Free Speech: Testing

So often was he grilled by the press in the days before he delivered his controversial address, that Zayed M. Yasin ’02 prepared a handout of frequently asked questions and responses. Nightline had devoted a segment to the upcoming speech, and Yasin had been on the Today show. One TV talk-show host reportedly called him “a kid known to have been a fundraiser for Hamas.” Yasin had the FAQ sheet with him at a press conference at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge held soon after he spoke. He wore pinned to his academic gown one of the red, white, and blue ribbons passed out earlier by those protesting what they thought Yasin would say. “I expected the speech to raise a couple of eyebrows,” he said, “but didn’t expect anything like this level of response—or how personal and vitriolic it became.”

Yasin had competed for the chance to deliver one of three student “parts” during the formal Commencement exercises. He won the spot in April by delivering to a committee of six judges—faculty members and administrators—the speech he proposed to give.

Yasin, 22, is a Muslim American, the son of a Bangladeshi father and Irish-American mother, who grew up in Scituate, Massachusetts. A member of Leverett House, he was a biomedical engineering concentrator and the former president of the Harvard Islamic Society. In his Commencement remarks, he meant to exhort his privileged classmatess to fight against social injustice. He invoked the venerable Muslim concept of jihad—not reclaiming the word from those who use it only to mean “holy war”—to describe a personal struggle to do the right thing, to perfect one’s own morality.

At first he titled his talk “Of Faith and Citizenship: My American Jihad,” but Michael Shinagel, dean of continuing education and one of the judges who chose Yasin, later suggested that something punchier would be better. Yasin shortened the title to “American Jihad.”

When the names of the student orators and the title of Yasin’s speech were released, a hullabaloo ensued. The term jihad, critics said, is employed by Islamic fundamentalists to justify terrorism. He began to receive hate mail, including an e-mailed death threat. “[I]n a university setting, it is important for people to keep open minds, listen carefully to one another and react to the totality of what each speaker has to say,” President Lawrence H. Summers said in a statement. “Direct personal threats are reprehensible....”

In a Crimson opinion piece, Vasugi V. Ganeshananthan ’02 called Summers’s statement “lukewarm,” and quoted Ganeshananthan’s former classmate, Harvard historian now at Columbia, orated at Phi Beta Kappa on “The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Ozzy Osbourne,” exploring the role of rhetoric in stitching together community. Compared to a functioning democratic polity, where “the power of eloquence presupposed the freedom to be persuaded,” he said, “terror is—in every sense—dumb.” Charles Wright, professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, read his poem “Homage to Mark Rothko,” about ambition. In preamble he noted, “I know that ambition is the middle name of every one of you here”—and then cautioned about its limits, and warned that ambition is a “hard road, and you’ve got to have a good pair of shoes.”

“[W]e should not expect anything like this. I was all set to give a speech today entitled ‘American Jihad,’” said humorist Al Franken ’73 (top, left), the seniors’ guest speaker at Class Day. “But after receiving several complaints, I’ve decided instead to give a less controversial speech entitled ‘The Case for Profiling Young Arab Men.’” Former U.S. Senate majority leader George J. Mitchell, Democrat of Maine (top, right), spoke at the Kennedy School. “There is no such thing,” he said, “as a conflict that can’t be ended.” Simon Schama (bottom, left), a former Harvard historian now at Columbia, orated at Phi Beta Kappa on “The
I am one of you. But I am also one of “them.” What do I mean? When I am told that this is a world at war, a war between the great civilizations and religions of the earth, I don’t know whether to laugh, or cry. “What about me?” I ask. As a practicing Muslim and a registered voter in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, am I, through the combination of my faith and my citizenship, an inherent contradiction?

I think not. Both the Qu’ran and the Constitution teach ideals of peace, justice, and compassion, ideals that command my love, and my belief. Each of these texts, one the heart of my religion, and the other that of my country, demand a constant struggle to do what is right.

I choose the word “struggle” very deliberately, for its connotations of turmoil and tribulation, both internal and external. The word of struggle in Arabic, in the language of my faith, is jihad. It is a word that has been corrupted and misinterpreted, both by those who do and do not claim to be Muslims, and we saw last fall, to our great national and personal loss, the results of this corruption. Jihad, in its true and purest form, the form to which all Muslims aspire, is the determination to do right, to do justice even against your own interests. It is an individual struggle for personal moral behavior. Especially today, it is a struggle that exists on many levels: self-purification and awareness, public service and social justice. On a global scale, it is a struggle involving people of all ages, colors, and creeds, for control of the Big Decisions: not only who controls what piece of land, but more importantly, who gets medicine, who can eat.

So where is our jihad, where is our struggle as we move on from Harvard’s sheltering walls? Worthy adversaries are innumerable. We can turn our struggle to the war against oppression, poverty, disease... But before looking outward, we must first look inward. Before deciding what we are against, we must decide what we are for. The only way to define the inner moral force that drives our struggle is to learn through action—to get our hands dirty. To strive to see the world as it sees itself, testing the boundaries of what we think we know, and how we know it. To combine our academic search for truth with a sense of empathy for our fellow humanity—to seek Veritas in Humanitas.

On one level it’s simple: everyone wants the same things that we do. The true American Dream is a universal dream, and it is more than a set of materialistic aspirations. It is the power and opportunity to shape one’s own life: to house and feed a family, with security and dignity, and to practice your faith in peace. This is our American Jihad.

As a Muslim, and as an American, I am commanded to stand up for the protection of life and liberty, to serve the poor and the weak, to celebrate the diversity of humankind. There is no contradiction. Not for me, and not for anyone, of any combination of faith, culture, and nationality, who believes in a community of the human spirit.

Some of this is a mantra that has been spoken at myriad graduations. Worth repeating, perhaps, but nothing new. What is new was taught us by last fall’s tragedy of materialistic aspirations... This is our American Jihad.

My first job was at the Dairy Queen in my hometown of Augusta, Maine. I won’t claim that everything I need to know in life I learned at the Dairy Queen—otherwise, I’ve wasted a lot of time and tuition dollars here at Harvard. But there is at least one lesson I learned back then that our educations at Harvard sometimes neglect: that logic and analytical reasoning have their limits.

The patterns of ice cream sales are an example of this limit of logic... For those of you “from away,” as we say in Maine, remember that February in New York, or to Sierra Leone to work with orphans, Harvard graduates have a responsibility to leave their mark on the world. So let us struggle, and let us make our mark. And I hope and pray that our children, our grandchildren, and those who take our seats in the years to come, will have cause to be proud.
JOHN HARVARD’S JOURNAL
COMMENCEMENT 2002

is a remarkable time for my old Dairy Queen. Cars line up for the drive-thru, their occupants desperate for a fix of hot fudge and an M&M Blizzard®. It defies logic, but in the depths of winter, one escape from the cold is to eat frozen food.

I learned the limits of logic again this past fall, through much more poignant circumstances. In the last year we have all witnessed terror and tragedy previously unknown to us. I’ll never forget calling my friends that September morning, informing some of them for the first time of the horrors unfolding on my television screen. To a person, my Harvard friends responded with logic and reason, asking what had happened, how many were hurt, who had done it. I duly recited the information I had. They turned on their screens. To a person, my Harvard friends would venture to guess that there are two qualities, then I recommend a medium Blizzard. Speaking purely analytically, the Oreo kind tastes best.

President Summers declared last fall that he wants Harvard graduates to possess the building blocks to understand and improve the world around us. He stood in this very space and pledged not to rest until the endowment coffers are full, and all of us know the difference between a gene and a chromosome. On his behalf, I’ll make it crystal clear before we receive our diplomas: a gene contains the DNA blueprint to synthesize proteins, and a chromosome is the structure that organizes thousands of those genes.

But we still need to learn when to lead with our analytical reasoning—the part of us that knows the difference between genes and chromosomes—and when to lead just with our senses and our souls. I would venture to guess that there are many of us at this illustrious gathering who haven’t yet mastered that part of growing up.

My mother’s visceral reaction to September’s horrors shook me out of my litany of facts and figures. This is a lesson we learn collectively when tragedy strikes, as it did that autumn morning. We can also learn it individually through the mundane experiences of everyday life—here at Harvard, or wherever we may be.

Our capacity to confront the world’s problems resides in our ability to disaggregate those problems through rational thought, and to know when reason is not enough. Moreover, that awareness defines our capacity to confront more personal quandaries. Our challenge, as daughters and sons of Harvard, is to blend our collective expertise in analytical reasoning with the communal wisdom of emotional engagement.

Out of loyalty to my first employer, if a bit of Dairy Queen helps you fuse those two qualities, then I recommend a medium Blizzard. Speaking purely analytically, the Oreo kind tastes best.

Veritas

President Lawrence H. Summers took stock of the ever wetter, colder weather as the Commencement afternoon exercises proceeded and decided to cut short delivery of his prepared remarks. He reported on his “freshman year” as president, likening it to “that of many other first-year students. Settling into a new place to live, getting an e-mail account up and running, guzzling Diet Coke, not getting too much sleep.” He recalled memorable events, significant appointments, and, especially, people he had met, on the faculties and in the student bodies, whose unheralded but exciting intellectual work offers examples of “the kind of brilliance, the kind of dedication to learning and knowledge, that are so very typical of this community.”

Those examples were to have introduced the second half of his address, on the search for truth within a university enterprise like Harvard. But given the prevailing “humiditas” and “frigiditas,” he referred the small audience present in Tercentenary Theatre, and those watching the proceedings at broadcast sites, to the Internet for the rest of his text. That section of Summers’s first Commencement address is excerpted here.

...I’ve learned something about the history of veritas this year. Originally it was paired on the University’s coat of arms with the University’s real motto, “In Christi Gloriam.” Veritas meant divine truth, truth reached ultimately not through reason but through faith.

President Quincy in 1843 suggested to the Harvard Corporation that it adopt the word on the open books as the true symbol of the function of the University: “The duty of considering science and learning as an independent interest of the community... giving to that interest...a vitality of its own, having no precarious dependence for existence on subser-
Our press published Erich Segal’s recent book on *The Death of Comedy*, but it did not and it would not publish *Love Story*.

Our prospects for making this world a better, freer, more comfortable place for all who live on this planet depend on nothing as much as clear and imaginative thinking—and people who are capable of thinking clearly and imaginatively. People committed to *veritas*.

### “Civilization Need Not Die”

At the dinner for honorary-degree recipients the night before Commencement, President Summers characterized Daniel Patrick Moynihan, using one of the latter’s own terms, as a “great complexifier”—denoting a kind of analysis far too often in short supply. Moynihan—former four-term United States Senator from New York, ambassador to India and to the United Nations, adviser to four presidents, and Harvard professor—exhibited that habit of mind in a chilling assessment of the present world situation. Excerpts follow.

A while back it came as something of a start to find in *The New Yorker* a reference to an article I had written, and I quote, “in the middle of the last century.” Yet persons my age have been thinking back to those times and how, in the end, things turned out so well and so badly. Millions of us returned from the assorted services to find that the economic growth that had come with the Second World War had not ended with the peace. The Depression had not resumed…

It would be difficult indeed to summon up the optimism that came with this great surprise. My beloved colleague Nathan Glazer and the revered David Riesman wrote at the time that America was “the land of the second chance” and so indeed it seemed. We had surmounted the Depression; the war. We could realize so indeed it seemed. We had surmounted the Depression; the war. We could realistically think of a world of stability, peace—above all, a world of law.

Looking back, it is clear we were not nearly so fortunate. Great leaders pre-
served—and in measure extended—
democracy. But totalitarianism had not
been defeated. To the contrary, by 1948 to-
totalitarians controlled most of Eurasia. As
we now learn, 11 days after Nagasaki, the
Soviets established a special committee to
create an equivalent weapon....Now the
Cold War was on. From the summer of
1914, the world had been at war—with in-
terludes [of peace], no more. It finally
seemed to end with the collapse of the
Soviet Union and the changes in China.

But now we have to ask if it is once
again the summer of 1914.
Small acts of terror in the Middle East, in
South Asia, could lead to cataclysm, as they
did at Sarajevo. And for which great pow-
nerful or not, have been preparing.
The era are overlapping....
Standing at Trinity site at Los Alamos,
J. Robert Oppenheimer pondered an an-
cient Sanskrit text in which the Lord
Shiva declares, “I am become Death, the
shatterer of worlds.” Was he right?
At the very least we can come
to terms with the limits of our
capacity to foresee events.... [In
1993, Weatherhead University
Professor] Samuel Huntington
outlined that new world order—or disorder—...in an ar-
ticle in [Foreign Affairs] entitled
“The Clash of Civilizations.” His
subsequent book of that title is a
defining text of our time.
Huntington perceives a world of
seven or eight major conflict
than twenty-five cultures—the West, Russia,
China, India, and Islam. Add
Japan, South America, Africa....
The Cold War on balance
suppressed conflict. But the end of the Cold War has
brought not universal peace
but widespread violence. Some
of this has been merely residual
proxy conflicts dating back to
the earlier era. Some plain eth-
nic conflict. But the new horror
occurs on the fault lines....be-
tween the different cultures.
For argument’s sake one
could propose that Marxism
was the last nearly successful
effort to Westernize the rest of
the world.... This wasn’t going
to last, and of course, it hasn’t.
Hence Huntington: “The central problem in the relations
between the West and the rest is...the discordance be-
tween the West’s—particularly America’s—efforts to promote
universal Western culture and
its declining ability to do so.”
Again, there seems to be no
end of ethnic conflict within
civilizations. But it is to the
clash of civilizations we must look with a
measure of dread. The Bulletin of the Atomic
Scientists recently noted that “The crisis
between India and Pakistan, touched off
by a December 13 terrorist attack on the
Indian parliament, marks the closest two
states have come to nuclear war since the
Cuban Missile Crisis.”...
The terrorist attacks on the United
States of last September were not nu-
clear—but they will be. Again to cite
Huntington, “At some point...a few terror-
ists will be able to produce massive vio-
ence and massive destruction. Separately,
terrorism and nuclear weapons are the
weapons of the non-Western weak. If and
when they are combined, the non-West-
ern weak will be strong.”
This was written in 1996. The first mass
murder by terrorists came last Septem-
ber. Just last month the vice president in-
formed [reporter] Tim Russert that “the
prospects of a future attack...are almost
necessary. Not a matter of if, but when.”
Secretary Rumsfeld has added that the
attack will be nuclear.

We are indeed at war and we must
act accordingly, with equal measures of
audacity and precaution.
As regards precaution, note how read-
ibly the clash of civilizations could spread
to our own homeland. The Bureau of the
Census lists some 68 separate ancestries
in the American population.... Not since
1910 have we had so high a proportion of
immigrants....
This, as ever, has had bounteous re-
wards.... The problem comes when immi-
grants and their descendants bring with
them...the clashes they left behind. Noth-
ing new, but newly ominous. Last month
in Washington an enormous march filled
Pennsylvania Avenue on the way to the
Capitol grounds. The marchers, in the
main, were there to support the Palestin-
ian cause. Fair enough. But every five feet
or so there would be a sign proclaiming
“Zionism equals Racism” or a placard with
a swastika alongside a Star of David.
Which is anything but fair, which is poi-
sonous and has no place in our discourse....
It is a testament to our First Amendment
freedoms that we permit such displays,
however obnoxious to our fundamental
ideals. But in the wake of 9/11, we confront

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UPON THE OCCASION
OF YOUR GRADUATION

Although—let us be right out front
—there is nothing gradual about it.
Surely your progress has been
digestively slow. Has claimed—like an eggshell the egg;
Egg, yolk—your whole life.
But the truth of your arrival, and what now follows,
Is the truth of birds, a vertical reality
Into which one who would soar must abruptly fall
Between first leap and first flight.
No small trick, either, to gaze confidently upward
While experiencing the gravity of your situation.
Ecce hobo; behold the graduate, a tasseled thing
With parchment wings suspended in air with holes in it.

And yet I can see you aloft already:
If only in my mind’s eye:
With the vision of owls to see in the dark,
Curiosity of crows,
Endurance of wild, homeless geese,
I expect you to struggle into your sky,
Rise, glide, wheel and dive,
To wherever your nature calls you.

Roosting now, I but dimly recall
My fledgling flights or hear cry my reasons.
A park bird, I’ll watch for your return,
Let your flights mark my seasons.

~BERNARD HUEBNER

After 20 years teaching in the Maine public schools, Bernard Huebner
’63, M.A.T. ’65, was decertified last year for refusing to submit to the
fingerprinting and national criminal-history background check
newly required of all school personnel in that state. A resident of
Waterville, Maine, he is finishing a book manuscript entitled “Prints

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the fear that such heinous speech can be a precursor to violence… that threatens our existence.

To be sure, we must do what is necessary to meet the threat. We need to better understand what the dangers are. We need to explore how better to organize the agencies of government to detect and prevent calamitous action.

But at the same time, we need [to] take care that whatever we do is consistent with our basic constitutional design. What we do must be commensurate with the threat in ways that do not needlessly undermine the very liberties we seek to protect.

The concern is suspicion and fear within…. In Washington, agencies compete in techniques of intrusion and exclusion: identity cards and x-ray machines and all the clutter, plus a new life for secrecy…Secrecy, as George Will writes, “renders societies susceptible to epidemics of suspicion.”

We are witnessing such an outbreak in Washington just now. Great clamor as to what the different agencies knew in advance of the 9/11 attack; when the president was briefed; what was he told. These are legitimate questions, but there is a prior issue, which is the disposition of closed systems not to share information…. There is police work to be done. But so many forms of secrecy are self-defeating. In 1988, the CIA formally estimated the gross domestic product of East Germany to be higher than West Germany’s. We should calculate the risks of depending on such…arrangements.

The “what-ifs” are intriguing. What if the United States had recognized Soviet weakness earlier and, accordingly, kept its own budget in order, so that upon the breakup of the Soviet Union a momentous economic-aid program could have been commenced? What if we had better calculated the forces of the future so that we could have avoided going directly from the “end” of the Cold War to a new Balkan war…leaving little attention and far fewer resources for the shattered Soviet empire?

Because we have that second chance present conflict, as the president says over and over again, is not with Islam, but with a malignant growth within Islam defying the teaching of the Qu’ran that the struggle to the path of God forbids the deliberate killing of non-combatants. Just how and when Islam will rid itself of current heresies is something no one can say. But not soon…. Other clashes will follow.

Certainly we must not let ourselves be seen as rushing around the world looking for arguments…. Nor should we let ourselves be seen as ignoring allies, disillusioning friends, thinking only of ourselves in the most narrow terms. That is not how we survived the twentieth century.

Nor will it serve in the twenty-first.

Last February, some 60 academics of the widest range of political persuasion and religious belief, a number of them here at Harvard, including Huntington, published a manifesto: “What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America.” [See May-June, page 62]…We affirmed “five fundamental truths that pertain to all people without distinction,” beginning “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” We allow for our own shortcomings as a nation: sins, arrogance, failings. But we assert we are no less bound by moral obligation. And finally, “reason and careful moral reflection also teach us that there are times when the first and most important reply to evil is to stop it.”

But there is more…. Fifty-five years ago, on this occasion, General George C. Marshall summoned our nation to restore the countries whose mad regimes had brought the world such horror. It was an act of statesmanship and vision without equal in history. History summons us once more in different ways, but with even greater urgency. Civilization need not die. But at this moment, only the United States can save it. Thank you.

For complete texts of the Commencement speeches, visit www.harvard-magazine.com.