

8 September 2020

Friends,

Below is The Generals Redoubt's response to President Dudley's September 7th email:

The Generals Redoubt echoes President Dudley's support for the free exchange of ideas in the classroom and has no real issue with the subject matter of the course titled "How to Overthrow the State." However, the conversation surrounding this particular course goes beyond academic freedom. Whether intentional or not, it is inexcusable to subject the University to unnecessary national scrutiny while we are engaged in an extremely important dialogue regarding the University's name, a dialogue which will determine the future, and in some ways the past, of the school.

Was the national reaction to the subject matter of the course overblown, especially by those who jumped to conclusions without reading the course description or syllabus in full? Maybe, depending on who you ask. But was the reaction to the title of the course overblown? No. And was either reaction a surprise in today's vicious, twenty-four hour news and social media cycles? Again, no. And therein lies the issue. This intense scrutiny was entirely foreseeable, the administration failed to recognize it as a possibility, and the administration is now circling the wagons and brushing it off as a non-issue by all but ignoring the title of the course and focusing almost exclusively on its content.

As a threshold matter, in his September 7th email, President Dudley refers to the course as "How to Overthrow the State: Historical Lessons from the Global South." However, in the description contained in the University's online course catalog, the course is simply titled "Writing Seminar for First-Years: How to Overthrow the State." It is doubtful that President Dudley is misrepresenting or reinventing the name of the course at this point, so if this is in fact the course's full title then it would have been prudent to include it in the course catalog. The longer title is much less provocative and much more informative. In fact, the inclusion of the full title

might have avoided this mess altogether.

In reading the course description, which The Generals Redoubt conspicuously included in its initial email on this issue, it appears that the subject matter of the course is generally benign.

President Dudley all but confirmed this when he included further details about the course in his email, such as the course's examination of the Declaration of Independence, a detail which would

have been wise to include in the course description alongside names such as Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. While reasonable minds can differ on the wisdom of holding Che Guevara out as a role model in any capacity, even as a writer, that is a debate for another time. What is most pressing is the need to discuss the course title and why this conversation is even happening.

Nobody who has done his or her homework on this course or the curriculum as a whole is accusing Washington and Lee of training students to commit treason. Unfortunately, and in somewhat of a misdirect, the administration has largely focused its response on this argument while failing to recognize that the core issue is not necessarily the existence of a course teaching this particular

subject matter, but rather the existence of a course with this particular title. While some may question the content

of the course, the University is certainly within its discretion to offer it as a writing seminar.

However, the University can also exercise discretion by critically evaluating course titles and their foreseeable consequences. Names matter, don't they? After all, we as a community are embroiled in a monumental debate over the name of the University. Why should a critical evaluation of intentionally provocative course titles be any different, albeit on a much smaller scale? There is no question that such a critical evaluation would have occurred had a professor proposed a writing seminar titled "How to Make America Great Again: Restoring Prosperity by Looking to the Past." The Generals Redoubt is not advocating that the University offer this course and wishes to avoid politics; however, it is a timely thought experiment and comparison.

It is hard to believe that the administration's response to national outrage over such a course title

would be limited to "Well, it's just a persuasive writing seminar and the provocative title was meant to attract students and get them excited." The more likely scenario is that there would be a series of official apologies, admissions that the title was a mistake in today's volatile national climate, and an immediate change to the name of the course.

Provocative, interesting course titles are fine, and The Generals Redoubt applauds Washington and Lee for placing an emphasis on critical thinking and writing skills, but "How to Overthrow the State" has no comparison to the other course titles cited in President Dudley's email. This is especially true when the country is plagued by violent, deadly clashes between civilians. To title a course "How to Overthrow the State" in today's charged national climate is not funny or creative, it is an example of poor judgment. Washington and Lee does not exist in a vacuum, and long-term consequences must be considered when making decisions on course titles. For example, what will potential employers think when they look at a transcript and see that the applicant took a course titled "How to Overthrow the State"? Or, even worse, what if that student

eventually has to apply for a security clearance with the government? These are not outlandish concerns, and The Generals Redoubt has verified that as recently as 2019, the "creative" titles for first-year writing seminars appear on official transcripts. If the format of the transcripts has not changed, then a student taking the course right now will presumably have the following entry on their undergraduate transcript forever: "FY WR SEM: HOW TO OVERTHROW THE STATE."

While students can avoid this scenario by taking a different writing seminar, eighteen-year-old college freshmen lured by the course's "cool" or "rebellious" title might not even recognize the long-term consequences of its presence on their transcript. It is up to the administration to take steps to avoid such an outcome.

Another long-term consequence of a decision like this is its impact on the Washington and Lee brand. The Washington and Lee brand is as important to a 1960 graduate as it is to a 2020

graduate and any negative national media attention, whether justified or not, can tarnish that brand. The administration must understand that Washington and Lee exists in a world full of sound bytes where one-liners like this can have devastating consequences, even if they are wrongfully misinterpreted. Once the outrage has occurred, the damage has been done. Those in charge must be able to foresee the probable adverse consequences of even minor decisions and prevent those consequences from occurring. While we applaud the University for attempting to engage in a deeper conversation with the outside world regarding academic freedom and its educational

mission, the University must understand that it is sometimes better to bypass those conversations altogether by avoiding the poor decisions that lead to them. This is especially true when the outside world is tragically uninterested in having such a conversation and instead wants to do nothing but point fingers and hurl accusations.

Finally, as President Dudley mentioned, it is important to reflect on civility. The Generals Redoubt is saddened to hear that threats have been made against the faculty. There is no place in this country for violently threatening those you disagree with. Presumably these threats have come from outside the University community as this is not how a Washington and Lee graduate would act. Instead, students and alumni of Washington and Lee are held to a high standard of civility. When reflecting on civility, we hope that President Dudley abides by the statement in his email and extends the civility requirement to faculty members. He can begin by looking no further than the professor teaching "How to Overthrow the State," not for how he teaches, but for how he conducts himself outside of the classroom. In an email dated October 8, 2019, Professor Gildner responded to a Generals Redoubt announcement regarding the website launch by simply stating "And f*** right off" in the body of the email in bold and underlined typeface. There was no attempt to engage in the type of discourse that one might expect from a professor of History.

Nor was there a polite, civil attempt to request that the Generals Redoubt no longer contact him. Instead, there was a profane, vulgar, and uncivil remark. Given that revealing exchange, it is no surprise that Professor Gildner is at the center of this controversy, and it is not hard to imagine how certain historical figures are portrayed in his classroom.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that President Dudley doubled down on the course title by expressing his pride for the course instead of simply admitting that the title was, and still is, a mistake. While The Generals Redoubt appreciates President Dudley's willingness to stick up for those he is charged with leading, it also recognizes that it is sometimes necessary to break ranks and admit mistakes. This is something that President Dudley is either unwilling or unable to do at

the present moment, and it is unfortunate for the University. Further, as President Dudley laments

the distorting and sensationalizing of the course in the media, one is left to wonder where this fervid and near instantaneous defense of the University's namesakes was when a Washington and

Lee professor took to the media and attacked Lee by taking quotes and stories out of context?

Although the national outrage over this course title will die down in a few days, this episode and the University's official response are just reminders of the path that the current administration is choosing for our alma mater.

The Generals Redoubt