignored: appeasement is a losing strategy. Trump will keep waging culture wars, and Yale shouldn't wait until Jan. 20, 2029 to recover some semblance of the moral fiber it erased in its mission statement. If Dhillon's departure offers a moment of relief, we should use it to reflect on how Yale's governance structure got us here.

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