

OPINION

YCC resolution shifts focus from dances to Darfur

BY ZACHARY KAUFMAN

On Wed., Jan. 25, the Yale College Council (YCC), which I led seven years ago, passed a resolution with important implications for Yale's future. The YCC recommended that the Yale Corporation determine if Yale's multi-billion-dollar endowment is invested in companies that do business with the Sudanese government—and, if so, to pressure those companies to use their governmental connections to lessen the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. If the companies fail to do so, the resolution mandates, the Corporation should divest from those holdings. The YCC also recommended that the Yale administration develop a comprehensive investment policy towards companies operating in other countries in which atrocities are being, or have been, perpetrated. My academic and professional experience with atrocities—which includes time spent with perpetrators of, victims of, and bystanders to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—has shown me the urgency of seizing every available opportunity to prevent or halt heinous crimes, such as genocide. Ultimately, the resolution is also cause for reflection on the role the YCC—and perhaps any student government—should play in such matters.



The Administration's decision on Sudanese investments is critically important for several reasons. Overwhelming evidence suggests that the Sudanese government actively supports—or is, at least, complicit in—the Darfur atrocities. Investments in companies tied to the Sudanese government, then, may be used to further genocide. Since companies with business in Sudan may affect—be it positively or negatively—the perpetuation of atrocities, Yale should use its power as an investor to urge those companies to play constructive roles. In confronting corporations that do business in Sudan, the Administration could contribute to a broader campaign to cripple Khartoum's ability to support the Janjaweed, the nomadic militia serving as the principle perpetrators of the genocide. Such an action would make an important symbolic statement about the University's intent to prevent massive human-rights violations. Yale is considered—and considers itself—a leader in social justice, having led an anti-apartheid divestment move from South African businesses in the '80s. Yet while Yale sits silently, its peers—Dartmouth, Harvard, and Stanford—have already announced that they will divest from companies involved in Sudan.

It is also appropriate and right that the YCC took a position on this matter. Students contribute to—and benefit from—Yale’s endowment. What the University chooses to invest in affects a wide cross-section of campus life, from the financial aid students receive to the quality of faculty. As such, all Yale students should be concerned about the source of the endowment’s profits.

Some might argue that it is not within the YCC’s mandate to consider such matters. But the University’s investments affect all Yale students, it is only proper that the YCC, as the officially designated representative body of the undergraduate community, choose to express its views. Though some may grumble that the YCC’s responsibilities should be restricted to organizing Spring Fling, my experience as YCC president has led me to believe that effective student government is also able to confront a charged issue such as divestment. While spending the last three years in England, I have found that student governments on other campuses are often far more engaged in political matters that affect their student bodies, while still managing to organize the campus-wide activities that students expect of them.

The YCC’s resolution matters, then, both in the short-and the long-term. Even if it does not help persuade the Administration to pressure Sudanese corporations, or to divest whatever holdings it may have, the YCC was still right to press forward with a resolution. To be a responsible representative body, the YCC must record its view, if it has one, on contentious issues that affect Yale students. The University’s investment policy is one of these cases.

The YCC, like its analogues around the world, has the potential to be less a “student government” and more a lobbying group, in areas from financial aid to dining hall policies that lie outside the control it imposes over funds. Sometimes its efforts succeed; sometimes they do not. In every case, though, I believe that the Administration considers the YCC’s views.

It is in the Yale undergraduate community’s interest to have a strong and effective YCC. As the only designated advocate for undergraduates’ concerns, the YCC can be a useful servant to Yale’s undergraduate community. There are matters, such as Sudanese investments, in which the YCC’s voice should be heard. But there should also be a continuing campus-wide discussion regarding other issues on which the YCC should state its position clearly and loudly. The more students who are involved in this discussion, the more representative and effective the YCC can be.

Since taking my first step onto Old Campus almost a decade ago, I have been proud to be an Eli. But I would be prouder still if the Administration pressured corporations tied to the Sudanese government—or, if that effort fails, divested whatever holdings it possessed. It is time that Yale developed a coherent policy for considering whether to invest in or divest from holding tied to alleged supporters or perpetrators of atrocities. The YCC’s recent resolution, however controversial or effective it may be, is, at the very least, a step in the right direction.

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