Trump’s Attacks Have Helped Heal a Deeply Divided Harvard

Miles J. Herszenhorn, Vimal Patel, The New York Times, 27 May 2025

A leading pro-Palestinian student demonstrator led chants for a crowd of hundreds gathered in front of the gates to Harvard Yard on Tuesday evening. A former Jewish leader on campus who has criticized pro-Palestinian campus activism delivered the first speech. A professor who is one of Harvard’s most prominent critics then joined them to urge people to defend the university.

Harvard in recent years has been the site of bitter acrimony over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, free speech and the future of American higher education. But the Trump administration’s attack on Harvard has infused the campus with a sense of unity it has lacked over the last year and half, as the university prepares for commencement this week. “School pride is probably at an all-time high,” said Abdullah Shahid Sial, a sophomore from Pakistan and one of Harvard’s two undergraduate student body presidents. He said he had not seen the campus so unified. “I hope it continues.”

The Department of Homeland Security announced last week that it had barred Harvard from enrolling international students, a move that sent shock waves through higher education. The government has also frozen more than $3 billion in grants and contracts in its battle against the university. The extraordinary attack has caused many in the Harvard community to set differences aside at what they say is an existential moment for the 388-year-old university. Wherever one falls on the Middle East conflict, Mr. Sial said, “everyone is on the side that cracking down on international students will not solve any of those issues.”

The Trump administration has said it is punishing Harvard because it has not done enough to stop antisemitism and has created an environment that is hostile to conservatives.

The campus has banded together because what President Trump is doing “is completely beyond the pale,” said N. Gregory Mankiw, an influential conservative economist. Professor Mankiw, who worked in the George W. Bush administration, said he would like more viewpoint diversity on campus but added that he had always felt appreciated and treated “extremely well” at Harvard. “Double parking is a problem,” he said. “But we don’t start executing people who double park.”

While some students and faculty members remain critical of Harvard, the rally on Tuesday seemed to capture the prevailing mood on campus. A new group, formed to oppose Trump administration demands, organized the event as a show of support for Harvard’s international students. Jacob M. Miller, who in 2023 served as the student president of Harvard’s Hillel chapter, a center for Jewish life on campus, frequently appeared on national television after the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel to say Harvard’s administration was not doing enough to combat antisemitism. At the rally on Tuesday, he said Harvard’s Jewish community rejects the Trump administration’s narrative that the federal government’s actions are intended to protect Jewish students. “We will not allow our identities to be invoked to undermine institutions of higher education,” Mr. Miller said. “And we will not allow the administration to wield our identities as a pretextual prop in the political persecution of our peers.” [...]

The need for faculty and administrators to unite to defend the university has “taken priority over other divisions among us,” said Vincent Brown, a history professor. Dr. Brown had recently criticized university actions, including urging leaders to take a stronger posture against the Trump administration when it adopted a conciliatory stance. Now, he said, “everybody is united behind President Garber and anybody else who is willing to defend the academic sector against the assault of the Trump administration.”