

# OPINIONS

## THE ORTHODOXY OF 'WOKENESS'

# Wokeness in all its self-flattering moral vanity comes for a statue at Princeton

Swallows of indignation gust across campuses so frequently that they seem merely performative — synthetic, perfunctory, uninteresting. Princeton's current contentments, however, fascinatingly illustrates how woke-ness, which lacks limiting principles, limits opposition to itself.



George Will

Since 2001, a statue of John Witherspoon (1723-1794), the Presbyterian minister recruited from Scotland to be the then-college's president, has adorned a plaza adjacent to Firestone Library. Now the woke, who subordinate everything to "social justice" as they imagine it, demand its removal because he owned two slaves and did not advocate immediate abolition.

As Princeton's president, this "animated son of liberty" (John Adams' description of the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence) assured the precarious institution's survival. His students included future congressmen, senators, Supreme Court justices and a president — James Madison stayed an extra year to study with



TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Princeton University is considering a proposal to remove a John Witherspoon statue.

Witherspoon.

Kevin DeYoung, now serving as a Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina, wrote his 2019 doctoral dissertation on Witherspoon. DeYoung's judgment is that Witherspoon believed three things about slavery, two of them true: Slavery was wrong, immediate emancipation was impossible, but America's moral evolution would extinguish it within two generations.

DeYoung explains, without drawing conclusions from, three facts: In Scotland, Witherspoon baptized a runaway slave claimed by a member of Witherspoon's church. At Princeton, Witherspoon tutored free Blacks. And Witherspoon's will listed

two slaves "until they are 28." He had proposed a New Jersey law to free slaves at that age who were born after the law's passage.

Today's disparagement of Witherspoon is more than just another example of "presentism" — judging the past through the lens of the present. It illustrates how the woke become a suffocating, controlling minority.

Princeton's Committee on Naming has been holding "listening sessions" to ascertain what Princetonians think about the statue. But who is speaking? Princetonians for Free Speech (PFS), an alumni organization much more devoted than the university's administration and

trustees are to viewpoint diversity, notes that "the atmosphere on campus greatly inhibits students, faculty, and others from stating their true views" on "highly politicized issues," which nowadays most issues become.

In the Free Speech Ranking survey by the nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), only 55% of Princeton students said it was never acceptable to block other students from attending a campus speech, only 25% said it was never acceptable to shout down a speaker, only 23% said they were very comfortable expressing their views during classroom discussions of political topics.

There is no reason to think Princeton significantly differs from FIRE's finding that only 14% of students nationwide would be very comfortable speaking freely in public settings, such as "listening sessions."

PFS notes that the anti-Witherspoon cohort says Princeton is a "home," therefore everyone should be protected from feeling "less at home" because of, say, unhappy thoughts occasioned by a statue. But a university is not a "home." A university's *raison d'être*, unlike a family's, is civil but robust and unsettling questionings and disagreements. (Although a family without controversies sounds unlikely and unappealing.)

Looking ahead, can Princeton continue honoring distinguished graduate school alumni with the James Madison Medal, named for someone who owned many more than two slaves? If the woke get Charles Willson Peale's portrait of George Washington banished from Nassau Hall, perhaps their moral squint will turn to Harvey Firestone, whose tire company's labor policies on Liberian rubber plantations, and perhaps elsewhere, might make the woke feel "unsafe" when passing between the Witherspoon statue and Fire-

stone Library. How many Princeton names will survive one-sided "listening sessions" about the human imperfections that disturb persons who cherish their capacity for being disturbed?

The fires of wokeness will soon be starved of fuel by the sterile monotony of wokeness's achievement: enforced orthodoxy. Campuses are becoming burned-over places, sullen about the scarcity of things to deplore and cancel within their gates. Beyond those gates, society increasingly regards academia with, at best, bemusement.

Nevertheless, in their leafy quarantine, the woke will have the consolation of vanity. Wokeness has many flavors but one purpose: self-flattery. Wokeness tells its disciples how morally superior they are to almost everyone, ever. The woke have revised Martin Luther King Jr.'s maxim about the moral universe to: "The arc of the moral universe is long and bends toward me."

Bent by such people, a university becomes, as PFS says, "a place where orthodoxy is imposed and only a narrow version of history and knowledge is accepted." So, not a university.

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## Sims

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as .03 ounces of gold per ton of rock — by pulverizing it and spraying huge piles of ore with a cyanide solution that leaches out any gold.

Once the valuable minerals are removed, the toxic sludge is pumped into tailings ponds. Arsenic from these ponds can leak into the groundwater. Failure of the dams holding back the sludge could result in hundreds of thousands of tons of poisonous waste being released, threatening nearby residents and waterways. Exposed minerals from digging the pits can cause acid mine drainage — a problem also as-

sociated with coal mining that regulations have long failed to address adequately. Acid mine drainage requires expensive, ongoing treatment more or less in perpetuity. Left untreated, it turns water rust-orange, and it can kill fish and aquatic insects.

In addition to acid mine drainage, other elements can be released into the water from mining activity: arsenic, cadmium, lead, mercury, thallium and other toxic metals. The explosives used in exploration and mining can elevate nitrates in local waterways, causing toxic algae blooms and other issues. Processing the ore requires huge amounts of water, which could draw down the water table and dry

up nearby wells. Groundwater also must be pumped out of the huge mining pits, potentially leading to additional types of contamination.

In short, large-scale gold mining in Virginia has all the makings of an environmental disaster. As emphasized in the results of both reports, it would risk the drinking water of millions while causing long-term environmental harm and endangering public health.

Do we want to trust regulations to protect us from all that, or should we just say "no thanks" to large-scale gold mining in Virginia?

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## Students

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due process hearings in Virginia are far from impartial, but in fact are deeply flawed. As parents of a significantly disabled child, we spent years trying to secure needed educational accommodations. When we first challenged the Fairfax school system's denial of those accommodations, a school-district social worker warned us to not even bother because we "would lose."

And lose we did. The due process hearing system was so stacked against us we never had a chance. This became clear to us as the school district presented false testimony vastly exaggerating our son's capabilities and progress. For example, the district's witness claimed our son could count to 50 and read books; in reality, he could only count to 2 and knew only a few of the letters in the alphabet. We contradicted the district's witness with testimony from some of the best diagnostic medical experts in the country. Yet our hearing officer summarily disregarded those experts and denied the educational resources the experts testified our son needed. We believe that the school officials and their outside counsel intentionally presented false testimony in our son's case, possibly as the product of coercion of school officials.

We have learned that false testimony by public school officials is nothing new in Virginia. On Oct. 28, 2005, Henrico County principal Ronald Odom was criminally charged with perjury for lying in a due process case of a disabled child. The charge was subsequently dismissed because the court concluded that officials could not be criminally liable for testimony in administrative proceedings under the IDEA. Just last month, following the release of a scathing grand jury report, the Virginia Attorney General indicted Loudoun County school spokesman Wayne Byard with felony perjury and former Loudoun County school superintendent Scott Ziegler with various crimes, including one count of misdemeanor false publication.

Stunned by both the process and the outcome in our own son's case, we investigated the ruling record of our hearing officer. We were shocked to learn that she had never ruled for a disabled child in a due process hearing in almost 30 years since

being originally certified in 1993. This discovery prompted us to launch a Freedom of Information Act investigation to see if any other hearing officers had a similar ruling record. Our FOIA requests were met with fierce resistance from the Virginia Department of Education. But after an investigation lasting nearly a year and costing thousands of dollars in legal fees and expenses, we learned that most hearing officers have never ruled for a disabled child.

The facts — now public for the first time — are shocking. Like our own hearing officer, about two-thirds of Virginia hearing officers have never ruled for a disabled child over the course of two decades. In Northern Virginia, the numbers are even worse: 83% of all hearing officers have never ruled in favor of a disabled student in the last decade. Overall, Virginia families almost never win their IDEA due process hearings, with a success rate of just 1.5% over the last 20 years.

To put this into context, in states where most due process hearings occur, studies have found that parents prevail in due process hearings approximately 30% of the time — a rate 20 times higher than in Virginia.

To address this injustice, we recently filed a class action lawsuit against the VDOE and the Fairfax County School Board. Through this litigation, we are seeking profound reform, including more effective oversight, removal of biased hearing officers, elimination of conflicts of interest, and improved certification and training of hearing officers. We also formed a nonprofit organization called Hear Our Voices, which assists and advocates for disabled families and seeks legislative reform, as outlined on the organization's website.

Though these efforts are important, we cannot win this fight alone. We need help from individuals, families, courageous educators, school administrators, and hearing officers who have witnessed unfair and unethical practices to come forward and tell their stories.

The mistreatment of disabled students in Virginia can only continue in an environment of secrecy and lack of action. We have uncovered some of the secrets, and we hope our case ignites broader action by the courts and the community for much-needed reform.

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## Williams

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evidence he could not investigate. Apparently a Foundation voting to dissolve itself, and then refusing to have any contact with its former partners or to even provide any financial information as to the status of the holdings for which they were a fiduciary agent, is not a crime. In the words of the detective, it is just "evidence of poor business practice."

Kristen Nye, vice president of the Richmond City Council, begs to differ.

"It appears that a crime was committed, and it definitely needs to be investigated," she said.

"These groups that range in size from a few members to hundreds of members have put their heart and soul into supporting different initiatives and different parks in our city. And they deserve to have an answer to what has happened to their funds. And they deserve to get those funds back so they can continue to support the community like they've been doing," she said. "Indeed, 'Move along, nothing to see here' is unacceptable.

Several years ago, Enrichmond acquired two historic African American cemeteries, East End and Evergreen. Ultimately, a descendants group and a cemetery historian would express grave doubts

about Enrichmond's stewardship and transparency.

In the spring of 2021, the administration of Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, concerned about the rancor between the descendants group and Enrichmond, withdrew \$75,000 in annual funding — effectively a vote of no confidence.

Hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars were funneled to Enrichmond and its holding company, Parity LLC, to facilitate its takeover of the cemeteries. We need to know what became of those funds and the private donations to its partners.

The opacity of the past cannot be a template moving forward.

Amid the wreckage, there are signs of movement. The assets of the organization are being turned over to the city of Richmond, according to board member John Mitchell Jr., the great-great-nephew of John Mitchell Jr., the businessman, former city councilman and editor of the Richmond Planet, who is buried at Evergreen.

"The only person on the board now is me. I'm the last man standing," said Mitchell, who rejoined the board in July after the nonprofit dissolved. "I'm dealing with the city now as far as turning over the assets. Period."

In the aftermath of Enrichmond's dissolution, the volunteer group Friends of East End has returned to East End

cemetery, removing heaps of brush, tree limbs, and cut logs from its interior and moving them to the road for Henrico County to pick up, said Brian Palmer, a Friends member who has documented this debacle. "No organized volunteer workdays yet. We're still holding off."

Meanwhile, Richmond Tree Stewards has been granted 501(c)(3) status, opened its own bank account, and received permission to solicit donations in Virginia, Pohlmann said.

"Thanks to the support of a primary donor as well as contributions from a number of Stewards, we have been able to continue our work of caring for Richmond's trees," he said. "We trained a new class of prospective Stewards this past fall, our largest class ever; and we managed to give away 2,000 trees to local homeowners at an event in October."

Unfortunately, from what Pohlmann has gathered, other former Enrichmond partners have not fared nearly as well. "All of us could do a much better job of our volunteer work for the City if our funds on deposit with Enrichmond were restored to us."

That needs to happen. Someone must be held responsible. Numerous partners must be made whole. The city needs to step up and make this matter right.

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