

**Cornel West, “Why I Left Harvard University,”**  
***The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 47 (Spring, 2005), 64-68**

In early October 2001, shortly after Lawrence Summers arrived on campus, I was summoned to meet with him. My friend and department head Henry Louis Gates Jr. had kindly put me on notice that President Summers would like to talk to me. I had neither met President Summers nor would I have recognized him on the street. I had no idea what he looked like. I'd heard a few rumors about his bumpy start as leader of Harvard. He had reputedly made remarks about putting the famous Afro American studies department in its place. He had held meetings with department heads and deliberately skipped over the Afro-American studies head, Professor Gates. I had also heard that in a meeting with black employees he had said that the beneficial results of affirmative action were not yet convincing. And there was the story of his infamous memo at the World Bank in which he suggested transporting dangerous polluted material to sub-Saharan Africa because that region suffered from overpopulation. I took those rumors with a grain of salt, though, because I had seen little hard evidence that confirmed them. I was annoyed about some of the early signs of his administration—especially regarding opposition to a living-wage campaign I strongly supported. I had also been annoyed by the administration's request at the start of the term that I reduce my course on Afro-American studies from 700 to 400 students because, it said, there was no room at Harvard to teach such a large class. The latter matter dragged on for three weeks as I refused to cut back on my class, until I finally settled for teaching all 700 students in the basement of a Catholic church off campus owing to the support of its prophetic priest.

Just prior to my date with President Summers, Professor Gates took me aside and showed me a three-page single spaced letter he had written to the president reviewing my 16 books and eight coedited works, and describing my faculty advisory roles with numerous student groups. I was taken aback to discover that I was apparently under scrutiny, and I couldn't believe the amount of energy and time Professor Gates had been required to devote to the task; it seemed unnecessary, even wasteful. As a University Professor at Harvard—a special kind of professorship that resides in no department or program—I was free to teach wherever I so desired and able to cut back on my teaching load if I so desired, though I had not at all desired to and had in fact added to mine.

I didn't think I should have needed such an introduction, or needed to justify myself, to the president.

When I entered his office, Professor Summers seemed nervous as he shook my hand; frankly, he seemed uneasy in his own skin. Then, to my astonishment, this man I'd never met before started our conversation by saying that he wanted me to help him f\*\*\* up Professor Mansfield, a leading conservative professor who has openly disparaged the sizable presence of black students and women at Harvard. President Summers apparently assumed that because I am a deep black democrat I would relish taking part in bringing Professor Mansfield down. To his surprise, and I would imagine embarrassment, I told him that Professor Mansfield is a friend of mine, my former teacher, and a respected colleague, and that in fact I had just congratulated Mansfield at the faculty club on his superb translation (with his wife) of Tocqueville's two-volume classic *Democracy in America*. I told Summers that Professor Mansfield and I had taken part in many public debates on race, which had been wildly popular with students, that I had lectured in his classes, and that though I vehemently

disagreed with Mansfield's views we never reverted to ugly language or nasty name-calling. President Summers reacted as if I'd transformed from a stereotypical hip-hop ghetto dweller into a Bible-thumping, Sunday-school-attending evangelical believer (which, in part, I am) before his eyes. I was appalled that the president of this country's premier university would take such a bullying and crude approach to his faculty.

With those pleasant formalities over, Summers then launched into a litany of complaints about me and reprimands. He complained that I had canceled classes for three straight weeks in the year 2000 to promote the Bill Bradley campaign. That I had lent my support to a presidential candidate no one in his right mind would support (I wondered whether he meant Ralph Nader or Al Sharpton, but quickly concluded he meant the latter). He exclaimed that my rap CD was an embarrassment to Harvard, and that I needed to write a major book on a philosophical tradition to establish myself (he was apparently unaware that I had written just such a book 12 years earlier, and that I was in fact quite well established, having earlier held tenured positions at both Yale and Princeton). He then asserted that my course in Afro-American studies—and other courses in the department—were contributing to grade inflation in the curriculum. That I had to learn to be a good citizen at Harvard and focus on the academic needs of students, not the wages of workers (though, of course, I had just fought to address the needs of students by keeping my most popular class open to all 700 who had enrolled). That I needed to write works that would be reviewed not in popular periodicals like the *New York Review of Books* but in specialized academic journals (no book of mine has ever been independently reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, but there's always hope). And that we should meet bimonthly so he could monitor my grades and my progress on

published work. He ended his tirade with a sense of reassurance, which was accompanied by a smug grin of the arrogance I often associate with the bosses of my late father as they denied him a promotion for the nth time. What kind of reaction could he have expected from me? What kind of narrow-mindedness would drive someone in his position of authority to make such irresponsible characterizations on the basis purely of hearsay and I perhaps personal and political bias? Did he believe he was beyond accountability, like some rash CEO of a corporation?

In response I looked him straight in the eyes and asked him what kind of person he took me to be. I informed him that I had missed one class in all my time at Harvard, in order to give the keynote address at a Harvard-sponsored conference on AIDS in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, led by my wife. That I don't support candidates based on what others say or respect, but based on my personal convictions. That I was as much a part of the Harvard tradition as he was (I revere the place, having graduated from Harvard College in 1973) and that if I wanted to present a danceable education to young people in their own idiom I would do so. That I had written 16 books, including a highly respected treatment of the major American philosophical tradition (pragmatism—from Emerson to Rorty) still in print after 12 years. That the grades in my courses could stand next to any grades in any other department. That the *New York Review of Books* had never reviewed my books in a major way. That I had given over 50 lectures to student groups in my seven years at Harvard. That my office hours were often extended to five hours to accommodate students. And that I would not mind meeting him over the year but never to be monitored as if I were his negligent graduate student. At that our meeting was over.

Though the encounter should never have become news, because of the explosive nature of the situation—a clash between a prominent black Harvard professor and the brash new Jewish Harvard president—it became a news bombshell. This experience gave me a personal taste of the media's crass, sentimental nihilist quest for the juicy story. After meeting with my close colleagues at Harvard, I had decided not to go public and simply to resign from Harvard and return to Princeton, an offer that had been extended to me long before, first by Princeton president Harold Shapiro and then by the new president, Shirley Tilghman. But then the rumors began to swirl and news reporters started to appear at my door, and though I refused to say a word, the press had a field day. *The Boston Globe* ran a piece on the incident by a reporter who had tried to reach me for two months. *The New York Times* followed with a front-page article—without talking to me—that focused on Summers' ambivalence about affirmative action, an issue not even broached in our meeting. The next thing I knew, reporters from around the country and the world were descending on Cambridge to get the scoop on what was *really* happening at Harvard. Students responded with petitions of support. TV pundits were charging me with never showing up for classes, spending all my time in the recording studio, refusing to write books, publishing mediocre texts years ago, and mau-mauing Summers to enhance my salary. George Will even wrote that my position at Harvard was an extreme case of "racial entitlement." In the face of an onslaught like that, and after consulting my friend Professor Charles Ogletree Jr. of Harvard Law School, I decided I had to speak, and did so first with Tavis Smiley and later the *New York Times* and on *The O'Reilly Factor*. My purpose was to tell the truth, expose the lies, and bear witness to the fact that President Summers had messed with the wrong Negro.

Despite the press' focus on me and my alleged transgressions, the image of Harvard was tarnished. The media frenzy had made Summers look not in control of the situation. When some colleagues threatened to leave with me, the Harvard overseers— his bosses—began to get nervous. The word also spread that I had more academic references in professional journals than all other black scholars in the j country except my colleague Professor William Julius I Wilson (also a University Professor); that I had more academic references than 14 of the other 17 Harvard University Professors; and that I had nearly twice as many such references as Summers himself. It had become clear that he had not done his homework—not read one page of my corpus, not listened to one note of my CD, nor consulted colleagues about my grades or my work with students on campus. Despite the premature wave of support for him in the press, the truth was emerging. So Summers requested another meeting to clear the air, and I accepted. In our next meeting, Summers was cordial, at ease, and clearly eager to get the matter behind him. We talked movingly about my upcoming surgery (I had cancer at the time) and his courageous experience as a cancer survivor himself. He thanked me for not playing the race card. His major fear in the incident was clearly that he would be pegged as a racist—a charge already leveled at him during his years at the World Bank. I replied that in America the whole deck was full of race cards; I just felt that other issues were also at stake. He said we'd had a mere misunderstanding and apologized— more than once—to me. I replied that he had authorized every xenophobic and conservative or neoliberal newspaper writer in the country to unleash pent-up hostility toward me.

And still the media distortions continued.

The next day, a story on the front page of the *New York Times* reported that Summers had not budged an inch, had held his ground against me, and had refused to apologize. I could not believe what I had read and immediately called him and asked him whether he had not in fact apologized—more than once. He said of course he had and that the story had simply gotten it wrong. Unbelievably, I was later to find out that when a contact of mine asked the reporter about the story, and whether Summers had apologized to me, the reporter said that in an interview Summers had strongly insisted that he had not apologized and would never do so. I then knew just what an unprincipled power player I was dealing with. In my next interview I called Summers the Ariel Sharon of American higher education—a bull in a china shop, a bully in a difficult and delicate situation, an arrogant man, and an ineffective leader. Needless to say, more hell broke loose. Charges of anti-Semitism were heard from New York to Tel Aviv—charges I had encountered before, given my support of the Million Man March led by Minister Louis Farrakhan, as well as my staunch opposition with my friend Rabbi Michael Lerner to Sharon's repressive policies against the Palestinians.

The whole ugly incident reflects the crass level to which the university world has sunk; it has become a competitive, market-driven, backbiting microcosm of the troubles with American business and society at large. My disappointments were threefold. First, how little interest the Harvard faculty and the press had in waiting to ascertain the truth—*veritas*, the very motto of Harvard—as opposed to relishing the swarm of rumor and misstatements. University professors are all too aware of what a backbiting world academic life has become, and yet they showed so little concern about academic freedom and respect for a fellow colleague. This attitude is so representative of a spineless

ness in the academy that is antithetical to the important role universities should be playing in holding up standards of truth and integrity and working to impart faith in those standards to our youth.

Second, I was amazed at how parochial and personal the issue was perceived to be. It was viewed as a mere local clash of personalities, with the president upholding standards and refusing to give in to an undeserving and greedy professor. What was missed was the larger issue—a debate about the vision of the national university in the age of American empire. A well-established professor—already tenured at Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, with more publications than 95 percent of his colleagues—was told to tame his fire, limit his audience, and do what he was told in the academy by a Harvard president with a technocratic vision and bullying behavior. Universities are meant to be sanctum sanctorums of robust debate, not institutions run by dictatorial mandate. President Summers has every right to his views about affirmative action, Iraq, hip-hop culture, the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and a living wage for workers at Harvard. And so do I, and I should have had the right to oppose him and insist on reasonable debate without being subjected to slightly veiled threats and overt disrespect. None of these issues about the integrity of academic freedom surfaced in the worldwide frenzy over the incident. Only a subtle article by Sam Tanenhaus in *Vanity Fair* (June 2002) raised these issues.

Third, the delicate dilemma of black-Jewish relations was boiling beneath the surface of our controversy, yet only Rabbi Michael Lerner had the courage to address it. The first Jewish president of Harvard—an institution with its own history of anti-Semitism and racism—not only comes down on a high-profile African-American professor but also challenges the merits of the premier Afro-



American studies department in the world. The tensions between blacks and Jews are so volatile and our national discourse regarding difficult issues is so stunted that thoughtful dialogue is nearly impossible. Now there is little sensitivity to and awareness of the legacy of that tension at the country's leading university.

The larger message of my sad encounter with President Summers is that it reflects a fundamental clash between the technocratic and the democratic conceptions of intellectual life in America. Summers revealed that he has a great unease about academics engaging the larger culture and society—especially the youths of hip-hop culture and democratic movements of dissent and resistance. My vision of academic engagement embraces his academic standards of excellence yet also revels in overcoming the huge distance between the elite world of the universities, the young people in the hood, and the democratic activists who fight for social change. As one who is deeply committed to the deep democratic tradition in America and to engaging youth culture, I have no intention of cutting back on my academic and outreach activities, because the effort to shatter the sleepwalking of youths who are shut out of the intellectual excitement and opportunity of the academy is such a vital one for our democracy.