

Free speech on campus: Is it really dead?

A stunning exchange occurred during the Q&A segment of a recent public lecture on campus. Bill Bolling, former lieutenant governor of Virginia and a member of the JMU Board of Visitors, was speaking as part of the *Democracy in Peril?* lecture series sponsored by our Department of History. “Since When Did Compromise Become a Bad Thing?” attracted a large audience of students, faculty and local community members on the eve of James Madison’s 267th birthday celebration. After Bolling’s thoughtful and provocative remarks, he opened the discussion and a local high-school student rose to ask a question. Bolling had been discussing the decline of civil discourse in society and its root causes, including the danger of living in an echo chamber of opinions created by surrounding ourselves with media—both social and traditional—that serve only to reinforce our own personal political views. The student asked whether “safe spaces” in schools and on campuses, where students can go to avoid being confronted by ideas that might offend them, could be considered a form of echo chamber. Bolling, visibly impressed by the nuanced and penetrating question posed by the bright young man, responded that he’d never thought of safe spaces in such a context. As he explored the idea, he wondered aloud whether a place to avoid ideas we find offensive might not be a safe space, but indeed a “dangerous space.”


A Google search for “safe space colleges” yields explosively vitriolic content, much of it blaming safe spaces for increasing intolerance among college students. In your search results, you’ll likely encounter the term “snowflake” used to describe college students and professors who presumably are too fragile to countenance ideas opposing their own. Yet there we were at a *Democracy in Peril?* talk, a room full of people on a university campus possessing multitudes of political viewpoints, sexual identities and racial backgrounds, listening to a traditionally conservative Republican speaker challenge an idea that some in the room held dear. And . . . the building didn’t burn down. Police in riot gear did not have to restore order. The speaker’s freedom to wonder out loud whether safe spaces might be dangerous spaces was not curtailed by an angry audience shouting him down. In fact, Bolling was greeted warmly at a reception following his lecture.

Of course, I am employing hyperbole here, but it’s to make an important point: If you believe some news outlets, such a challeng-

ing yet civil exchange on a potentially divisive topic could never have taken place on a university campus without unrest ensuing.

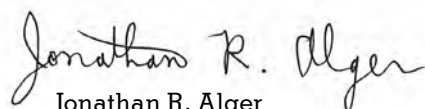
But they can and they do at James Madison University. As president of the university named for one of the principal architects of the system governing our civil society, I feel especially responsible for addressing the decline of our collective ability to get along despite our differences. As you will read in our cover story by Abraham Goldberg, this decline began in the mid-to-late 20th century. But our civic malaise has grown acute in recent years with headlines such as the ones emanating ominously from Charlottesville, Virginia, last August. That’s why the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement exists at JMU. We define civic engagement as advancing the legacy of James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, by preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good. It is Goldberg’s principal work as executive director of the center to oversee a range of programs animated by this definition.

Even though the cover of this issue of *Madison* asks whether our civil society can be saved, we remain optimistic at JMU. Working in education is fundamentally a hopeful enterprise, of course. But we’re also inspired by the ideas that James Madison gave us and how brilliantly practical they are today. As you read

about students, faculty and alumni engaged in all sorts of endeavors in this issue, meditate on the fact that James Madison’s political philosophy of governing was based on successfully counterbalancing interests. All of the human activity depicted in this magazine represents, in the aggregate, a great diversity of ideas, preferences, traditions, desires, opinions—all of them worthy of enjoying freedom of expression, and none of them dominated by another. Madison saw virtue in such diversity, and his ideas for a system of governing were based on encouraging varying interests to flourish. To celebrate Madison’s genius, we need to go further than tolerating other ideas; we must respect them and honor the integral role a diversity of interests plays in the ongoing American democratic experiment. 



Eli Cortes (Eleazar), a local high-school student and Valley Scholar, posed a question about safe spaces in schools during a public lecture at JMU in March.



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