

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON  
**CAMPUS UNREST**



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# CAMPUS UNREST



The university campus has often been a place of unrest. Moreover, it has been a place of secular, progressive indoctrination. But something has been going wrong on many college campuses. Speakers have been shouted down and disinvited in record numbers. Professors and students have been fearful of saying anything that might be condemned by hostile students. Anxiety, depression, and even suicide are on the rise.

That is why we invited Jonathan

Haidt on the *Point of View Radio Talk Show* to discuss the book he wrote with Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. They believe some significant psychological changes have taken place in the minds of students that explain much of the campus unrest we have seen in this decade.

Jonathan Haidt told us that this whole discussion began when he sat down with his co-author (Greg Lukianoff) a number of years ago to make sense of what was happening on college campuses. They decided to write an article about it for *The Atlantic* with the title, "Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions." The editor suggested the more provocative title, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. The piece from *The Atlantic* was one of the most viewed-articles of all time and was then expanded to this book.

When the article came out, one of the criticisms was that psychology was

only part of the problem. Heather MacDonald asked if “risk-averse child-rearing is the source of the problem, why aren’t heterosexual white males demanding safe spaces?” They all had the same sort of parents.

That is a good question. Obviously, the problem isn’t merely psychological but also ideological. We have talked about campus intolerance on the radio program for decades and understand the impact of years of teaching that Western culture is racist, sexist, and the source of most problems.

My response is simple. Both are true. Ideology explains the hostility to Western values in general and Christianity in particular. Psychology explains why the problem has become worse in the last decade.

### **Three Untruths**

The foundation of the book can easily be summarized in three untruths that are the first three chapters of the book.

The first is the “Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Weaker.” Nietzsche’s original aphorism was, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” The younger generation has turned this idea on its head.

It is true that some things are fragile (like china teacups), while other things are resilient (and can withstand shocks). But they also note that some things are antifragile. In other words, they actually require stressors and challenges to grow. Our muscles are like that. Our immune system is like that. And university education is supposed to be like that. Students are supposed to be challenged by new ideas, not locked away in “safe spaces.”

Unfortunately, most young people have been protected by a culture that promotes what they refer to as “safetyism.” It has become a cult of safety that is obsessed with eliminating threats (whether real or imagined) to the point where fragility becomes expected and

routine. And while this is true for the millennial generation (also called Generation Y), it is even truer for the iGen generation (also called Generation Z) who are even more obsessed with safety.

Part of the problem in these untruths is what they call “concept creep.” Safety used to mean to be safe from physical threats. But that has expanded to the idea that safety must also include emotional comfort. In order to provide that comfort, professors and students a few years ago introduced the idea of creating “safe spaces” for students. And in order to keep those students emotionally safe in the classroom, professors must issue “trigger warnings” so these students don’t experience trauma during a classroom lecture or discussion.

The second untruth is the “Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings.” You can get yourself in some difficult circumstances quickly if you always trust your emotions. It is easy

in this world to get frustrated, discouraged, and even depressed. Psychologists have found that certain patients can get themselves caught in a feedback loop in which irrational negative beliefs cause powerful negative feelings. We are seeing that on college campuses today.

Psychologists describe “the cognitive triad” of depression. These are: “I’m no good” and “My world is bleak” and “My future is hopeless.” Psychologists have effective ways of helping someone break the disempowering feedback cycle between negative beliefs and negative emotions. But very few adults (parents, professors, administrators) are working to correct mistaken ideas.

In a college classroom, students are apt to make some sweeping generalizations and engage in simplistic labeling of the lecture or reading material. When that occurs, we would hope that a professor would move the discussion by asking questions or even challenging the assertion.

Instead, many professors and colleges go along with the student comments. In fact, many even argue that any perceived slight adds up to what today are called “microaggressions.” In many cases, slights may be unintentional and actually wholly formed from the listener’s interpretation.

It is an easy step from not allowing certain topics to be discussed to not allowing speakers on campus who might present a perspective that aggrieved students believe should not be discussed. In Haidt’s book is a chart illustrating how many speakers have been disinvited from universities. Five years ago, the line jumps significantly.

This is another place where we observe “concept creep.” You see this in some of the op-eds run in student newspapers that attempt to justify the violence that often breaks out when a conservative speaker has been invited to campus. The students argue that words

are like violence. They cannot let someone speak on a topic from a perspective they reject. It is committing violence to them. Therefore, violence is justified because it is self-defense.

The third untruth follows from that assumption. It is the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People.” The authors argue, “that the human mind is prepared for tribalism.” They even provide psychological research demonstrating that. But that doesn’t mean we have to live that way. In fact, conditions in society can turn tribalism up, down, or off. Certain conflicts can turn tribalism up and make them more attentive to signs about which team a person may be on. Peace and prosperity usually turn tribalism down.

Unfortunately, in the university community, distinctions between groups are not downplayed but emphasized. Distinctions defined by race, gender, and

sexual preference are given prominence. Mix that with the identity politics we see in society, and you generate the conflict we see almost every day in America.

The authors make an important distinction between two kinds of identity politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. epitomized what could be called “common-humanity identity politics.” He addressed the evil of racism by appealing to the shared morals of Americans using the unifying language of religion.

That is different from what we find on college campuses today that could be called “common-enemy identity politics.” It attempts to identify a common enemy as a way to enlarge and motivate your tribe. Their slogan sounds like this: Our battle for identity and survival is a battle between good people and bad people. We’re the good guys and need to defeat the bad guys.

### **What Can We Do?**

The long-term solution is to pray

for revival in the church and spiritual awakening in America. As with any social issue, the answer can be found in the Bible and the preaching of the gospel to this emerging generation. But there are some practical things that must be done immediately.

First, college administrators must get control of their campus. The riot at the University of California resulted in violence and property destruction. The police did not take action during the riot, and the administration did not take action afterwards.

Some form of deterrence would have prevented future such actions on the University of California campus. Instead, the inaction established a precedent that likely allowed the conflict at Middlebury College. Students not only shut down the lecture, but they assaulted one of the campus professors. Once again, no significant action was taken against the students and outside agitators. The problem will get

worse if there is no deterrence.

Second, we need to educate this generation about free speech. One poll done by the Brookings Institute discovered that nearly half (44%) of all college students believe that hate speech is NOT protected by the First Amendment. And since many students label just about anything they don't like as hate speech, you can see why we have this behavior on college campuses.

More than half (51%) of college students think they have a right to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. A smaller percentage (19%) of college students think it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

This is why we must continue to challenge and educate the emerging generation with biblical truth and constitutional insights. The unrest on the campus has made its way into our society as well.

## **Additional Resources**

Kim Holmes, *The Closing of the Liberal Mind*, New York: Encounter Books, 2016.

Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, New York; Random House, 2018.

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*, New York, Penguin, 2018.

John Villasenor, "Views among college students regarding the First Amendment: Results from a new survey," Brookings Institute, September 18, 2017.

Jonathan Haidt, *Point of View Radio Talk Show*, January 22, 2019 <https://pointofview.net/show/tuesday-january-22-2019/>



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