



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 23, 2017

Two Vice Presidential Commencement Speeches, Two Different Responses

Vice President Mike Pence (shown) traveled to two institutions of higher learning to deliver commencement addresses May 20 and 21, receiving drastically different receptions at each.

Pence's address at the commencement for students graduating from Notre Dame, a Catholic university in Indiana, was, predictably, the one the media focused on, largely because of the announced plans by a small group of students to protest the vice president's speech.



As Pence, who served Indiana both as a U.S representative and as the state's governor, stepped to the podium to begin his remarks after receiving an honorary degree, a group of approximate 150 students stood to their feet and filed out of Notre Dame Stadium.

The students, part of a group calling itself [WeStaNDfor](#), had announced their intentions to disrupt the commencement, and several of the students declared their reasoning. "Personally, I know Mike Pence's policies from his time as governor when he tried to implement RFRA [The Religious Freedom Restoration Act] without civil rights protections for LGBTQ people," said one student at the Catholic university, identified by [CNN](#) as Bryan Ricketts. "As a gay man, this directly impacted me. However, many graduates here have been directly targeted by other policies — for example, those students and their families who are undocumented and who risk deportation to celebrate this milestone in their lives."

Another protesting student, Jenn Cha, said that "it is an egregious insult to invite Pence to speak at the celebration of the accomplishments of university graduates, many of whom are LGBTQ, first-generation, low-income, and people of color he has actively supported legislation against." Student Liz Hynes added that Pence's "anti-LGBT, anti-refugee, and anti-health care policies have harmed people in ways for which no religious justification can be made."

The vice president appeared unfazed by the protest, calling Notre Dame a "vanguard of freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas," and telling the remaining graduating seniors and their families that "while this institution has maintained an atmosphere of civility and open debate, far too many campuses across America have become characterized by speech codes, safe spaces, tone policing, administration-sanctioned political correctness — all of which amounts to the suppression of free speech. These practices are destructive of learning and the pursuit of knowledge."

[Fox News](#) reported that Pence had been invited to speak at Notre Dame "after students and faculty objected to a prospective invitation to President Trump, who would have been the seventh U.S. president to give the commencement address." In his speech the vice president was intentional in standing up for Trump. "Just as Notre Dame has stood strong to protect its religious liberty," he said, "I'm proud that this President just took steps to ensure that this university and the Little Sisters of the



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Poor could not be forced to violate their consciences to fully participate in American civic life” — referencing an [executive order](#) the president had signed in early May protecting religious groups from the “contraceptive mandate” in the Obama-signed Affordable Care Act.

Pence added that President Trump had also spoken out “against religious persecution of all people of all faiths and on the world stage he condemned, in his words, the murder of innocent Muslims, the oppression of women, the persecution of Jews, and the slaughter of Christians.”

Fox News noted that before Pence spoke, Notre Dame valedictorian Caleb Joshua Pine, a class speaker, “had urged a ‘stand against the scapegoating of Muslims’ and openly criticized Trump’s push to build a wall along the Mexican border.”

Vice President Pence faced no such overt competition — either from student protestors or student orators — when he addressed graduating seniors a day earlier (May 20) at Grove City College, a conservative Christian liberal arts institution an hour north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Speaking to the assembled group of respectful students and their families, Pence declared his pride in serving “a president who stands without apology for the sanctity of life and all the God-given liberties in the Constitution of the United States.”

Appealing to the religious convictions he shared with a majority of the assembled, the vice president urged Grove City College’s 2017 graduating class to “lead fearlessly. Be men and women of integrity, with a servant’s heart. Expect opposition and persevere. And lastly, have faith ... that He that brought you this far will never leave you and never forsake you, because He never will. If you hold fast to Him, to the faith that deepened in this special place and to all that you learned from this extraordinary faculty, I know in my heart of hearts you will not only persevere, you will prevail.”

In all fairness, not every Grove City College student was enthusiastically welcoming of Vice President Pence to campus. A day before his commencement speech at the Christian school, the [New York Times](#) trotted out one such student in its op-ed pages, junior Molly Wicker, who insisted that the announcement that Pence would be the commencement speaker this year “drew considerable backlash. Alumni and students flooded administrators’ inboxes with emails protesting the decision, and faculty members have called for boycotts.” Wicker added that many at the school who opposed the decision did so because they feared Pence’s presence would “serve as an endorsement of the current president.”

While Grove City’s students, alumni, faculty, and administration have traditionally embraced both Christian and politically conservative convictions, Wicker suggested that Donald Trump’s presence in the White House stretched the patience of many. “Evangelical voters have long demanded that politicians exemplify Christian character and morality in the public sector,” she wrote. “In Donald Trump, however, evangelicals were confronted with a candidate who pledged allegiance to conservative ideals, but embodied none of them.”

Noting that protests at Grove City College look different from those at other institutions, Wicker wrote that after the announcement that Pence would be the featured commencement speaker, “students expressed their concerns in editorials for the school newspaper and in meetings with administrators.” She added that “a Facebook group, with nearly 900 members, is planning a physical protest on graduation day. Grove City College is private, so the protesters will not be allowed on the grounds. But they do plan to march through the small town that encircles campus.”

Unlike the scene at Notre Dame, none of that protest was allowed to mar the celebration of Grove City’s graduating seniors. And for her part, Wicker gave lip service to supporting Pence’s appearance at her



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school. “My hope is that Mr. Pence, as a Christian, will use his platform here to encourage graduates to apply their faith toward the greater good,” she wrote beforehand. “Presumably, if he can harness his faith toward the same end, he may make a difference as a voice of reason and compassion in the White House.”

Photo of Mike Pence: Screenshot from [youtube video](#)



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