

# David Hollinger on the Evangelical Republican Impact on Academia

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You're listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior Publicist for the Hopkins Press Journals Program. We're kicking off season four today with David Hollinger, who is the Preston Hotchkis Professor of History Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. His specialties are American intellectual history and American ethno-racial history. Today, we're gonna talk to him about his new article for *Social Research*, which is entitled "The Evangelical Capture of the Republican Party, and Its Implications for Academia." Dr. Hollinger's new article is part of a new special issue of *Social Research* called "The Embattled University", a stellar issue which also features contributions from Judith Butler, Lisa Anderson, Albenia Azamova, Ahmed Bawa, Supriya Chaudhuri, Nicholas B. Dirks, Len Gutkin, and Jonathan Veitch. A lot of good stuff in there! Highly recommend checking it out, especially if you have a stake in the future of higher education. So with no further ado, let's speak with Dr. David Hollinger.

All right, we are here with David Hollinger. Thank you so much for joining us on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

## David Hollinger

Glad to be here.

## Rahne Alexander

So, this was a really fascinating article and it's a highlight of the new issue of *Social Research*. It's a special issue devoted to "The Embattled University." Was your piece commissioned for the issue or was it a piece that was already in development?

## David Hollinger

Well, it was commissioned for the issue, but it came to me at a very opportune time because I had been working up to say some of these things and was figuring that I would do an article and send it somewhere. And then I got this wonderful invitation from the editors of *Social Research*. So it was perfect timing. It was at their invitation, but on the other hand, I had a head of steam going.

## Rahne Alexander

That's great. That's great. It's lovely when when all those forces merge together. So you begin with a very bold statement, which is that for the first time in American history, we have a major party that has a vested interest in keeping the education level of society low." Can you explain what you mean by that?

## David Hollinger

The Republicans have a vested interest in an electorate with a very limited education right now. That's a remarkable thing in American history. I can't think of

any other time that that's happened. And it makes sense if you consider several of the policy domains of interest to Republicans and where education, particularly a liberal arts education, this is different from technical vocational education, but a liberal arts education enables individuals to be more, to more easily recognize indicators of global warming. Education helps people appreciate the value of vaccines. Education enables people to understand the past disabling legacy for descendants of enslaved Americans. Education helps people grasp the evidence that Joe Biden won the election of 2020. Education helps people see how much of human life opens up for women when they have reproductive choice. Education helps people understand how tariffs affect consumer expenses. Education helps people discern what really happened on January 6, 2021, rather than just being subject to what various polemicists say. Education enables people to recognize the Nakba of 1948, the expulsion of the Palestinians as a basic part of modern history. An education helps people just see through a lot of the lies that Trump has told all during his time. And although the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and *The Atlantic* expose these things all the time, I mean, if you're not well educated, it's easy to be hornswoggled by this kind of stuff. Education helps people understand the importance of foreign aid. So there's a lot of, if you look down at the different policy things on which the Republicans and the Democrats disagree, there is astonishing number of these things where more education is going to make people more likely to sympathize with the policy positions of the Democrats. Now that's a remarkable thing in American history to have one of the parties so clearly identified with more education.

### **Rahne Alexander**

Yeah, that's really wild! And you point out in the article that the Republican Party was traditionally very pro-education. Its leaders promoted development of public education in many states, especially in New York and California. You say Earl Warren, Nelson Rockefeller, they were Republicans. Dwight Eisenhower was even the president of Columbia University before he ran for (U.S.) president. What do you think happened to the Republican Party?

### **David Hollinger**

What happens in, say, from about the 1960s and 70s and 80s, there's a gradual change. But the dependence of Republicans on low education voters is not really new. It began to be remarked upon after this last election. A lot of the pundits began to talk about this. But, you know, if you go back to 2016 or 2020, Trump didn't make any effort really to connect with high education voters. I mean, he basically ignored all the states that had higher education voters. He didn't campaign even in 2016 for the electoral votes of any state in the eastern corridor from Maine to Virginia, with the exception of Pennsylvania. He didn't try to win the Pacific states of California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. And already by 2016, before the age of Trump, the Republican Party had so abandoned the 16 coastal states that have higher education levels, they had so abandoned them that of the 32 senators representing those coastal states in 2016, only two were Republicans, Susan Collins of Maine and Patrick Joseph Toomey of Pennsylvania. So what happens is that the Republican Party from about the 1970s and 80s down through 2012, 2016, lost a *commitment* to winning the electoral votes and the senatorial seats of the states that had the highest educational level. That's quite a remarkable change [Laughter] in American history.

**Rahne Alexander**

So you say this goes back to the Southern strategy. How so?

**David Hollinger**

What happens is that when the Republicans decide in, well, originally with Goldwater, but particularly by the time you get to Nixon, then above all with Reagan, they decide that they want to build an electorate based on the southern states. And that's because the Southern states have so many voters that are uncomfortable about school integration, are uncomfortable about so much attention to civil rights for Black people. So this looks like a good bunch of Republican votes. So when we talk about the Southern strategy, we usually talk about it with race, and that's understandable. But something about the Southern strategy that doesn't get as much attention, are its religious and its educational coordinates, you might say, or components, because it turns out that the same states that the Republicans chose for those sort of classic racial reasons are also the states that have the highest percentage of evangelical Protestants by far, by far. And also they're the states that have the lowest educational level by far.

So what happens is when the Republicans begin developing the Southern strategy, why they become more and more dependent on the Southerners and on the equivalents of the Southern white voters, the evangelicals, the lower educated people in the Great Plains and in the mountains and parts of the Midwest. So the Republican Party finds that these voters are very reliable. I mean, you can count on them. [Laughter] I don't think they started out with this in mind. I mean, I don't think they were trying to do that. I think that they were interested in the racial thing, but it turns out that they were sort of stuck with a bunch of voters that were not interested in much education, not interested in secularization. So you have a Republican party that's increasingly dependent on voters that they can really count on. That's the key. The Republicans find by the 1990s, by the early 21st century, that these people will always come out. They will always vote for you. So you're getting 80 % of the white evangelicals voting for the Republicans well before the end of the 20th century. That's not something that's new.

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah, that's so interesting. And so the evangelicals end up having a huge influence on the Republican Party, even though we're seeing a more secularization in the United States, right?

**David Hollinger**

Yeah, even the evangelicals bring into the Republican Party a Manichean element, a sharp good-evil distinction. you know, politics are accustomed to making compromises. Well, okay, you get some pretty fierce disagreements, to be sure. But the evangelicals bring in a sensibility of apocalyptic struggle between good and evil. And you find this all through Billy Graham's writings and all through most evangelical preaching. so it's harder to do compromise that. So you get a Republican party, which we see today, which is really very implacable. So you have a Republican evangelical who's the speaker of the House. All these things we read about in the daily press about how opposed to cooperation and compromise, the Republicans are. And this is partly because of this evangelical base. I mean, think basically what

happens here is that the Republicans, many of whom at the beginning didn't have any particular interest in evangelicalism, didn't have any particular interest in religion, you know, they were sort of okay with it, but they end up being captured because of the magnificent reliability of these evangelical voters. So by today, white evangelicals constitute only about 13% of the population of the United States, but they're overwhelmingly influential. I have, and you know, like one of the country now professes no religion at all. So this is an increasingly secular society, but here the politics are so dominated by these Republicans. It's interesting that there's only one member of the Congress that does not proclaim a religious affiliation. So now here you have one third of the country not having a religious affiliation, one congressman. Okay. So that's an emblem for this juxtaposition that's come about.

**Rahne Alexander**

That's so interesting. So this issue of *Social Research* to which your article is contributed is devoted to "The Embattled University." Just how does this vested interest of the Republican Party affect higher education?

**David Hollinger**

We see this in JD Vance's endlessly quoted remark, building on Nixon, "*professors are the enemy*." We see this in the attacks that we've been reading about of the Trump administration on Columbia University, on Harvard especially, and the canceling of a whole lot of research grants that affect all kinds of universities.

Even though Trump seems to have a particular animus against Harvard and Columbia and the Ivy League, it's reaching out in all sorts of ways. So, the, the challenge that higher education has is to maintain its funding at a time when we've become accustomed to very strong federal support for education, public and private education. And then the Republicans are part of their attack on what they think of as liberal elites is to diminish the standing of universities. And even though the Vance comment is one that gets quoted a lot, there are a number of other Republican leaders that have said similar kinds of things. And we really are now dealing with a government of the United States that is increasingly Christian supremacist. It's not just white supremacist, it's Christian supremacist. And the Christian supremacy of a lot of these people cuts against the nonsectarianism of higher education, the pluralism of higher education. So here these universities are always stressing open inquiry and a variety of points of view and diversity and all this. And then the government of the United States is just not comfortable with that as it used to be.

**Rahne Alexander**

So much of the article is devoted to how higher education might handle this current crisis. And you emphasize the need for academics to explain themselves more effectively to the public. One of the quotes you quoted a journalist is complaining, "You academics are too cynical about the public. You don't do enough to explain yourselves. You don't give people enough credit for being able to understand you." What about that? Are academics too aloof from the public? What should they be saying to the public?

**David Hollinger**

Yeah, this is a real problem. I think university leaders have been complacent for a long time and have just assumed that all this money is going to keep coming from public sources rather than making sure that large segments of the public understand what universities are. And I think that many university presidents, when they talk about what we do deal with it too narrowly in economic and technological concerns. They say, well, as a result of higher education and universities, why, you know, we get better medical technology. Well, that's true. I mean, it's important to keep mentioning that. But there's also a civic aspect to it that I think leaders of higher education have been insufficiently forthright about. I mean, you could say that we university people serve society by placing its inherited pieties and entrenched interests at risk. Not in some iconoclastic mode, but rather by way of ensuring that the beliefs and entanglements that people have survive only when they are strong enough to meet the most empirically warranted and conceptually coherent of challenges. So the idea of honestly, critically evaluating ideas that are prominent in society, social policies and so forth. That's what we're supposed to do. And it makes some people uncomfortable, but it really is our role. Our role as university professors is not to make *people comfortable*. Our role is more to try and advance truth, knowledge, and make sure that social policy, that public conduct is based on as much knowledge as we can acquire now.

Not all questions have an easy answer, in terms of knowledge, but knowledge helps a lot. As we've just seen in all sorts of issues in our society, it really helps to have some knowledge as to what's going on. So when I say the most empirically warranted and conceptually coherent of challenges, I mean that you have to really go after these ideas that are around and try to critically discuss them. That's what we should be doing. And saying that straight out risks bothering some people. Are you saying that what we learn from our churches and our peer groups and our families is subject to correction? Yes, we are saying that! We are saying that we would like to help you understand the basis for our lives together. Doesn't mean that we have to be mean to each other, to quarrel about it. But universities have a critical dimension that we should be proud to proclaim.

**Rahne Alexander**

I agree with that. Do you think there's mistakes that academics can make in dealing with the public?

**David Hollinger**

I think that sometimes universities try to take on too much. Rather than just being organized around truth and knowledge and critical inquiry, which is what we ought to be doing, we're often tempted to become all-purpose instruments for social justice. Now, I can understand this temptation. I'm subject to it myself.

Because there are so many injustices in the society and so many institutions don't deal with it. So there's a feeling that we in the universities ought to take this over. And that's why there's so much conversation about DEI, example, diversity, equity and inclusion. Well, it's one thing to try and bring about fair practices within a university, but when we try to make ourselves an instrument for curing a lot of the social ills outside, I think that takes us beyond our normal sphere and risks getting in the way of our doing the things that we're really designed to do. A favorite example of mine, these DEI statements, now there's been much discussion here in

the last year or so about them, but these were the arrangements that many universities had. Whereas if you're applying for a faculty position, you have to write out sort of what you believe about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And as a number of studies have shown, lot of campuses have these sort of, as we might say, political commissars that check these things out. Oh well, here's somebody who doesn't really seem to believe in our mission of social justice. This is a person who has like two conservative views or he or she says that he doesn't even believe in affirmative action. Well, we don't want that person around. I mean, there's a lot of evidence that they're really —or that some of these people have been zapped on that basis. Okay, that's a mistake! We should be hiring faculty and sustaining an academic environment that is based on professionalism, on academic professionalism, not on a capacity to solve all these problems in society at large. One thing that's kind of awkward right now is that a lot of us who have been arguing for greater academic professionalism, and for the end of DEI statements, find ourselves sort of allied with the Trump administration because they come along and they blast all these things.

[Laughter]

then guys like [inaudible] said, you must be supporting Trump. Well, of course! I'm not supporting Trump. We've been arguing for these things for a long time. There was a good comment the other day by Steven Pinker at Harvard who said that, "If it's raining, you should put up an umbrella, even if Trump says it's a good idea." So we should have our own understanding of what universities need and we should do it and we should avoid mistakes no matter what Trump and his administration think. So yes, I think we can make mistakes. I think we've made mistakes. I think we've done too much outreach. I think we often exaggerate the comprehensive role of racism in American history. Now racism is there. I mean, it's very important.

I'm retired now, but I taught in the classroom for 44 years. And I taught about racism all the time. And it's not as though we just somehow discovered this. It's always there, but it's a matter of putting it into perspective. We want to advance democratic pluralism in the society, which I certainly do. Then we need to make sure that we don't overstep things. I think from the point of view of universities, discovering and disseminating *the truth is enough*.

**Rahne Alexander**

I can't argue with that. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything you'd like to add?

**David Hollinger**

Yeah, one thing I would add, I think this matter of the United States suddenly having a major political party that actually has a vested interest in keeping people from getting a liberal arts education, I think this is an astonishing fact about American history. And we're in it right now! The Republican Party does not want people to study professionally validated history, sociology, philosophy, political science. This is a terrible thing for the country.

**Rahne Alexander**

Thank you so much for your time and thank you for being on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

**David Hollinger**

Alright.

**Rahne Alexander**

Thank you for tuning in to the Hopkins Press Podcast. We're making David Hollinger's *Social Research* article, "The Evangelical Capture Of The Republican Party And Its Implications For Academia", available to read for free through the rest of July via Project MUSE.

If you're enjoying the Hopkins Press Podcast, please rate us on your favorite platform, subscribe, tell a friend. Thanks again for listening and we hope to see you next time on the Hopkins Press Podcast!