School of Hard Knocks
What President Summers never learned about Harvard.
By James Traub
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I have a soft spot for Larry Summers, who resigned yesterday as president of Harvard rather than face the humiliation of being fired. I admit that I develop a soft spot for almost everyone I spend 25 or 30 hours interviewing, as I did in Summers' case three years ago when I wrote a profile of him for the New York Times Magazine. I can't say that I found Summers' manner beguiling, or even prepossessing; he seemed, if anything, only barely socialized. But that's what I liked about him. Most university presidents are high-minded, silver-throated, and stupefyingly banal. Not Summers: The first time I heard him speak, when he was still Treasury secretary in the Clinton administration, he said something like, "There are two views on this subject, A and B, and I know I should say the truth lies between them. But it doesn't: A is right and B is wrong."

Now that Summers has been forced to resign after five years, his supporters, especially on the right, will be saying that he has paid the price for his candor. Summers was foolhardy enough to take on the African American Studies department, and the anti-Israel crowd, and the intellectual relativists, and the paladins of the Law School and so on. The Weekly Standard named him their "favorite university president." And the outraged, leftier-than-thou faculty struck back, insisting on a vote of confidence for next week that Summers seemed almost certain to lose—at which point the Harvard Corporation, the governing body of the university, pulled the plug. Or so the narrative will go.

It's true that a significant number of the many people I met who loathed Summers considered him a cultural conservative hellbent on pulling down the multicultural, deconstructionist temple of academic orthodoxy. And it's true as well that Summers disliked what he considered the ideological slant of much contemporary scholarship and prevented a number of scholars whose views he found faddish from gaining tenure. But he wasn't forced out of Harvard because he stood up to political correctness. If anything, Summers was forced out of Harvard because he behaved so boorishly that he provided a bottomless supply of ammunition to his enemies, both the ideologues and the doctrine-free. Sometimes it's just not a good idea to say "A is right and B is wrong"—for example, when you're talking to B's chief proponent.

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To be fair, it's no easy matter to take over an immensely self-regarding institution that needs serious renovation. Summers' predecessor, the amiable and ruminative Neil Rudenstine, had extricated himself from this dilemma by profusely thanking everyone in sight and taking tough issues under advisement for the duration. Summers was hired to kick some Harvard butt, whether in regard to the archaic system known as "every tub on its own bottom," which granted almost total independence to the various graduate schools, or to the plummeting standard of new hires at the Law School. "We didn't think we were hiring Dag Hammarskjold," as one corporation member told me.

And at first, Summers looked like an inspired choice. Besides being brilliant even by the Harvard standard of brilliance, he was willing to make tough decisions, and he was fundamentally forward-looking. He pointed out, for example, that while it was socially unacceptable at a great university to admit that one hadn't read a play by Shakespeare, you could safely joke about not knowing the difference between a gene and a chromosome. Summers instigated a review of Harvard's "core curriculum" with a view to raising the status of science and of quantitative thinking generally, as well as to answer perennial complaints from freshmen that they had little or no contact with senior faculty. Even before Summers' departure, faculty opposition appears to have worn him down on the subject. On the other hand, Summers' decision to reshape the physical campus by moving the sciences to a vast plot of land Harvard owns in the town of Allston, Mass., will presumably constitute his permanent legacy.

But Summers never came to grips with, or perhaps recognized, the special problem of the supremely self-regarding culture. As it happens, I have written about just such situations before and have even, when Tina Brown was editor of *The New Yorker*, worked at one. One thing I've learned is that the wise steward of such majestic institutions says, or at least is understood to say, "I love this place so much that I will not accept anything less than the best." Tina Brown gave *The New Yorker* a much-needed blood transfusion, but by making all too manifest her disdain for the eccentric heirloom she'd inherited, she provoked a generation of gifted contributors to leave, disposed of much of the magazine's fiber along with its mold, and got herself fired after five years (of steady financial losses, to be sure).
That Summers’ tenure now looks something like Tina Brown’s is bizarre. Despite the fact that he had established his intellectual reputation at Harvard, loved the place, and was as devoted as anyone there to the life of the mind, Summers nevertheless managed to persuade much of his constituency that he was an alien in their midst. And this had less to do with his views, or his position in the *kulturkampf*, than his manner, which was almost comically maladroit. One of Summers’ favorite phrases was, “Here’s what you’re thinking.” This would typically be followed by a bravura summation of what his interlocutor was, in fact, thinking. (Harvard professors harbor the vanity that they know very well what they’re thinking.) Summers had a gift for arming, rather than disarming, his audience. One of his own aides described for me a famously contentious meeting with Law School faculty at which, he said, “Larry told them he wasn’t going to pay any attention to their views, when in fact he was going to be listening to their views.” Summers so offended his own preferred candidate to head the Graduate School of Education, whom he subjected to a withering cross-examination, that she changed her mind about taking the position until members of the school interceded.

You do, of course, have to wonder about professional intellectuals who get so wobbly under cross-examination. Harvard professors appear to be accustomed to a level of deference that few of us on the other side of those Ivy walls could ever expect. Clearly this had much to do with the fabled Cornel West affair, when the president grievously offended this overhyped superstar by tendering what Summers apparently regarded as delicate hints on matters such as grade inflation and the production of serious academic work. Summers was right, as he generally was. But he never intended to insult West. In fact, he had no idea that he had insulted West. Summers himself wouldn’t have been offended, and it never crossed his mind that Cornel West might be made of different material than Larry Summers, or that West might need to hear some malarkey along the lines of, “I love your work so much that I don’t want to accept anything less than the best.” Larry Summers didn’t do malarkey; he did “the merits.” The professors under his charge, alas, were not made of such stern stuff as he, and it ought not have been beyond Summers’ ken to figure this out.

Over the years, Summers was whacked in the head by so many two-by-fours that he did finally learn some caution. He all but groveled in apology after he observed, in the spirit of free inquiry, or so he imagined, that innate abilities might have something to do with the difference between men and women in the distribution of test-score performance in the sciences. Summers kept away almost entirely from the culture wars in which he had embroiled himself in earlier years. But it was too late, for he had reduced his margin of error almost to zero. And when, last month, he forced out of office a dean who was not considered particularly effective and unconvincingly pleaded ignorance about a financial scandal engulfing a friend and fellow Harvard economist, he had apparently exceeded that margin by quite a bit. Summers finally lost his base of support in the Harvard Corporation, at which point he was left to choose only the date and manner of his departure.

I, for one, will miss Summers, since university presidents who have something to say that is worth hearing are as rare as hen’s teeth. And I worry that an emboldened faculty will push the Harvard Corporation to choose as his successor the reincarnation of Neil Rudenstine. Summers had a worthy cause; I hope he hasn’t wound up discrediting it.

*James Traub is at work on a book about Kofi Annan and the United Nations.*

*Photograph of Larry Summers by Douglas McFadd/Getty Images.*
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