LETTER FROM BERKELEY JULY 2, 2018 ISSUE

HOW SOCIAL-MEDIA TROLLS TURNED U.C. BERKELEY INTO A FREE-SPEECH CIRCUS

Public universities have no choice but to welcome far-right speakers seeking self-promotion. Should the First Amendment be reinterpreted for the digital age?

By Andrew Marantz

One afternoon last fall, I sat in the Free Speech Movement Café, on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, drinking a fair-trade, shade-grown coffee. Students at nearby tables chatted in Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and English; next to me, a student alternated between reading a

battered copy of "The Myth of Sisyphus," by Camus, and checking Facebook on her phone. "This café," a placard read, "is an educational reminder for the community that the campus freedoms we take for granted did not always exist, and, in the democratic tradition, had to be fought for." In the fall of 1964, left-wing students at U.C. Berkeley demanded the right to hand out antiwar literature on Sproul Plaza, the red brick agora at the center of the campus. The administration refused, citing rules against the use of school property for external organizing. The students' struggle, which became known as the Free Speech Movement, consumed the university's attention for much of the academic year, and made minor national celebrities of the movement's undergraduate leaders—especially Mario Savio, who was rakish enough to be a countercultural icon and articulate enough to be interviewed on television. Joan Baez went to Berkeley to show support for the students, singing "We Shall Overcome" from the steps of Sproul Hall. In the end, the students won, and some of them went on to join the next generation of professors and university administrators. "Freedom of speech," Mario Savio once said, "is the thing that marks us as just below the angels."

Fifty-three years later, the mood on campus was distinctly less celestial. Like the agitation throughout the country, the agitation at Berkeley had many long-roiling causes, but its proximate cause was easy to identify: a right-wing professional irritant named Milo Yiannopoulos. A former Breitbart editor and a self-proclaimed "Internet supervillain," he was known less for his arguments than for his combative one-liners and protean, peroxide-blond hair. Another word for "Internet supervillain" is "troll," and, whenever too many news cycles passed without any mention of him, Yiannopoulos showed up somewhere unexpected, such as the White House press briefing room or a left-leaning college campus, hoping to provoke a reaction.

In the process, he convinced his supporters that he should be a poster child for campus free speech, a principle that is universally lauded in theory but vexingly thorny in practice. In the 2017-18 academic year, Politico reported, an unusually large number of universities struggled "to balance their commitment to free speech—which has been challenged by alt-right supporters of President Donald Trump—with campus safety." One expert on campus life called this "the No. 1 topic of the year." Many college administrators were forced to devote their scarce time and money to securing on-campus venues for pugnacious right-wing speakers such as Ann Coulter and David Horowitz; arch-conservative policy entrepreneurs such as Heather Mac Donald and Charles Murray; and avowed racists such as Richard Spencer. These are names that a lot of Americans would prefer to forget. All of these figures hold views that are divisive, or worse. Yet this is precisely what makes them useful test cases. The Supreme Court's most important First Amendment opinions often concern the lowliest forms of human expression: a burning cross, a homophobic slur, a "BONG HITS 4 JESUS" banner.

Yiannopoulos, who claims to disdain identity politics but rarely forgoes an opportunity to call attention to his sexual orientation, spent much of 2016 and the early part of 2017 on what he called the Dangerous Faggot Tour, visiting dozens of colleges across the country. Each stop was part Trump rally, part standup show, part PowerPoint deck, and part bigoted rant. At U.C. Santa Barbara, a group of young men wearing red "Make America Great Again" hats carried Yiannopoulos into the venue on a litter; he then delivered, in a genteel Oxbridge accent, a lecture called "Feminism Is Cancer." At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he projected a photo of a transgender student, subjecting her to public mockery. "It's just a man in a dress, isn't it?" he said.

The last stop on his tour, on February 1, 2017, was U.C. Berkeley, the nation's

preëminent public university, in one of its most proudly left-leaning cities. A week before Yiannopoulos's arrival, the U.C. system had reaffirmed its promise to protect undocumented students from arrest and deportation. In response, Yiannopoulos called for Berkeley's administrators to be criminally prosecuted. There were rumors that he planned to name undocumented students from the stage, alerting Immigration and Customs Enforcement to their presence. There was little that administrators could do. At a public institution, cancelling a speech because of what the speaker might say is called prior restraint, and the courts have generally deemed it unconstitutional.

On the afternoon of the event, fifteen hundred protesters amassed on Sproul Plaza. Some called themselves Antifa, for "anti-Fascist," a loose collective of far-left vigilantes who draw inspiration from the European anarchist tradition. A few protesters, wearing black clothing and bandannas or masks over their faces, hurled metal police barricades through a plate-glass window of Berkeley's student center; someone set fire to a lighting rig, and flames leaped several stories into the air. A Berkeley student, wearing a red hat that said "Make Bitcoin Great Again," was interviewed by a local news crew as the mayhem escalated behind her. "I'm looking to just make a statement by being here, and I think the protesters are doing the same," she said. "And props to them, for the ones who are doing it nonviolently." Moments later, a masked protester ran up and pepper-sprayed her in the face.

Police evacuated Yiannopoulos from campus before he could speak. The next morning, the riot was the lead story on "Fox & Friends." The show's most prominent fan, Donald Trump, who had been President for less than two weeks, tweeted, "If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view - NO FEDERAL FUNDS?" The whole spectacle was such a boon to Yiannopoulos's brand that some left-wing

conspiracy theorists wondered whether he had hired the masked protesters himself.

Spring came, and then summer. The annual Berkeley Kite Festival took place at the marina. Biologists from Berkeley published a paper in *Science* explaining how chickens grow feathers. Yiannopoulos wrote a book that included some of the zingers he'd trotted out at his college talks, and it reached No. 2 on the *Times* nonfiction best-seller list.

Carol Christ, a scholar of Victorian literature and a former president of Smith College, took office as Berkeley's new chancellor. She had been a Berkeley professor for many years, beginning in 1970—close enough to the Free Speech Movement to be touched by its spirit. A few days into the fall semester, she announced that a student group had invited Yiannopoulos back to Berkeley, and

that she intended to let him speak. Citing the Bill of Rights and John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty," she declared that her first academic year as chancellor would be "a free speech year." "We would be providing students with a less valuable education," Christ wrote, "if we tried to shelter them from ideas that many find wrong, even dangerous." The homage was surely unintentional, but "Dangerous" happened to be the title of Yiannopoulos's book.

Whether a sophist like Milo Yiannopoulos may speak at a public university like Berkeley is less a question of what the law is than of what the law should be. The Supreme Court has been consistent, during the past half century or so, in its broad interpretation of the First Amendment. "Speech can't be prevented simply because it's offensive, even if it's very deeply offensive," Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean of the U.C. Berkeley School of Law and the co-author of a book called "Free Speech on Campus," told me one morning in his office. He grimaced sympathetically as he talked, like a doctor delivering bad news. "I would argue that it's generally a good idea to protect speech we don't like, even when we're not legally obligated to do so, but in this case we are."

Voltaire, anti-Semite and sage of the Enlightenment, is credited with the aphorism "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Chemerinsky, arguably the foremost First Amendment scholar in the country, believes, in the Voltairean tradition, that free speech is the bedrock of a free society. I asked him about the Antifa activists who had vowed to shut down Yiannopoulos's events by any means necessary. "Violence is never protected by the Constitution," he said. "And preventing the speech of others, even by using one's own speech, is called the heckler's veto, and it is not protected, either."

On talk radio and social media, many free-speech advocates lack Chemerinsky's judiciousness. Some answer every challenge with a recitation of the First

Amendment, as if its forty-five words were a magic spell that could settle any debate. Free-speech skeptics on the left can be equally predisposed to bad-faith arguments—misreading or ignoring the Constitution, dismissing the concept of free speech as inherently racist, or simply bypassing discourse and setting public property on fire.

There are better arguments. "No one is disputing how the courts have ruled on this," john a. powell, a Berkeley law professor with joint appointments in the departments of African-American Studies and Ethnic Studies, told me. "What I'm saying is that courts are often wrong." Powell is tall, with a relaxed sartorial style, and his manner of speaking is soft and serenely confident. Before he became an academic, he was the national legal director of the A.C.L.U. "I represented the Ku Klux Klan when I was in that job," he said. "My family was not pleased with me, but I said, 'Look, they have First Amendment rights, too.' So it's not that I don't understand or care deeply about free speech. But what would it look like if we cared just as deeply about equality? What if we weighed the two as conflicting values, instead of this false formalism where the right to speech is recognized but the harm caused by that speech is not?"

Yiannopoulos and many of his defenders like to call themselves free-speech absolutists, but this is hyperbole. No one actually believes that all forms of expression are protected by the First Amendment. False advertising, child pornography, blackmail—all are speech, all are illegal. You're not allowed to shout "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, make a "true threat," or incite imminent violence. These are all exceptions to the First Amendment that the Supreme Court has made—made up, really—over time. The boundaries can and do shift. In 1940, a New Hampshire man was jailed for calling a city marshal "a damned Fascist." The Supreme Court upheld the conviction, ruling that the words were not protected by the First Amendment, because they were "fighting words,"

which "by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace."

Are some of Yiannopoulos's antics—say, his attempts to intimidate undocumented and transgender students—closer to fighting words than to intellectual discourse? Maybe. But the fighting-words doctrine has fallen out of favor with the courts. In 2006, the Westboro Baptist Church picketed a soldier's funeral, carrying signs that read "Thank God for dead soldiers" and "You're going to Hell." Even factoring in almost seven decades of epithet inflation, this would seem more injurious than "damned Fascist." And yet the Supreme Court ruled that the signs were protected by the First Amendment.

In the nineteen-seventies, when women entered the workplace in large numbers, some male bosses made salacious comments, or hung pornographic images on the walls. "These days, we'd say, 'That's a hostile workplace, that's sexual harassment,' " powell said. "But those weren't recognized legal concepts yet. So the courts' response was 'Sorry, nothing we can do. Pornographic posters are speech. If women don't like it, they can put up their own posters.' " He drew an analogy to today's trolls and white supremacists. "The knee-jerk response is 'Nothing we can do, it's speech.' 'Well, hold on, what about the harm they're causing?' 'What harm? It's just words.' That might sound intuitive to us now. But, if you know the history, you can imagine how our intuitions might look foolish, even immoral, a generation later."

In the media, and on his Facebook and Instagram feeds, Yiannopoulos tirelessly promoted his return to Berkeley. Instead of a mere lecture, he envisioned "a huge, multi-day event" called Milo's Free Speech Week. A video had recently come to light in which he'd made some deeply ill-advised comments about pederasty. Afterward, he'd been widely condemned on both the

left and the right. He seemed to hope that his Berkeley appearance would restore him to mainstream relevance, and perhaps marketability.

He posted a schedule, at FreeSpeechWeek.com, that culminated in the presentation of the first annual Mario Savio Award for Free Speech. (Savio died in 1996; his son Daniel told the *Guardian* that Yiannopoulos's appropriation of his father's legacy was "some kind of sick joke.") When Yiannopoulos spoke privately to his influential friends on the far right, he often said, "This will be our Woodstock." He released a list of more than twenty speakers, which included many of the usual free-speech warriors and also some surprising names, such as the secretive military-security magnate Erik Prince. In addition to Yiannopoulos, the four headliners would be Ann Coulter; Pamela Geller, a virulently Islamophobic blogger from Long Island; Mike Cernovich, a conspiracy theorist and vigilante journalist; and Steve Bannon, newly fired from his job as Trump's chief strategist. To build anticipation, Yiannopoulos's team made promotional videos about each headliner, in the style of an action-movie trailer. "Bannon Infiltrates Berkeley," less than thirty seconds long, has been viewed more than thirty thousand times.

Mindful of the potential for violence, some students requested a robust police presence; others suggested that more police on campus would make them feel less safe, not more; still others demanded that the university cancel Free Speech Week. More than a hundred and fifty Berkeley faculty members and graduate students signed an open letter calling for a campus-wide boycott. Christ told me that she never considered cancelling the event. "The reputational cost would simply be too high," she said. Reputational cost is impossible to quantify, but the literal cost to U.C. Berkeley, in security fees alone, was likely to exceed a million dollars. The university had a budget deficit of more than a hundred million dollars, with less funding coming from the state in recent years. "Would I rather

devote our precious resources to more class sections, overdue building repairs, or many other things we badly need?" Christ continued. "Absolutely. But we have to make this work." Others on campus speculated that Yiannopoulos's real goal was to force a government-subsidized institution to expend as many resources as possible. On FreeSpeechWeek.com, there were T-shirts for sale reading "Defund Berkeley."

Traditionally, outside speakers don't have unilateral power to schedule their own events on college campuses—like vampires, they have to be invited in—and Yiannopoulos was the guest of a conservative student organization called the Berkeley Patriot. "We don't want to seem like we support someone like Milo, because we don't," Pranav Jandhyala, one of the Patriot students, told the *Daily Cal*, the campus newspaper. "We're simply inviting him because free speech is protected." As the ostensible organizers of the event, the students had to sign contracts and waivers, assuming significant legal risk. At the time, the Berkeley Patriot had existed for only a few months. It had between five and twenty active members, depending on the definition of "active." For a while, the administration and the Patriot students worked well together. "We're treating them the way we'd treat any other students who are taking on something difficult and need our support," Dan Mogulof, the assistant vice-chancellor for public affairs, told me. "We want to be sure that they don't feel unsafe or marginalized."

Then things began to fall apart. The university set several deadlines, and, amid negotiations over contracts, the Patriot students missed them all. It also became clear that Yiannopoulos's lineup was not a list of confirmed speakers but a wish list. "Contrary to news reports, I have not been contacted about participating in Free Speech Week," Heather Mac Donald tweeted. Erik Prince told *The Atlantic* that his presence on the list was "a typo." Bannon said nothing publicly, but several people told me that he was scheduled to be in China that week. "I would

never under any circumstances appear at an event that included Milo Yiannopoulos," Charles Murray told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Asked why, Murray responded, "Because he is a despicable asshole."

Carol Christ told me, "The metaphor I've been thinking about a lot is that of an object and its shadow. At first, I was imagining a conventional lecture: the lecture is the object; the digital recording is its shadow." We were sitting in her office, which she hadn't had time to finish unpacking. Several copies of the Norton Critical Edition of "The Mill on the Floss," which she had edited, remained in a cardboard box on the floor. "By contrast," she continued, "when I consider Milo's —I'll use the word 'event,' although I'm not sure that that's exactly the right word—it's becoming clearer that he's actually trying to plant a narrative, a trail of impressions and images, that lives primarily in the digital world, and that we, this physical campus, are merely the shadow."

Yiannopoulos is not the only orator who has figured out that a speaking gig at a public university, especially in the face of fierce ideological opposition, is an easy way to attract an audience. "My college tour began after the victory by Donald Trump," Richard Spencer, a proponent of "peaceful ethnic cleansing," said in a recent YouTube video. "I loved it. I thought it was a great success, and so did most everyone else." Such speakers often portray themselves as soldiers for free speech, but more often they use the First Amendment as a convenient shield.

One fall afternoon at Berkeley, outside the Free Speech Movement Café, several undergraduates gathered in a semicircle around an oversized poster, Sharpies in hand, doing what their liberal-arts curriculum had trained them to do: dissecting a text. "This is so full of fallacies, I just assumed it was by a student," one of them said. In fact, it was a transcription of a lecture that the conservative pundit Ben

Shapiro had delivered on campus the previous week. A former Breitbart editor, he now runs a site called the Daily Wire and hosts "The Ben Shapiro Show," the most popular right-wing podcast in the country. A first-year student with pink highlights in her hair pointed to one sentence: "The Constitution was not written by a bunch of people who speak Korean." It was one step in Shapiro's argument that there was no systemic racism in the United States. "As an Asian-American, I feel personally attacked," she said, adding, "I'm, like, half joking." Another sentence on the poster read, "Income inequality is not the big problem; nobody rich is making you poor." Above the latter clause, a student had written, in blue, "False premise, no one suggests that." Another student wrote, in red, "Read Marx plz."

Shapiro tries to appeal to both the pro-Trump and the anti-Trump factions of the Republican base, spitting out indignant syllogisms in a rapid nasal delivery that sounds like a podcast played at double speed. He had reserved a lecture hall on Sproul Plaza, and a thousand protesters showed up outside the venue. Compared with Yiannopoulos's appearance, there were far more police, and they were far more aggressive. They arrested nine protesters and confiscated a few sticks and other potential weapons. There was no violence—at least, not of the physical variety. "Speech is violent, we will not be silent!" a group of students, standing outside the Martin Luther King Jr. Student Union, chanted. Later, I asked Viana Roland, a political-science student who had joined the chant, what she'd meant. Roland is from Santa Maria, a farm town several hours south of Berkeley. "Folks in my family pick strawberries, and some of them are undocumented," she said. "Shapiro says that systemic racism is a myth. That is an apologetics for white supremacy, an ideology with a long legacy of violence." Because she was an Afro-Latina, she said, "that violence might be an abstraction to some people, but it's not abstract to me."

I asked john powell what he thought about the rhetorical tactic of conflating speech with bodily harm. "Consider the classic liberal justification for free speech," he said. " 'Your right to throw punches ends at the tip of my nose.' This is taken to mean that speech can never cause any kind of injury. But we have learned a lot about the brain that John Stuart Mill didn't know. So these students are asking, 'Given what we now know about stereotype threat and trauma and P.T.S.D., where is the tip of our nose, exactly?' "

Adam Jadhav, a Ph.D. student in Berkeley's geography department, has little patience for the classic liberal approach. While lecturing in a course called Global Environmental Politics, he projected a slide arguing that Yiannopoulos's event was "not about robust exchange of ideas" but "about a shadowy political element weaponizing a narrow interpretation of the First Amendment." A conservative student took a photo, in which Jadhav is clearly identifiable; someone sent it to Yiannopoulos, who shared it on Instagram.

"Idiots in the comments were calling me a fat slob because I didn't tuck in my shirt," Jadhav told me at a taquería a couple of blocks from campus. "I was, like, dude, come on, it's a kurta." Jadhav has thick-framed glasses, a small hoop earring, and a tattoo of a parrot on his forearm. The parrot, in a speech bubble, quotes Marx: "The point, however, is to change it!" "It" refers to the world. Marx was expressing his exasperation with armchair philosophers who are all talk and no action.

"I consider myself an activist, not just an academic," Jadhav continued, ordering a beer. "I align myself with Antifa, although that term is sometimes misunderstood. I'm not Black Bloc"—the masked, black-clad contingent that uses violence. "Most of us, percentage-wise, are not Black Bloc. I do, however, think it's important to stand up against hypernationalism and Fascism in all its

forms. That might entail breaking unjust laws, but that's how progress has always been made."

After Jadhav's picture circulated online, Christ wrote him a warm e-mail expressing her sympathy. He thanked her, but urged her to "control the narrative" when it came to Yiannopoulos. "What I meant was: Let's not get played," Jadhav said. "He's coming here to make people afraid, and to milk us for attention." There were real victims of government overreach—dozens of protesters rounded up in mass arrests at Trump's Inauguration; Desiree Fairooz, an activist who was arrested for laughing during the confirmation hearing of Attorney General Jeff Sessions—but Yiannopoulos, who has never been jailed or injured at his speeches, wasn't one of them.

Recently, on Fox News, Ben Shapiro said, "Everything has been deemed hate speech on campus. . . . There is a big part of the left—and it's growing—that says that it is incumbent to protect the campus from ideas that are dissenting." This premise has become commonplace, even among liberals, but the evidence is mixed. One study, from 2015, did find that forty per cent of millennials, a greater proportion than in any other age group, would want the government to be able to censor speech that is "offensive to minority groups." But another study, conducted the following year, found that only twenty-two per cent of college students wanted universities to ban offensive speech—a lower proportion than in the rest of the American adult population. In March, a political scientist named Jeffrey Sachs analyzed the most recent data, broken down by age. In conclusion, he tweeted, "There is no campus free speech crisis, the kids are all right, those that say otherwise have lost all perspective, and the real crisis may be elsewhere."

It was a bright Friday morning, and Dan Mogulof, the Berkeley public-affairs administrator, was speed-walking to California Hall, a Beaux-Arts building

where the chancellor and other top administrators have their offices. In theory, Free Speech Week was to begin in forty-eight hours. But, Mogulof had told me, "No speakers have been confirmed, no venues have been confirmed, no one on Milo's team will answer simple questions." Margo Bennett, the chief of campus police, said that "pretty much everything we know about Milo's plans, at this point, we're getting from his Instagram."

At the entrance to California Hall, Mogulof took a call on his cell phone. His eyebrows shot up, and he pumped his fist like a golfer sinking a long putt. Then he hung up and paced the corridors, popping in through various doors and interrupting meetings. "Sorry, friends, but it's rare that I get to bring good news," he said to a roomful of deans and assistant chancellors. "I'm just now—as in, right now—learning that a Berkeley Patriot student is telling local media that the event is off."

College administrators across the country were watching Free Speech Week closely. Richard Spencer was scheduled to speak soon at the University of Florida, and Charles Murray had been invited to the University of Colorado in Boulder. Officials from both schools were embedded with Berkeley's administrators, Mogulof said, "to observe—see what works, see what doesn't—and apply those lessons when it's their turn in the hot seat."

Mogulof hurried to Sproul Plaza, where he had called a press conference for print and TV reporters, both local and national. "I just texted someone from the Patriot," one reporter said to another. "I asked if Free Speech Week was cancelled, and the response was 'LOL, unclear.' So that's my headline, I guess: 'LOL, Unclear.' "

As Mogulof spoke to the reporters, an undergraduate sociology student walked

by, holding an iced coffee and a Rice Krispies Treats wrapper. She shouted a question at Mogulof: "Students have a right to go to their classes and feel safe in their classrooms, and you're ready to compromise that for, like, the First Amendment that you're trying to uplift?"

"Your concerns are right on the money," Mogulof said. The student was not satisfied. She continued to ask questions, using her phone to film the interaction. As she talked, a few of the TV cameras swung toward her. "Please do not take video of me!" she said, holding up her phone like a talisman.

Mike Cernovich, a right-wing vigilante journalist, said of a planned rally at Berkeley, "If there's a screaming Antifa crowd, and if I maybe have to street-fight my way in and break a few noses in self-defense, that's all good optics for me."

Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker

"Um, it's a press conference," one of the camera operators said.

A newspaper reporter said, "How's that for free speech?"

That night, I called Yiannopoulos and asked him where he was. "I've landed in San Francisco, but my specific location is top secret, I'm afraid," he said. "I'm not even telling dear friends, much less the press. For security reasons. I'm sure you understand."

It took me twenty minutes to discover his secret location, and another forty-five minutes to get there by BART. It was a chain hotel situated between a strip mall and an eight-lane highway, in the commuter suburb of Walnut Creek. I found Yiannopoulos and his entourage in a "Grill & Lounge" area decorated in at least five clashing shades of taupe. Yiannopoulos greeted me with a kiss on the cheek, as though he had no memory of our earlier conversation. "Normally, we stay at

places that are far, *far* posher than this," he said. "If you follow my Instagram, you know that already. But I'm afraid this trip had to be thrown together at the last minute. For security reasons, you understand."

Ann Coulter and Steve Bannon were no-shows. Joining Yiannopoulos were a few of his employees and the two remaining headliners, Pamela Geller and Mike Cernovich. "I'll do anything for Milo," Geller said, sipping a cocktail. "He and I are the same piece of kishke, as my grandmother used to say." Her persona is reminiscent of late-career Joan Rivers, but with more splenetic bigotry and fewer punch lines. "If Milo doesn't have freedom of speech, nobody does," she went on. "Besides, his company's publishing my next book, so it's good cross-promotion."

"Milo, what's the deal tomorrow, man?" Cernovich said. "Are we speaking on campus? Off campus? What the fuck is going on?"

"O.K., so this hasn't been announced yet, but we're giving a big press conference on Treasure Island," Yiannopoulos said. "I'm going to make my entrance by speedboat, with a camera trailing me on a drone, and we're going to be live-streaming it all on Facebook."

"I don't do boats," Geller said. "I projectile-vomit. But I love it for you, Milo, it's a fabulous idea. I predict two hundred and fifty thousand viewers watching that live stream, at least."

"I'll be wearing this gorgeous Balmain overcoat—I'll show you—with this huge fur collar," Yiannopoulos said.

Geller and Cernovich changed the subject to Internet censorship. "They kicked me off Google AdSense," Geller said. "I was making six figures a year from that. You can't even share my links on Pinterest now! I'm 'inappropriate content.' "

Yiannopoulos looked bored. "You guys are so selfish," he said. "We used to be talking about me." He turned to his stylist, a glassy-eyed, wisp-thin man, and whispered, "Go get the coat."

They continued hashing out plans. "So we'll walk in with you, through the streets of downtown Berkeley," Cernovich said. "If there's a screaming Antifa crowd, and if I maybe have to street-fight my way in and break a few noses in self-defense, that's all good optics for me."

"Maybe we should line up on the Sproul steps," Yiannopoulos said, "surrounded by Berkeley students wearing 'Defund Berkeley' T-shirts."

"Why don't we march in with our arms linked together, like the Martin Luther King people, singing 'We Shall Overcome'?" Cernovich said.

"We'll do our thing, and then at some point the protests will turn violent," Yiannopoulos said. "That will become the focus, and then we can just get ourselves out of there." He reclined in his chair and smiled. "It's all coming together," he said.

The stylist came back with the coat, and Yiannopoulos squealed. "Pamela, is this coat to die for or what?" he said.

"Oh, my God, Milo, I'm dying," Geller said. "It's sick."

He put the coat on and turned around, again and again, examining his reflection in the darkened glass of a window.

"It's fabulous," Geller said. "It's sick. I hate you."

There was no speedboat, no drone footage, no press conference on Treasure Island. Yiannopoulos, live-streaming on Facebook from his hotel room, delivered what he called a press conference, although the only questions came from online commenters. He invited Christ "to participate in a debate with me." Later, when I asked her whether she would consider accepting his offer, she laughed.

The next day, police escorted Yiannopoulos, Geller, and Cernovich onto Sproul Plaza through a back entrance. The plaza was ringed by police in riot gear; helicopters thumped overhead; snipers were visible on the rooftops. A crowd of supporters and protesters gathered outside the barricades, waiting to be let in. Yiannopoulos was not allowed onto the Sproul Hall steps. Instead, he stood on a concrete landing nearby, facing about thirty people. "I am here, in the name of Mario Savio, to make you stop!" one protester shouted.

Yiannopoulos addressed his audience. "I invite you to join me for a moment, on your knees, to pray," he said. "Pray for each other, for the fortitude and strength to carry on, to fight for free speech in the face of overwhelming odds." He knelt and clasped his hands. Few joined him. Geller tried to lead the crowd in a rendition of "We Shall Overcome," but, beyond those three words, nobody could remember the rest of the song. After about fifteen minutes, Yiannopoulos took a couple of selfies and left. No arrests were made, and no violence was reported. "I don't even know if this is gonna make it to air tonight," a local TV reporter said.

As his caravan left town, Yiannopoulos live-streamed from the back seat of an S.U.V. "We don't care if the police are throttling access to make sure there's only thirty people there," Yiannopoulos said. "None of that stuff is gonna deter us, because we don't crave acceptance and publicity the way liberals do. We just want

to be left alone." I watched the stream with Mogulof, who was eating a York Peppermint Patty. "So I guess that was the most expensive photo op in Berkeley's history, huh?" he said.

The day after his fifteen-minute Free Speech Week, Yiannopoulos left for Hawaii, and Berkeley tried, warily, to return to normal. In a classroom at the law school, john powell was teaching a seminar on civil rights. One student asked whether something like the intentional infliction of emotional distress, a concept from tort law, might be extended to free-speech cases. "It's an interesting question," powell said. "Why do we think, for example, that burning a cross is injurious? It's just a symbol. And yet even Clarence Thomas, who is rarely sympathetic to such arguments, recognizes that the symbol itself is emotionally injurious."

They discussed Plessy v. Ferguson, the 1896 case upholding a Louisiana law that segregated railcars by race. "The petitioner argued that segregation 'stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority,' " powell said. "But the Court rejected that and said, in effect, 'If you feel stigmatized, it's just in your mind.' " That changed in 1954, when the Court issued its unanimous decision in Brown v. Board of Education. "They finally found that segregation was, in fact, inherently harmful," powell said. "And what was the harm? The Court was very explicit: it's psychological harm." He paused, arching an eyebrow slightly. "This means that there is precedent for weighing psychological injury as a real concern."

Later that fall, Judith Butler, the cultural theorist and Berkeley professor, spoke at a forum sponsored by the Berkeley Academic Senate. "If free speech does take precedence over every other constitutional principle and every other community principle, then perhaps we should no longer claim to be weighing or balancing competing principles or values," Butler said. "We should perhaps frankly admit

that we have agreed in advance to have our community sundered, racial and sexual minorities demeaned, the dignity of trans people denied, that we are, in effect, willing to be wrecked by this principle of free speech."

Butler's partner, the political philosopher and Berkeley professor Wendy Brown, was teaching a course called Introduction to Political Theory. "It was an amazing experience to be discussing Mill while all this stuff was blowing up around us," she said. "It's one thing for a student to feel that, through the free exchange of ideas, 'the truth will out.' It's another thing to defend that position while Milo is staging his political theatre outside your window."

Shortly before winter break, Carol Christ recorded a YouTube video. "In many ways, it was a classic Berkeley semester," she said, "as we dealt with complex, controversial issues that played out across the campus and the country." A Berkeley student recorded a parody, holding a mug of tea and wearing a Carol Christ costume consisting of a gray wig and a sweater cape. In a chipper voice, she spoke of "a classic Berkeley semester" in which "Nazis frolicked across the campus"—a result, the Christ impersonator said, "of my neoliberal, Fascist-aligned white feminism." She topped off her tea with a generous pour of whiskey.

Some speakers began to lose their taste for on-campus provocation. In March, Richard Spencer appeared at Michigan State University. Two dozen protesters and counterprotesters were arrested outside the venue—the Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock Education—and Spencer ended up speaking to a near-empty hall. Afterward, he posted a video. "I really hate to say this, and I definitely hesitate to say this," he said, "but Antifa is winning."

The last time I checked, the only content on FreeSpeechWeek.com was a photo

of Yiannopoulos and the words "MILO WILL RETURN TO BERKELEY IN SPRING 2018." I texted Yiannopoulos, who had recently been shilling dietary supplements from the InfoWars studio, in Texas, to ask whether this was true. "Yes I am going back to Berkeley," he responded. "Working it out with the students now." No one at U.C. Berkeley had heard about any such plans.

Still, conservative speech at Berkeley continued in Yiannopoulos's absence. In April, Charlie Kirk, the executive director of the national conservative student group Turning Point U.S.A. and a friend of Donald Trump, Jr., announced that he would give a talk at Berkeley. He tweeted:

> My message will be quite clear:
>
> Open borders are inhumane
>
> We must build a militarized wall
>
> There are only 2 genders
>
> Berkeley should be defunded.

Speaking alongside Kirk was Turning Point's communications director, Candace Owens, a vitriolic young conservative with a knack for creating viral moments. Before she went by her own name, Owens was a YouTuber who called herself Red Pill Black, a reference to the fact that she was an African-American who had "escaped the Democrat plantation." Near the beginning of the talk, two hecklers stood up, and one of them shouted, "These aren't ideas, this is Fascism." They were ejected, and the audience cheered. "Antifa, if you really take a look at their platform . . . they seem to be the ones that are the white supremacists," Owens said. "They feel like their ideas are so supreme to everybody else's that they have the right to boycott, to be violent."

Four days after the panel, Kanye West tweeted, "I love the way Candace Owens thinks," followed by several tweets in which he expressed his "love" for Donald Trump. Despite widespread bewilderment and outrage, West refused to back down, insisting that his views were not about politics per se but about the higher principle of untrammelled expression. "Love who you want to love," West tweeted. "That's free thought."

In late May, Congress held a hearing on "Challenges to the Freedom of Speech on College Campuses." One of the witnesses was Bret Weinstein, a biologist who, until recently, taught at Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington. Last year, after he wrote a controversial e-mail, students protested and demanded that he be fired. Amid growing unrest on campus, a group of students posted a photo of themselves wielding baseball bats. Weinstein sued the college, alleging that it had failed to protect him from "threats of physical violence," and left his teaching job. The college admitted no wrongdoing, but settled for half a million dollars. At the congressional hearing, Weinstein was introduced with the title Professor-in-Exile. "The First Amendment is simply not sufficient to protect the free exchange of ideas," he said.

Near the end of the school year, I met Erwin Chemerinsky, the law-school dean, at a coffee shop in downtown Berkeley. "There is no guarantee that the marketplace of ideas will lead to truth, and that's obviously a big problem," he said. He is a Voltairean, not a Panglossian. Nonetheless, he continued, "My distrust of government is so great that I can't think of a way to address that problem without making it worse." Later, I talked to john powell. "There are any number of areas—gay rights, animal rights, housing—where legal reformers have set out to change the law," he said. "If our speech laws looked more like Canada's, would that be the end of democracy as we know it?"

Classes were over. The year of free speech, for all practical purposes, had come to a close. Outside California Hall, next to the Free Speech Bikeway, a grounds crew was spreading cedar mulch on the flower beds. The plate-glass window on Sproul Plaza had been replaced; nearby, seniors were putting on their caps and gowns and posing for photos. A shin-high self-driving robot scooted across the plaza with a sticker on its flank ("How's my programming?").

In 2014, at a teach-in commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Free Speech Movement, Wendy Brown spoke against trigger warnings and in favor of exposing students to new ideas. "When we demand, from the right or the left, that universities be cleansed of what's disturbing," she said, "we are complicit with the neoliberal destruction of the university." Back then, Milo Yiannopoulos was still an obscure opinion journalist, and Donald Trump was still a reality-show magnate. "I haven't radically shifted my position, but it's fair to say that I've shifted my emphasis," Brown told me. "I've become newly attuned to how free speech can be used as cover for larger political projects that have little to do with airing ideas."

Carol Christ told me that the events of the past academic year hadn't changed her faith in the First Amendment, but that they had made her wonder how an eighteenth-century text should be interpreted in the twenty-first century. "Speech is fundamentally different in the digital context," she said. "I don't think the law, or the country, has even started to catch up with that yet." The University of California had done everything within its legal power to let Yiannopoulos speak without allowing him to hijack Berkeley's campus. It was a qualified success that came at a steep price, in marred campus morale and in dollars—nearly three million, all told. "These aren't easy problems," Brown told me. "But I don't think it's beyond us to say, on the one hand, that everyone has a right to express their views, and, on the other hand, that a political provocateur

may not use a university campus as his personal playground, especially if it bankrupts the university. At some point, when some enormous amount of money has been spent, it has to be possible to say, O.K. Enough." ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the July 2, 2018, issue, with the headline "Fighting Words."

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Video

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