

Winner: Michael Cohen, Sophomore at Cornell University (NY)



**MICHAEL COHEN** wrote this article after finishing his freshman year in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University (NY). He enjoys following politics and sports, and is working toward a career in journalism or law. He is very interested in editorial writing and gets his inspiration from the social and political commentary of David Brooks.

# The Transition to College and the World

Before my freshmen year, I thought I knew everything—about myself, about college and about the world. I anticipated brilliant and disheveled professors, who, heads in the clouds, wander to class between picturesque gothic towers fortifying quads of freshly cut grass. I pictured Frisbees and roommates, intramural sports and life-changing lectures. Though all of these preconceived notions turned out to be true to some extent, I had no idea what the transition from high school to college was really about. Growing up with parents who see the world in a certain way, it is easy to adopt that familiar outlook and accept basic assumptions about what is right and wrong. In childhood, the world can be a simple place. To be an adult is to grapple with all that makes the world a complicated place...and that is what going to college is all about. The college transition is a transformation from dependence to independence, from being a mere product of one's upbringing to being a responsible individual who makes real choices, practical and philosophical, about one's path in life. It is a capricious out-of-the-classroom crash course on living whose lessons must be learned by oneself, about oneself, for oneself.

The American college campus of 2008 is not the bastion of political activism it was in 1968; long gone are the days of sit-ins, ideological clashes with police and mass demonstrations in the name of free speech and free love. Even without the likes of Mario Savio rousing the troops of the counterculture crusade, college remains a place where political sentiments are expressed and exchanged. Today's generation of college students, often criticized for standing idly by as our nation wages what many deem an unjust war, has carried on the torch of political awareness and civic engagement, albeit in a different way. Students today may not launch demonstrations comparable to those of their parents, but if one looks at the sums of money that college students have raised online for Barack Obama, Ron Paul and others, one will see that youthful political zeal endures. Collegiate political activism increasingly takes place not on the street, but on the Internet. The Facebook nation has replaced the Woodstock nation.

It was in this social and political climate that I unpacked my belongings, said goodbye to my parents and moved into my freshman dorm. Just living among a diverse group of people began to broaden my cultural horizons; I met and learned from people passionate about everything from Eastern religions to West Coast rap music. Yet it was not until the political science major across the hall started updating his Facebook page that I truly had to deal with opposing points of view and confront life's daunting philosophical challenges for myself.

Onto my computer screen popped this message: "Your friend has weighed in on four of today's most pressing political issues! They are: affirmative action, the Bush tax cuts, defense spending, and abortion! Click to read his comments on each issue."

I have always been interested in politics, but have usually shied away from political debate. This was a chance to

read up on my friend's views while avoiding confrontation, and I happily clicked to read more. I thoroughly disagreed with him on all four issues and, more than just that, his comments ran against many of the core principles that I have long believed. In high school I would have shrugged this off and continued with what I was doing. Perhaps due to the new level of confidence and knowledge that I had picked up in my Introduction to American Government class (or the fact that there was a football sitting right next to my computer and both our doors were open), I grabbed the ball, leaned back in my desk chair and sent a pass whizzing across the hall and right past his head.

"Come over here, you Communist!" I jokingly yelled out the door.

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up again as a stronger and more coherent body of thought, flowed amiably and effortlessly. I had always viewed affirmative action programs as a means to redress historical wrongs and lay the foundation for a more just future. Slavery and discrimination are sad but important realities of history and, while it is impossible to completely erase their lingering imprints on society, I had always assumed that it was my generation's duty to break down barriers that unfairly perpetuate the *status quo*.

My friend responded with some family history, "My parents came to this country in search of a better life in the 1960s. Why should my family be punished to remedy the slavery that ended in the 1860s? I don't need to tell you about the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, since we had a test on it last week. How does using a student's race to determine college admission add up to equal protection under the law?"

Next it was on to the Bush tax cut. I had always believed that tax cuts for the rich presented an outrageous injustice. He thought that, the more one is allowed to keep, the harder one will work to succeed in business and grow the economy.

"It's an incentive thing," he said. "Would you plow more fields if you were paid by the field or by the hour?"

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I was ready for that one, “You may think of it as an incentive issue but I think of it as a fairness issue. America is supposed to be a nation of freedom and quality. After all, we all get one vote. What is fair about tax cuts for the rich while people are starving?”

He countered, “What is fair about the government taking people’s hard earned money? American freedom should mean the freedom to earn money and live the way one pleases. That is the only type of equality the government can and should provide.”

On the next two issues, it was much the same. My friend was outraged that defense spending is currently only four percent of American GDP. He comes from a military family and believes that freedom is something we must fight for. I come from a family of hippies and have never wrapped my mind around killing in the name of peace. Growing up (probably due to picketers who stood in front of my neighborhood’s abortion clinic holding signs of smiling babies on one side and Jesus on the other), I had thought that all opponents of abortion were religious fanatics... until I learned that my friend opposes abortion on secular grounds. He approaches the issue from the perspective of the fetus. I have always looked through the eyes of the mother.

We were both defending our views of American freedom, but these views were nearly diametrically opposed. Both our intentions were honorable and we were even striving for the same goal... but nevertheless we disagreed on a very fun-

damental level. Much of the disagreement boiled down to a core ideological schism: I was brought up to see inequalities imbedded in the system, and believe that action must be taken to level the playing field. My friend considered this type of government action to be inherently unequal, and a violation of his constitutional rights. Suddenly I realized that proponents of the Bush tax cuts are not greedy, uncompassionate money-grubbers, but followers of a certain economic and philosophical doctrine. I realized opponents of affirmative action are not hateful individuals, but believers in a different but valid view of American freedom. Wars that I consider to be aggressive, others view as in defense of liberty at home and abroad. My realization transcended American politics; the world suddenly became a much more complicated place than it had seemed growing up.

For me, the transition to college was an eye-opening introduction to the rich diversity of the world. A clear sense of right and wrong gave way to a newfound respect for plurality, for integrative complexity, for ideas that continually challenge me to be a more thoughtful student and human being. Going to college means immersing oneself in such ideas, and clinging to what is familiar and comfortable is a surefire way to miss the most important lessons of all. To confront the complexities of the world in everyday life (on the way to the bathroom, on line at the campus bookstore or even on Facebook) is to enter the ultimate educational laboratory, the ultimate American bildungsroman, the ultimate transition from child to citizen of the world.