

# Inquiring Minds topic – 7 January 2022

Roger Palms, Moderator

## Should he who pays the piper be allowed to call the tune?

The Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy is one of Yale University's most celebrated and prestigious programs. Over the course of a year, it allows a select group of about two dozen students to immerse themselves in classic texts of history and statecraft, while also rubbing shoulders with guest instructors drawn from the worlds of government, politics, military affairs and the media.

But now, a program created to train future leaders how to steer through the turbulent waters of history is facing a crisis of its own.

Beverly Gage, a historian of 20th-century politics who has led the program since 2017, has resigned, saying the university failed to stand up for academic freedom amid inappropriate efforts by its donors to influence its curriculum and faculty hiring.

The donors, both prominent and deep-pocketed, are [Nicholas F. Brady](#), a former U.S. Treasury secretary under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and [Charles B. Johnson](#), a mutual fund billionaire and leading Republican donor who in 2013 made a \$250 million donation to Yale — the largest gift in its history.

Days after the 2020 presidential election, Professor Gage said, an opinion article in The New York Times by another instructor in the program calling Donald J. Trump a demagogue who threatened the Constitution prompted complaints from Mr. Brady.

Four months of wrangling over the program later, Professor Gage resigned after the university administration informed her that a new advisory board it was creating under previously ignored bylaws would be dominated by conservative figures of the donors' choosing.

Her resignation raises the question of where universities draw the line between honoring original agreements with donors and allowing them undue sway in academic affairs. It's a question that can become turbocharged when colliding political visions, and the imperatives of fund-raising, are involved.

Since taking over the program, Professor Gage has expanded the syllabus to include grass-roots social movements, like the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and the civil rights movement in the United States. Until late last year, she said, she had received no criticism from the donors or the administration about the course's direction.

The administration disputed her claims that Yale had given in to donor pressure. What the administration sees as legitimate oversight, Professor Gage, who remains a tenured professor in the history department, sees as a sudden effort by the donors to establish "some form of surveillance and control" over the program.

"It's very difficult to teach effectively or creatively in a situation where you are being second-guessed and undermined and not protected," she said in an interview.

The Grand Strategy program was founded in 2000 by the Yale historians John Lewis Gaddis, a [leading scholar](#) of the Cold War, and Paul Kennedy, the author of [“The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers”](#) The idea was to teach leadership through an eclectic curriculum of classic texts, case-studies and crisis simulations, incorporating thinkers and topics from Thucydides, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli to the Cold War.

The course quickly [drew admirers \(and imitators\)](#) well beyond Yale, along with plenty of suspicion on the predominantly liberal campus, where some saw it as a cultish bastion of retrograde “great man” history.

In 2006, it was formally endowed with a combined gift of \$17.5 million from Mr. Johnson and Mr. Brady. In [a 2013 article](#) in The Yale Daily News, Professor Gaddis said Mr. Brady had given a single directive: “Teach common sense.”

Professor Gage, 49, has incorporated social movement strategy into the course. (In a recent essay, she described herself as someone who “was as likely to be a protester as a policymaker.”) She said she has sought to bring in a demographically, politically and intellectually diverse group of practitioners as teachers and guest speakers. Recent invitees have included the former defense secretary James N. Mattis; the conservative intellectual Yuval Levin; the civil rights lawyer Vanita Gupta, and the racial justice activist Heather McGhee.

Professor Gage, who was [recently nominated](#) to the National Council on the Humanities, was renewed by Yale as program director in July 2020. (She is also a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine and has written opinion pieces for The Times.) She described her previous relationship with the donors as supportive.

But she said the tone abruptly changed last November, a week after the presidential election, when Bryan Garsten, a Yale political scientist who teaches in the program, published [an opinion article](#) called “How to Protect America From the Next Donald Trump.”

The next day, Professor Gage received an email from Mr. Hill saying Mr. Brady had called “to grouse” about the article, “complaining that there was no grand strategy in it.” According to the email, which was viewed by The Times, Mr. Brady also said that “this is not what Charlie Johnson and I signed up for.” (Mr. Hill [died last March](#), at 84.) In a phone call with Professor Gage that day, Mr. Brady reiterated his view and began asking about the syllabus and practitioners. “It was strange, because none of that had changed much in the past three years,” she said.

Mr. Brady lamented that the program isn’t “what it was.” When she pressed for specifics, he said she wasn’t teaching Grand Strategy “the way Henry Kissinger would.” “I said, “That’s absolutely right. I am not teaching Grand Strategy the way Henry Kissinger would,” she said.

Mr. Brady sent her an excerpt from the 2006 donor agreement, outlining an outside five-member “board of visitors” that would advise on the appointments of the practitioners.

Professor Gage had never heard of this board, which had never been established. Dr. Lewis, the vice provost, told her he would look into it. Two weeks later, Dr. Lewis said he had confirmed details in the donor agreement, and Yale had a legal obligation to create the board.

Professor Gage wasn’t happy. But if it were created, she insisted to Dr. Lewis, it would need diversity across generational, ideological, methodological, racial and gender lines. And the donors could not be allowed to appoint its members.

Yale, she said, seemed to agree. What followed were nearly two months of back and forth, with Dr. Lewis sending along a string of suggestions — most of them Republicans or conservatives, Professor Gage said. She said she told him most would be fine, as long as the board had a diverse mix.

But in late February, things “started to head downhill.” she said. In a phone call, she said, Dr. Lewis told her that the donors were threatening to sue to reclaim the remaining Grand Strategy endowment. And it was suggested that Mr. Johnson’s [\\$250 million donation](#) might also be in doubt.

On March 4, things came to a head. According to Professor Gage, Dr. Lewis told her that Mr. Johnson had what Dr. Lewis said was a mistaken impression that he could choose the board, and that he wanted to name Stephen J. Hadley, former national security adviser to George W. Bush; Thomas H. Kean, the former Republican governor of New Jersey; and Mr. Kissinger.

Professor Gage told him the board lacked the necessary variety, and that she objected to Mr. Kissinger. “He represents the opposite of the generational shift I have been trying to make,” she said in the interview.

The next week, Professor Gage said, Dr. Lewis said Dr. Salovey was moving ahead with a board including those three men. And it would not include anyone with social-movement expertise, because the donors didn’t want that.

Dr. Salovey asked her to see things “from the university’s perspective,” as she recalled it, describing it as a donor-management situation that would likely settle down.

She told him that unless Yale came out more strongly in favor of academic freedom and in support of the current program, she would resign. Several days later, she did so, effective in December.

Professor Gage said that at a time when many people are concerned about the lack of political diversity at elite campuses, it was ironic that the Grand Strategy program had come under fire.

“This program really tried to be something that lots of people say they want universities to be: a place of open engagement across ideological lines,” she said.

*- From the New York Times and the Economist*

## **Thought starters:**

1. Can donors be expected to support a program without input on how that program is run?
2. Should professors have full sway on what and how they teach?
3. Universities need donors or there is no program. How can the University Administration satisfy both donors and professors?
4. Money talks in both academia and in politics. The student and voter seem to be left out. What's the answer to this problem?
5. Is there always going to be a hopeless dilemma about influence, not only at universities but even in local school boards? Is there a way through this?
6. There are some in our group who have taught at the college level. There may be a personal example of this issue that will help the rest of us. Just be mindful of time constraints.
7. If there is time for additional consideration, we all know that this issue is also a problem in public school where teachers are being confronted by parents who want to dictate what should be taught to their children.