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Harvard Radical

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Correction Appended

It is no easy or enviable thing to take over an institution that perceives itself as matchless. And this is all the more true when, as is the case with Harvard University, a great many people, including some of the most powerful people on earth, share that view. Neil Rudenstine, who was Harvard's president from 1991 to 2001, had something like a nervous breakdown a few years into the job. He recovered, and the success of the remainder of his tenure was guaranteed by a combination of courtliness and an almost hyperbolic humility in the face of his own faculty. "He would thank you for absolutely anything" is how one university administrator I spoke with put it. By the time Rudenstine announced his intention to retire, the university's governing board, the Harvard Corporation, concluded that the institution had grown complacent, though of course it remained matchless. And so in March 2001, the board replaced Rudenstine with Lawrence H. Summers, a secretary of the treasury during the Clinton administration and a man more inclined to flatten than to flatter a colleague's vanity. "We didn't think we were hiring Dag Hammerskjold," D. Ronald Daniel, a member of the corporation, conceded.

Summers, 48, says he has always believed that the best way to show your respect for your fellow man is to argue with him, generally until one or the other of you is forced to admit the error of your ways. And so over the last two years, he has patiently explained to his colleagues in the professional schools and on the Faculty of Arts and Sciences; to students, alumni and donors; and, via the print media, to the nation's elite, with footnotes and caveats and an intellectual bravura that few can deny, or possibly withstand, exactly how and why it is that the time has come for a transformation at Harvard.

Summers wants Harvard to regard itself as a single sovereign entity rather than as an archipelago of loosely affiliated institutions. He wants to change the undergraduate curriculum so that students focus less on "ways of knowing" and more on actual knowledge. He wants to raise quantitative kinds of knowledge to something like parity with traditionally humanistic kinds of knowledge. He wants to make the university more directly engaged with problems in education and public health, and he wants the professions that deal with those problems to achieve the same status as the more lordly ones of law, business and medicine. And he wants to assert certain traditional verities, or rather open an intellectual space in which such verities can at least be posited. "The idea that we should be open to all ideas," he said when I saw him in mid-July, "is very different from the supposition that all ideas are equally valid."

Summers insists that he does not aspire to the role of public sage that presidents of Ivy League universities occupied until about 50 years ago. But it is simply a fact that by virtue of occupying the most commanding heights of the culture, Harvard has traditionally exercised enormous influence. If undergrad inorganic chemistry is now going to be taken to be as much a staple as political philosophy at Harvard, then your children may be more scientifically literate (and less philosophically literate) than you are.

Even if Summers were a guileful and calculating figure with a hidden agenda of drastic change, he would have a tough row to hoe. But he's not: he's a blunt and overbearing figure with an overt agenda of drastic change. It should come as no surprise that Larry Summers is not quite as popular a figure as his gracious predecessor was. One of Summers's oldest friends on the faculty said to me: "There are a lot of people on other parts of the campus I've met who just despise him. The level of the intensity of their dislike for him is just shocking."

I met professors who so thoroughly loathe the new president that they refuse even to grant his intelligence, perhaps because doing so would confer upon him a virtue treasured at Harvard. Despite the protections of tenure, virtually all of Summers's critics were too afraid of him to be willing to be quoted by name. It's not easy to imagine Summers winning these people over. Of course, he may not have to. Harvard's greatest presidents have been an exceptionally cold and nasty lot. One of them, Charles W. Eliot, once said that the most important attribute of a college president is the capacity to inflict pain.

As a very young Harvard economics professor, Summers was the kind of teacher who would hang around after class and talk to his students forever, and it's obvious that he still genuinely enjoys mixing it up with the kids, who tend to be an awful lot more forthright than the average tenured professor. One evening last spring, I sat in the junior common room at Dunster House, a Harvard dorm, while Summers chatted with 60 or so undergraduates. The president was wearing a rust-colored sweater whose fit was a good deal more snug than a man of his considerable bulk would normally consider flattering: many a late-night pizza had gone to forming that waistline. A student named Brad, a senior economics major, raised his hand and asked Summers if he considered it fair that certain feminist killjoys had demolished the nine-foot-high Snow Penis, which anonymous sculptors -- members of the crew team, it turned out -- had reared in Harvard Yard.

A more prudent university president might have ducked this First Amendment snowball. But not Larry Summers. He slid off the table he was perched on and advanced toward Brad with a calculating expression he must have turned on dozens of hapless opponents back in his days on the M.I.T. debate squad.

"If somebody had carved into the snow letters saying 'Kill the nigger,'" he said, "would it be your point that this constituted artistic expression, and so it would be inappropriate for other people to scuff up the work?" Summers has a distinctive way of talking: he backs and fills, stretching

out words and repeating phrases as he slots in new subclauses or contemplates alternative analogies. The effect is simultaneously leisurely and predatory -- a bit like William F. Buckley's rhetorical strategies. Brad, who hadn't realized that he had booked an appearance on "Firing Line," said no, but yes, more or less. "So," Summers said with a final slash of the epee, "how do you distinguish them?"

Summers dilated, amplified and controverted his way through the next several hours. The half-dozen or so students I spoke to afterward were delighted with his combative manner and concluded that he had taken them seriously enough to find their claims worth contradicting. In general, I found that with the exception of the ideologically driven, almost every student who has actually had contact with Summers has come away liking him. Summers's indifference to propriety was bracing for students wearily accustomed to the agonized sensitivity that has more or less become semiofficial campus culture.

Summers was not hired with a mandate to take on the institution or its culture. But by the time Rudenstine announced that he would leave, the seven members of the Harvard Corporation, which controls the process of succession, decided that the next president would have to take greater command of the university. Over the years, Harvard had assembled 260 acres across the Charles River in the town of Allston -- a tract as large as the entire existing institution. The next president had the mind-boggling opportunity to double the size of Harvard and perhaps also to remap its intellectual life in a new era of interdisciplinary activity. And thanks to Rudenstine's fund-raising talents, Harvard had a $18.3 billion endowment with which to help finance the move. Unfortunately, none of the principal candidates for moving -- the law school, the sciences or a mix of housing and museums -- were eager to leave the confines of Harvard Yard. Rudenstine had made it clear that he would move no one against his will. Clearly, this would not do. And so, as Daniel, a corporation member, told me, "We agreed that we needed somebody more aggressive, more pushy, bolder."

Summers was an impressive candidate from the outset. "What we saw," said Hanna Holborn Gray, the former president of the University of Chicago and a member of the corporation and its search committee, "was a powerful intellect and understanding of the university and a university's mission and purpose and a tremendous taste for excellence." Summers was going through a divorce. (His ex-wife now lives in Washington with their 13-year-old twin daughters and 10-year-old son.) That was not a problem. But Summers's temperament was troubling to some members of the corporation. The word from Washington was that he could be peremptory, condescending, impatient with lesser mortals. He had, as Robert Rubin, Summers's mentor and predecessor as treasury secretary, delicately put it, "a rough-edges issue." Rubin says that he spoke to members of the committee on four or five occasions. He assured them that Summers had matured a great deal in his years with Treasury. Still, the committee was torn until the final weeks -- even days -- between Summers and Lee Bollinger, then president of the University of Michigan, a candidate who seemed more polished and politic than Summers. (Bollinger is now president of Columbia.) In the end, the wish for boldness won out over apprehensions of abrasiveness.

The tactically sound approach to the-institution-that-considers-itself-matchless is first to demonstrate that you share its values and only then to begin pointing out that it could do a better job of living by them. That's what, say, Robert Rubin would do. But Summers always takes the shortest distance between two points. In July 2001, four months after his appointment was announced around the time he assumed office, Summers somewhat reluctantly agreed to meet with seven or eight of Harvard's leading black scholars. Under Rudenstine's extremely lavish care, Harvard had assembled far and away the most distinguished Afro-American studies department in the country. Black scholars feared that the notoriously hardheaded Summers would be far less assiduous than Rudenstine had been. At the meeting, Charles Ogletree, a law-school professor, pressed Summers to spell out his views on affirmative action. Rudenstine had been a zealous advocate of affirmative action, and it was perfectly obvious that Summers had only to say a few magic words and all would be well.

According to one participant at the meeting, Summers replied to Ogletree: "The jury's out. I want to make up my own mind." Word soon got around that Summers opposed affirmative action and that he was critical of "The Shape of the River," the pro-affirmative-action tract that Rudenstine's predecessor, Derek Bok, was co-author of. (Summers says that he had only criticized the book's methodology.)

Summers is an intuitive meritocrat, and he has many misgivings about affirmative action, though he will now discuss them with candor only off the record. But he also says that Harvard has gotten affirmative action right, and he said so in an amicus brief that Harvard submitted to the Supreme Court in the recent case involving the University of Michigan. He could have said as much to Ogletree. Why didn't he? "I don't do litmus tests," Summers told me. He was modeling a new ethic for campus discourse. Or possibly he just spoke without thinking hard enough about it. The net effect was that his relations with Harvard's black community got off to an extremely inauspicious start. Ultimately, they would get quite a bit worse.

Summers took the same blunderbuss to the equally delicate issue of the university's traditional division of powers. Harvard is a very odd organization -- more like the United Nations, with its semiautonomous agencies, than like a classic university. Each of the graduate schools raises its own money and sets its own budget; so does the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The president and his bureaucratic apparatus, which occupy a building of their own, are known collectively as "the center." The president appoints the deans, but then the deans run their schools. This system of ancient lineage is described at Harvard by the quaint maritime metaphor "every tub on its own bottom." In an earlier day, when the faculty was small and weak, the president could exercise tremendous authority despite the tub system. But now, at Harvard, as at other elite universities, it is the faculty that essentially "owns" the institutions; faculty members are its permanent citizens and the incarnation of its central purpose.

Summers made it clear from the outset that the balance of power at Harvard would shift toward the center. He and his provost, Steven Hyman, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, established a process whereby each professional school drew up a highly detailed document listing academic and budgetary plans for the short and long terms and then sent out a squad of vice presidents to pore over the studies

with the schools' deans for three hours. Armed with numbers, Summers went to battle -- for example, making it clear to Joseph Nye, dean of the Kennedy School of Government, that he would have to stop running a deficit.

But Summers's most notorious power struggle came with the law school, and it wasn't over budget lines. Summers had identified Harvard Law as the one school most in need of presidential supervision, for despite its magisterial reputation it had been losing both students and scholars to other institutions. When Robert Clark, the school's longtime dean, agreed to step down, the faculty decided to appoint a committee to seek a successor. This was a transparent power play, for the appointment of a dean is arguably the most important power reserved to the president. The day the committee was to be established, Summers went to the law school and spoke to the entire faculty. According to one professor, Summers said flatly, "The president is charged with sole responsibility to appoint a dean."

The meeting degenerated into a series of angry exchanges. One veteran professor I spoke to denounced Summers as "a control freak" and mocked Summers's hierarchical "Washington" style. "He doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks," said another professor. And Summers managed to make things worse by unintended acts of boorishness. He told a junior member of the law-school faculty that a question she had asked was dumb; surprised to hear later that the young woman was offended, he apologized grudgingly.

And yet Summers ultimately did what was widely perceived as the right thing. The search committee he appointed was respected within the law school. And Elena Kagan, a former Clinton administration official and recent arrival at the law school, whom he chose as dean (ultimately, the search committee was window dressing), was the one member of the faculty acceptable to virtually all parties. When I saw Summers recently, he said that not only the selection of Kagan but also the process of selecting her had led to a "clearing of the air."

This may be true. Martha Minow, a highly regarded member of the law-school faculty and one of the Summers skeptics, told me that the choice of Kagan showed that Summers had read the mood of the faculty very carefully. "There's an extraordinary feeling of a new beginning at the law school right now," she said. Minow had also just come from listening to Summers address a conference on affirmative action, where he had delivered an endorsement of the process with which he had been grappling. That was a surprise. "He is moved," Minow said, "by powerful intellectual arguments."

You have to wonder why Summers couldn't have placated the faculty in advance. Is "no placating" a new principle to be enshrined alongside "no litmus tests"? One administrator said that during the previous search, 14 years earlier: "Derek Bok said, 'I'll appoint the committee' -- and then he appointed the same people the faculty wanted. Larry could have said, 'Here's my committee' and then disarmed them." But Summers's attitude, according to the administrator, was: "'I'm not going to let them do that.' He does the right thing, but he doesn't take advantage of it." Perhaps the principle is "I'm not going to make it easy."

And it won't be easy, because the power struggles aren't over yet. Summers has announced that he will extend the tenure review process. Previously, the university president's power to review -- and perhaps veto -- tenure decisions applied to only the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and a few other schools. The law school, which has made a series of what Summers calls "idiosyncratic choices" in the awarding of tenure, has put up the most resistance to this extension of presidential power. Summers has already trampled on several proposed appointments to the college, which of course only increases apprehension elsewhere. Minow said, "I think a lot of people think it's a bad idea," though she personally is waiting to see whether Summers exercises the judiciousness and restraint he has promised. She and her colleagues may also not agree that they have accepted, as Summers told me they have, "some of the concerns about inbredness, political correctness, lack of intellectual energy that were seen on the outside." And they may not view the fact that he said so as a token of judiciousness and restraint.

Larry Summers is not just an economist but, as one of his critics put it, an economist economist. His friend Andrei Shleifer, also an economist, put it more diplomatically: "It's fair to say that he's into facts." Almost all of Summers's friends are economists or policy types (though he is currently dating a Harvard English professor, Elisa New); he does not read serious fiction; he shows few signs of aesthetic sensitivity; he is a slovenly dresser and not a terribly tidy eater. Summers may well have the densest collection of economist genes of any man alive. Both of his parents are economists. And Paul Samuelson, his father's brother, and Kenneth Arrow, his mother's brother, each won a Nobel Prize for economics. In one of our earliest conversations, I asked Summers if he thought that his distinctive habits of mind came from his upbringing. Summers does not find his own background a terribly interesting subject, and the question struck him as overly deterministic, but he did recall that if the family -- he has two brothers -- was stuck in traffic, one of his parents might ask, "If there was one more lane, would that eliminate the traffic jam or simply increase the number of drivers who used the road?" One of the Summers-haters told me he had heard that the family rated sunsets, but Summers said that that was a game his father played with Summers's children (no doubt fostering a third generation of economists).

Both of Summers's parents taught at the University of Pennsylvania, and he grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He appears to have been a garden-variety nerd, a math whiz who loved to play with numbers, though he says that he cared about current events and politics in a way that the other math dweebs did not. Summers enrolled at M.I.T. planning to study math or physics but soon found that the school was full of people better at math than he was. It was then that he transferred to economics, a field that, he said, "enabled me to combine the analytical approach that I found very interesting with relevance to the problems of the world." M.I.T. had many of the world's greatest economists, including Paul Samuelson, who had built the department. It was also a place where economics was practiced as a highly analytical, data-driven profession. Summers graduated in 1975, earned his Ph.D. from Harvard and then returned to M.I.T. as an assistant professor.

"Those were very happy years," Summers said. If he weren't so ambitious, Summers could have been blissfully happy as a Cambridge lifer. Back in those glory years, all the hotshots from Harvard and M.I.T. hung out at the National Bureau of Economic Research (N.B.E.R.) in Cambridge, whose president was the Harvard economist and former Nixon administration official Martin Feldstein. Feldstein became Summers's mentor.

Summers's crowd would work through the night on knotty problems, taking a break at the Harvard House of Pizza. Lawrence Katz, an economics professor at Harvard and a longtime friend, said: "Larry was a hive of activity. The best graduate students were always working with him. What was amazing was the breadth of his activity -- he could work on 20 problems with 20 different people." Summers's name appears on 77 N.B.E.R. working papers from the 1980's, usually with two or three other authors. He was considered a great person to collaborate with, generous and indefatigable.

In 1983, Summers moved to Harvard, becoming, at age 28, what was then the youngest faculty member in the history of the university to be granted tenure. Summers's great achievement as an economist was to use data to upend settled theories -- the theory, for example, that unemployment was a "natural" and short-term phenomenon to be treated with minor adjustments; or the theory that asset prices fundamentally reflected rational judgments by investors. But he was also a daring theorizer who preferred the big, brazen formulation to the modest one. In 1993, he cemented his reputation as a Wunderkind by winning the John Bates Clark Medal given annually to economists under 40; he had done almost all the work cited by his early 30's.

Economics is one of the few academic fields in which you can go straight into the world of policy and politics if you are so inclined. Summers was so inclined. In 1988, he worked as a part-time adviser to Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign. In 1991, he took a two-year leave of absence to become chief economist at the World Bank. His work there generally received very positive reviews, but his reputation was not helped by the leaking of one of his memos. "I've always thought that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly underpolluted," Summers wrote. He suggested that the World Bank encourage "more migration of the dirty industries" to less developed nations. The memo made Summers sound like the Dr. Strangelove of economics and earned him a very frosty relationship for several years with Vice President Al Gore, who may have never before encountered the term "underpolluted." (Summers says that the memo was written by a subordinate, though he has always accepted blame for the language.)

Summers's position as an international civil servant precluded him from working on Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, as many of his Dukakis friends were doing, but he was desperate to be in the game. Summers spoke constantly about economic issues to his contacts in the campaign and suggested other economists for explicit policy advice. When Clinton won, Summers joined the transition team, hoping for a big job.

But Summers still bore strong traces of the Harvard House of Pizza. As Gene Sperling, a member of Clinton's National Economic Council and Summers's closest contact in the White House, put it, "Here was a guy with a big brain, and you want him on your team, but there was a sense that you needed to have a grown-up around." Summers was hoping to be named chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, but when he lost out he accepted the post of under secretary of the treasury for international affairs, where he would be surrounded by grown-ups. Nevertheless, the big brain stood Summers in good stead. He quickly gained a reputation as a master explainer -- the man who could lay out the macroeconomic consequences of any given change in tax policy, who could figure out in his head what effect it would have on the gross domestic product 10 years down the road.

In 1995, Robert Rubin became treasury secretary, and Rubin came increasingly to rely on Summers not only for economics but also for policy advice. "Larry had an almost academic sense of purpose," Rubin said, "but not an academic naïveté." Rubin says that Summers understood how to market highly abstract policy in a way that would resonate with ordinary people. It also turned out that Summers could be a fine tactician, and even something of a diplomat, much to the surprise of White House officials. Summers played a leading role in the controversial bailout of Mexico in 1995, as well as in handling the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and 1998. Most people who worked for Summers at the time have only good things to say about him now. Stuart E. Eizenstat, who served as a deputy when Summers took over from Rubin in 1999, says that he never encountered the Summers of legend and lore. "He was a prince to work for," Eizenstat told me. "He was considerate of my views, he included me on all major decisions, he did not make snap judgments, he fought through decisions, he gave me a wide swath of jurisdictions." Several noneconomists who worked either for or with Summers said that he never condescended to them and that they always felt he was arguing in order to get to the merits. Washington is, of course, a place with a uniquely high tolerance for brusque behavior.

It is a truism among Summers's friends and colleagues that he "grew" during his years in the Clinton administration. Summers concedes the point, but only after converting it into a sort of utility equation: "Over time, I came to see that mutual interest was often a more important catalyst to agreement than compelling logic." What is striking, and a little bit touching, is how very self-conscious this process was. With the model of Rubin ever before him, Gene Sperling recalled: "Larry started really consciously working on the kinder, gentler Larry Summers. We talked about it all the time for years and years. It was not unusual for Larry to call and say, 'You think I was too abrupt at this meeting?' And I'd say, 'Yeah.' We'd talk about what to do." And so Summers rounded off his rough edges. It is a source of genuine wonderment to people at Harvard that the Larry Summers they are seeing is the sanded-down one.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks took place soon after Summers took office and inflected his presidency in ways that could scarcely have been anticipated. While much of the university world took the view that the United States must in some important way have been responsible for the attacks, Summers says that he felt called to speak up for patriotic values. At a speech at the Kennedy School in late October, he chided the school's dean for failing to include a uniformed officer among those the school was honoring for public service. "There are still many people who, when they think of police, think too quickly of Chicago in 1968 and too slowly of the people who risk their lives every day to keep streets safe in America's major cities," Summers told his audience. He seemed to be lecturing his own university and kindred institutions in public. In the ensuing months, Summers tried to raise the status of the R.O.T.C. on campus: he demanded the reversal of a policy that had prevented students from listing R.O.T.C. service in the yearbook and made a point of addressing the R.O.T.C. graduation ceremony at the end of the year. And then last September, he threw down another ideological gauntlet when he claimed, in a speech that was front-page news all over the country, that

"serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent." And he did not shy from observing that this group included scholars at Harvard and elsewhere who had called on Harvard to divest its portfolio of companies that did business in Israel.

Between patriotism, R.O.T.C., anti-anti-Semitism and much hard talk about grade inflation, Summers quickly gained a reputation as the spokesman for mainstream values as against the consensual leftism of the elite campus. The conservative Weekly Standard called him its "favorite university president," while The Wall Street Journal editorial page spoke in similarly glowing terms -- not a form of adulation normally considered desirable for Ivy League presidents. It was really an astounding situation: the equivalent of Alan Greenspan taking on corporate malfeasance. Summers seemed to have embarked on a crusade for which many people -- and not only conservatives -- had long been waiting. Indeed, one of Summers's oldest friends at Harvard, the economist Dale Jorgenson, said that Summers "feels that universities in general have forgotten that they're part of the nation" and wants to restore a sense of "moral clarity" to campus discourse.

Summers himself bridles at the suggestion that he is trying to speak against the grain of the institution he leads or to somehow bring it to heel. He declines the title of "cultural conservative," not only because it would get him into a lot of trouble but also because, he said, those who march under that banner tend to "have views about the one right way, which tends to be a white European male way." Summers really is not that kind of ideologue; it is rather that he is an unabashedly mainstream figure in a highly progressive culture. And the discomfort he causes has not persuaded him to stop. In the spring of 2002, he attended a discussion about globalization with the faculty of the Graduate School of Education. "They were going in the direction that globalization pointed to the need for more education directed at multicultural understanding," he said. "And I said that I thought globalization meant global competition, and that it made the basic capacity to read and do arithmetic more important." I asked Summers what the response had been. "It was," he said dryly, "seen as a distinctive perspective."

People inside Harvard are less preoccupied with Summers's musings on the Kulturkampf than they are with his plans to reshape the undergraduate curriculum. Harvard has been revisiting its curriculum every few decades since the late 19th century, when its president, Charles W. Eliot, added electives to what had been a rigidly defined program, thus changing the nature of undergraduate study throughout the country. The most recent stage of this evolution came in 1978, when Harvard adopted a "core" of courses in fields of inquiry that spanned domains, including historical study, moral reasoning, social analysis, science, music and art, literature and so on. These courses are designed to introduce "approaches to knowledge" rather than specific information and thus legitimized a trend throughout education toward ways of knowing rather than knowledge. As recently as the mid-1990's, a faculty-student committee decided that the core was just fine; Summers insisted that it was not.

Summers's views about the curriculum have something to do with the nature of knowledge -- and something to do with Harvard. In his conversations with students, he has heard a complaint that Harvard students have been making forever, to no effect: they have no contact with senior faculty members, especially outside of the sciences. The titans who have come to rest at Harvard generally consider undergraduates beneath their dignity, and this, in turn, fosters something of a culture of intimidation. One student I spoke to said dreamily that at Wellesley, or so she had heard, "they go and have dinner with professors." Summers would like to make the Harvard experience a little more like his economics classes. This is the kind of gradual culture change that cannot simply be imposed, which is to say that it does not play into Summers's talents. He has, however, expanded a program of "freshman seminars," small classes taught by leading members of the faculty.

The fundamental reason Summers wants to change the undergraduate curriculum is that, as he explains, the nature of knowledge has changed so radically. Summers often says that one of the two most important phenomena of the last quarter-century is the revolution in the biological sciences. And yet, as he also often says, while it is socially unacceptable at an elite university to admit that you haven't read a Shakespeare play, no stigma at all attaches to not knowing the difference between a gene and a chromosome or the meaning of exponential growth. Summers compares this ignorance to the provinciality of never having traveled abroad. He wants every student to live in science for a while and not just to do some sightseeing in a course designed to help you "think like a biologist." Summers is not categorically opposed to the "ways of thinking" approach. "The hard question," he said, "is the line between learning a lot of science in one area and surveying more broadly but less deeply and thus less close to the genuine professional enterprise."

But the intellectual revolution that Summers says he hopes to capture in the new curriculum is not limited to science itself. "More and more areas of thought have become susceptible to progress," he said, "susceptible to the posing of questions, the looking at the world and trying to find answers, the coming to views that represent closer approximations of the truth." Tools of measurement have become ubiquitous, as well as extraordinarily refined. Archaeology, Summers observed, "was at one stage kind of a 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' operation. Now we're hiring a chemist who can figure out diet from fingernail clippings."

Political scientists are using computer modeling to make comparative studies; mathematicians analyze the pattern of change in the AIDS virus to explain why the interval between infection and sickness is so long. The great universities have traditionally defined themselves as humanistic rather than scientific institutions. Summers's point is not so much that the balance should shift as that the distinctions between these modes of understanding have blurred, though clearly in a way that favors the analytic domains -- the soft has become harder, rather than the other way around.

Most faculty members at Harvard worry much more about this hard-soft spectrum than they do about the left-right one. "By training and temperament, economists are intellectual imperialists," said the political theorist Michael Sandel. "They believe their models of rational choice can explain all human behavior." Summers has, in fact, driven a wedge through the government department by appearing to favor rational-choice theorists over more traditional political scientists. "The question," Sandel said, "is whether Larry can rise above this prejudice and develop

the broader intellectual sympathies he needs to be a great Harvard president." It is quite possible that just as Charles W. Eliot came to be seen as the man who brought the range of modern knowledge into the traditional university, so Summers will be seen as the man who decisively moved those universities toward increasingly analytical, data-driven ways of knowing.

In a way, Summers wants to move Harvard simultaneously into the vanguard and the rearguard. He wants Harvard to be at the forefront of cutting-edge research; he is very proud of a genomics institute that Harvard has formed in collaboration with M.I.T., which will cost $300 million over 10 years. At the same time, he is an intellectual traditionalist. He would like to bring back the old art-history survey course, though of course in less Eurocentric form. He says he believes in what he calls "the aspiration of systematizing and presenting to students areas of human thought," which is more or less what Harvard's old general education system accomplished until it was replaced by the core. He said, with a nervous laugh -- he knew he was treading on thin ice -- "It is more important for students to have a basic understanding of literature than of the current fashions in literary theory." All things considered, he said, "I'd like to see us emphasize more knowing."

And yet Summers's intellectual politics cannot be captured quite so straightforwardly as that. The other tectonic event of the last quarter-century, in his view, is not scientific but sociological and moral -- the coming together, for good and ill, of rich and poor societies. Summers is vaguer about Harvard's, and higher education's, role in this regard, but he is very clear that universities must have a sense of moral mission. He argues that "Harvard must do something to reduce the racial gap" in test scores that makes affirmative action necessary, and he says he hopes to move the School of Education toward a closer engagement with the Boston public schools. He talks a great deal about raising the status and increasing the resources of the School of Public Health, the School of Education, the Kennedy School of Government and the divinity school, which are sometimes collectively referred to as "the baby schools." He points out that it is precisely because those schools have public missions that their graduates do not earn much money and therefore cannot keep the schools richly endowed. Making those schools "central to the life of the university," Summers said, "is probably the most important way that we can magnify the university's contribution to addressing the pressing problems of the world."

Summers also seems to have reached a decision about the new campus at Allston that is consistent with his vision of Harvard. The question of Allston is the question of what Harvard should be like in 20, 30, even 50 years. What is it that needs to be bigger? What needs to be next to what? Does proximity even matter? Soon after arriving, Summers concluded that Allston should serve as the home either of the professional schools, and above all the law school, or of the sciences. The law school devoted tremendous time and resources to demonstrating that moving it would be a catastrophic mistake. The various science faculties were more open to a move, if extremely wary. Summers says he will announce his decision in the fall, but according to several sources, he has in fact already essentially chosen to move the sciences (as well as some other facilities) to Allston -- a decision that will make an important statement about the future of the university. Summers will then have to make a series of incredibly complicated decisions, which boil down to: Which sciences will go, and where? The kind of research being done in the biological sciences is practically indistinguishable from the work done at the medical school. How can one go and the other stay? Psychology and neuroscience are increasingly connected. Don't they have to be near each other? This is, fortunately, a very Larry Summers kind of problem. He has, as Jeremy Knowles, former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences elegantly put it, "a marvelously deconvoluting mind."

Larry Summers defined himself, in the mind of the public and to a lesser extent inside Harvard, through his very public, and very ugly, imbroglio early last year with Cornel West, the philosopher and sometime media star. Summers never intended to define himself that way, but now it is one of those things he has to dig himself out of, like becoming a hero to The Weekly Standard. (It was the tangle with West, more than anything else, that made him into a darling of the right in the first place.) Summers's testy exchange with the university's leading black scholars the previous summer constituted only one element of the background to l'affaire West. Neil Rudenstine had allowed the Afro-American studies department to live by its own rules and to practically formulate its own budget. Summers made it plain to Henry Louis Gates Jr., the chairman and builder of the Afro-American studies department, that henceforward the department would be subject to "the same kind of standards and expectations," as he puts it, that applied to the rest of the university.

West appeared to be the living incarnation of those separate standards. He had been named one of Harvard's 17 "university professors" despite a modest record of academic achievement. More recently, he had become a political publicist, a media star, a professional spellbinder whose most recent "work" was a spoken-word CD. He was rumored to have missed classes to campaign for Bill Bradley and to have distributed A's with an abandon exceptional even at Harvard, where the average grade hovers between B+ and A-. Summers took these stories very seriously, and at a meeting with Gates at the beginning of the school year, he presented the entire litany. Gates, horrified, fired off a two-page single-spaced letter refuting the allegations.

Nevertheless, in a conversation with West in mid-October 2001, Summers, according to West's reported version of the events, repeated those allegations, chastised him for making the CD and vowed to monitor his work through regular meetings in the future. Summers has, until now, refused to offer his side of the conversation, and when I first asked him he declined once again. But when I said I understood that he had accused West of missing three weeks' worth of classes, Summers flared up in a very uncharacteristic way. "That's absolutely, categorically not true," he shot back. "I did say there were various kinds of rumors about attending classes, and that I had no idea whether they were true or whether they weren't, and that what happened in the past didn't matter anyway, but what was obviously important was the primary obligation to the university and to meeting classes."

Summers seems to marvel at the hypersensitivity required to mistake such an innocuous observation for criticism. It's very possible that were he in West's shoes he would have simply said, "The rumors are false" and left it at that. Summers added that the allegation about "monitoring" was also "absolutely, categorically false."

West himself may have been so upset that he took away an inflamed version of the actual conversation. (West failed to return numerous telephone calls seeking comment.) He may also have had trouble understanding that Summers didn't intend to insult him but to let him know that a new day had dawned. Summers, on the other hand, was probably thinking about academic standards, about citizenship to the university, about grade inflation, about scotching the therapeutic dimension of ethnic studies -- about everything, in short, save West himself. He was demonstrating yet again his remarkable inability to recognize the subjectivity of others. It turns out that you can emulate Robert Rubin without internalizing him.

What was left, of course, was a mess. When the news broke in December, Summers was forced to issue an apologetic defense of affirmative action. West announced that he was leaving for Princeton, as did K. Anthony Appiah, a widely admired philosopher (who had personal reasons for leaving independent of Summers). Gates came within a hair of joining them, agreeing to stay only after an entreaty from the editors of the student newspaper, as well as others from Vernon E. Jordan Jr., former president of the United Negro College Fund, and Summers himself. Harvard came very close to losing one of its most celebrated departments, and Summers earned the enmity of much of Harvard's black community.

And yet Summers, true to his nature, has learned. He now praises Gates at every turn and has established a real relationship with him. He has agreed to rebuild the department through extensive hiring, and he and Gates have spoken about increasing its social-science orientation and thus making it more focused on the public good. And Gates is just the kind of worldly, ambitious, tough-minded academic who has no trouble seeing Summers's virtues. "Larry sees the whole field," Gates said to me. "He's not intimidated by the job. He's tremendously self-confident intellectually. He's going to make a great president."

The average tenure of a Harvard president over the last century and a half has been a little more than 20 years. Summers will probably stay at Harvard a long time. And yet it's hard to see how he can lead the institution if so many of its essential citizens feel he doesn't share their values. After we had spent many hours together, I told him that I had been surprised by how intensely people disliked him. Summers was sitting in a tan leather armchair in his office, his foot up on a coffee table so that I could see the hole in his shoe. He thought for a second, then he started to talk about how people naturally resist change. Yes, I said, feeling a bit uncomfortable, but it's you they don't like. He looked a little taken aback -- that was a first -- and he said quietly, "I'm sorry to hear that." But actually, he wasn't too sorry. "I have an aggressive and challenging approach," he said with one of those quick, embarrassed smiles he sometimes shoots into the middle of a sentence, reminding you of the inner adolescent. "And it may be there are times I have done that in a way that people haven't felt respected. That's certainly never been my intent." On the other hand, he said, "I don't think of leadership as a popularity contest."

Correction: *September 7, 2003, Sunday An article on Aug. 24 about Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard, misstated the frequency of the John Bates Clark Medal, which is awarded to economists under 40. It is given every two years, not annually. The article also described Allston, Mass., incorrectly. It is a section of Boston, not a separate town.*

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