PBS' "TO THE CONTRARY"

DeVos Booed; All Male Healthcare Working Group; Sexual Assault Stats

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Bonnie Erbe: This week on To The Contrary: First education secretary Betsy DeVos booed during her commencement address at HBCU Bethune-Cookman. Then where are the women crafting the senate healthcare bill? And the stats about sexual assault on college campuses have many people scratching their heads.

Bonnie Erbe: Hello, I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to To The Contrary, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, controversial commencement. Students' boos drowned out education secretary Betsy DeVos as she spoke at Bethune-Cookman university's commencement. Many graduating students of the historically black school also turned their backs in protest. The booing was so intense that the President of the school at one point interrupted the speech to urge students to be quiet. A local chapter of the NAACP had earlier called on the University's president to resign over the decision to invite DeVos. The education secretary is ramping up an attempt to reach out to HBCUs, but many students see it as an empty gesture, due to policies they say will harm minority and low income schools. Students were also responding to DeVos's comments in February in which she called HBCUs "real pioneers when it comes to school choice." So, Congressman woman Eleanor Holmes Norton, was the right way to express their displeasure to Secretary DeVos or was it rude?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: At the very least it was inevitable for the woman who insulted HBCUs established because of racial segregation, not by choice?

Anneke E. Green: It was rude an inappropriate. What are the kids learning if they think the best way to engage in dialogue is not to listen.

Erin Mason: The history of the struggle for civil rights marked by direct action, which gets the goods. It's rarely polite and no need to apologize.

Francesca Chambers: Well, Betsy DeVos may have had a better week it sounds like than the FBI director or ex-FBI director James Comey, because this week this mostly got swept under the rug as that took over all of Washington.

Bonnie Erbe: But why does she get into so much trouble? This is not the first place where she has been booed. Her very first act as education secretary outside of the building she tried to visit a D.C. school and people, the students and teachers stood out in front and said we don't want you. Is it because she's a woman or is it because she is extremely to the right as she is?

Francesca Chambers: There is a little bit of a backstory to what happened today. She had obviously said these schools were pioneers of school choice. Forgetting again or at least not recognizing that they were founded because they had nowhere else to go. And what was very difficult for her this week as well is that the president had put this signing statement on a spending bill that really blind sided her and I was told she was livid about it, targeting HBCU's funding and suggesting that these guarantees that they get might not be constitutional. And so going into this, she already had that riding on her and it was just a setup for a disaster for her.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: And she had her initial appearance when she was trying to get confirmed. She got the worst vote of all of the, of all of the nominees of the president because she performed so ignorantly and poorly. So from the get go right out of the box she seemed not to know what she was talking about.

Anneke E. Green: Her nomination and confirmation was historic. There was a tie breaking vote that had never beforehand on a cabinet level appointee where Pence cast the majority vote. But-
Bonnie Erbe: Are you saying that’s a good thing?

Anneke E. Green: I’m acknowledging that that did happen. And so she is a lightning rod, but she is now the Secretary of Education and for people to think that having sort of gorilla like actions to refuse to acknowledge her legitimacy I find troubling for our nation's institutions.

Bonnie Erbe: Could you not look at it though as she has the right to speak, at least she got to speak whereas Ann Coulter didn’t even get to speak at Berkeley, but going to a place where you know your remarks are going to be controversial and you are not going to be really welcomed, then why don’t the students have the right to voice their views just as much as she has the right to speak?

Anneke E. Green: Well they have the right to voice their views but I think the question is is it appropriate to drown out a speaker, to keep them from speaking and then or prior to that as you mentioned, with Ann Coulter, to try to get somebody canceled? I don’t think that that's a great way to express dissent. And it’s certainly not one that I think our founders would have agreed with.

Erin Mason: Well, what Betsy DeVos has said, particularly the comments about HBCUs and school choice was so grossly offensive and that layered on top of the fact that she’s grossly incompetent and unqualified-

Bonnie Erbe: Right, I mean what does it say about our knowledge of American history?

Erin Mason: Exactly. It's an insult, an insult to students graduating from an hbcu to have someone who would make such a flagrant statement like that come on what is supposed to be their special day. This is about freedom of expression. I Co-lead a direct action organization. I’m very comfortable with public protest. I think that public protest is something you have do with all of your other options have been exhausted and resisting Betsy DeVos is part of the resistance. And we are seeing this happen time and time again with members of his administration.

Anneke E. Green: But there is a difference between silencing and protest.

Bonnie Erbe: But, I wanted to ask you The President of the University said that Mary McCloud Bethune herself founded the university with a dollar 50 or something back in the 1800s and that she took sources of money from the left and the right, people whose voices or opinions she didn't necessarily agree with. He made it sound like he invited her because he wanted to get more money out of this administration. Did it work?

Francesca Chambers: Well, I don't know about that. I can't speak to his motivations. What I can say is there is a difficulty I think for any university in choosing commencement speakers, because you want someone who is very high profile but you also don’t want someone who is going to court controversy and ruin students special day. So, I think in this particular situation there is a question about whether or not the university was perhaps wise to not just invite her but to invite anyone who may have been a lightning rod for controversy but also as far as the administration is concerned, I’m sure they saw this as an opportunity to go to A school and speak to some students and speak to people that probably did not vote for Donald trump and get their message out, particularly after her previous comments about HBCUs and the way that some of the things that the president trump has said have been interpreted.

Bonnie Erbe: Do you think president Jackson will be able to avoid the cuts? I mean was this a move, in your eyes, to make nice, nice with this administration that clearly is going to cut back on funding for HBCUs and will it help him at all?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: The blow back seems to be all on him. People have called for his resignation now.
don't support silencing anyone. I have to ask all of you, what should they have done? One thing, the main thing they was get up and turn their backs. This is untold long held way of protesting. Whose day is this anyway? Is it for the President of the University trying to make sure that money comes to him, which is what it looks like even if it isn't. Or is it for the students who are having a unique day? Seems to me he wasn't thinking about his own students.

Anneke E. Green: He was... the students were drowning out her speech. As she was trying to speak and at one point the president had to intervene and ask the students to allow her to speak, which is definitionally silencing. I personally don't think it would be an issue if students wanted to express their opinions by turning their backs, that seems respectful but to keep someone from speaking seems to go against the entire point of higher education.

Francesca Chambers: To speak about the funding, I was going to say after the signing statement I mentioned. I do want to note that the president did come back and say I did not mean that specifically to target HBCUs. I have broad support for them. And also previously in his administration he signed an executive order prioritizing the HBCU initiative and actually bringing it out of the department of education to the white house...

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: Wait a minute-

Bonnie Erbe: Yeah but it has no money behind it. (All talking at once)

Francesca Chambers: No,no that part did not have money behind it. But it was supposed to be symbolic...

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I have to correct something here. He said it was unconstitutional. You said HBCUs were unconstitutional. That also was an insult. They have been open to white people from the beginning. It's only white institutions that have not been open to the HBCUs, which is how they got started in the first place.

Bonnie Erbe: Alright, Let us know what you think. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe or @ToTheContrary. From students to republican women senators and healthcare.

Bonnie Erbe: Senate Republicans are defending their all male healthcare working group this week with 13 members on the panel there is not a single woman. Maine senator Susan Collins was left off the team despite her healthcare expertise. Majority leader Mitch McConnell said “nobody is being excluded by gender” and “the group that counts is all 52 of us, referring to the republican senators”. The committee brings attention to the limited role that women play in the republican caucus, making up just 10% of Republican Senators. Comparatively women comprise one third of the Democratic caucus among the 21 female senators, five are Republicans. So Anneke, Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski, first of Maine and second of Alaska, have both been dissenting voices in the congress against the Trump Administration and against what the republican leadership is trying to accomplish in some situations. Are they being punished particularly Collins, who has a background in healthcare?

Anneke E. Green: I don't think they're being punished. I think what happened is the Republican leadership didn't think about what it might look like. We saw some quotes from G.O.P. Leadership aides saying well that's a bad optic and then after this was raised by female reporters, they came back and said these meetings are open to any of the five female republican senators when they want to come according to their schedule.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I do think they're being punished and it's not be cause she is a woman. She is a reigning expert among the Republicans on healthcare. She is being punished because she is a moderate republican and she doesn't, for the most part, agree with what is happening with healthcare now. It's political,
not related to her gender.

Bonnie Erbe: What specifically is Collins position? Does she want to keep the A.C.A.?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: She doesn't want to keep it, but she would allow some states to make a choice. This notion of moderation goes throughout her service in the senate.

Bonnie Erbe: What does the White House expect the senate will come back with by way of the A.C.A. and how is it going to be different than it would have been if Collins and Murkowski or some of the other female senators were involved in pulling it together?

Francesca Chambers: They haven't really been acknowledging that it could come back vastly different than the bill that was passed in the house, because to acknowledge it would be to say that what they had in the house was not as big of a victory as the president said it was when they took the big victory lap in the rose garden. But what could happen in the senate is there could be major changes specifically to the medicaid aspect of it, of the bill. There was a big expansion of medicaid under Obamacare and a lot of the senators that we are talking about want to keep it, because their states participate...

Bonnie Erbe: Want to keep medicaid expansion?

Francesca Chambers: Yes, they want to keep the expansion because their states benefited from it. So West Virginia's female Senator who is also a Republican as well falls in that category. And so if you have them in the working group, they might push for changes that would make it harder for the bill that passes in the senate to be reconciled with the bill that passes in the house. It is complicated. But I will also add that there are male republican senators who agree with them on that position. Rob Portman is one of them and so there are men in the senate who also take that position.

Bonnie Erbe: Do you expect maternity care to be put back into the bill by the senate?

Erin Manson: Well are 13 dudes going to do it? I don't know. Trump care seems to be just a mean spirit attack on women from every level from the attempts to strip maternity coverage out, the attacks on preventative care medicaid expansion, which disproportionally supports women, especially single mothers...

Bonnie Erbe: And I want to jump in. It must be viewed by some as kind of strange they want to take away abortion rights, take away now birth control coverage and when you do get pregnant you would think they would want to pay for maternity coverage so the babies are healthy, but no they're taking away maternity coverage. So you want to have a baby, you better have $17,000 bucks handy.

Erin Manson. Yeah, this whole conservative pro-life thing is the biggest pile of hypocrisy in the United States in some ways, right. Because it's totally going after women and not supporting them in terms of preventing pregnancy, supporting them through the pregnancy. Really the only focus is making sure people are born. But one thing about this senate grouping that I find particularly concerning: out of the Republican caucus, specifically concerning 1 in 10 senators is a woman. So if there is 13 people in this grouping, theoretically there should be one or two women included. So, there is absolutely no excuse for this and I think Mitch McConnell has some answering to do.

Bonnie Erbe: What do you think about it? Does it make sense from a conservative perspective that you would deny abortion, of course, yes. Birth control and then maternity coverage all at the same time?

Anneke E. Green: The governing philosophy here is that there are things that are not the government's role and
that Obamacare expanded a lot of things into the Government’s role that hadn't previously been there. And so now they want to have the discussion be: well you are taking these things away from people. Well not really. The result of doing that in the first place is that people have lost options. Their premiums have been higher and I find it more hypocritical as a woman to be told I need the government to look out for me. It doesn't seem that much different as being told you need a man to look out for you.

Bonnie Erbe: But if you have health insurance and you get pregnant, would you not be kind of shocked that your maternity care isn't covered?

Anneke E. Green: Well, I think it should be under most insurance plans but if it's not, that belongs on the private side of things. In the market. The less you allow the market to compete, the fewer options you have and that's what we have seen.

Bonnie Erbe: Eleanor.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: The theory of health insurance is that most of the benefits most of us need will be there for us. It isn't even insurance any longer if you can pick and choose. You need to put the whole class together. Then it's cheaper for everybody.

Bonnie Erbe: Well and do you think what will eventually come out of congress will eventually include maternity care?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I predict nothing will come out of congress. I hate to put it that way. I think we would have been better without the house bill to get the senate which is even more divided than the house. I don't think anything is going to happen.

Bonnie Erbe: That's been said but then again the leadership has come out and said no we are going have a response...

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: What else could they say?

Bonnie Erbe: But then how are they going to explain it and will it be in part due to the fact that there were no women on the committee pulling together the senate bill?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: Remember I said because there were no moderates on that committee. So what are they going to do when a bill comes forward that they have disagreed with from the beginning? I think what will happen is you won't have a bill that comes out and then you will go to conference. They'll just stretch it out, particularly after the 2018, so after the 2018 elections.

Bonnie Erbe: What if, as progressives have been saying, you know, they want a woman on the panel or more than one woman on the panel but what if, for example, Jodi Ernst from Iowa, who is far right had been on the panel, would that have made a difference in whatever the senate does or doesn't craft as healthcare?

Francesca Chambers: I don't think it would have necessarily made a difference if she specifically had been on the panel. But I wanted to say that I have to agree with you that when you look at what the senate has to take up. They're supposed to pass infrastructure. They're also supposed to pass a tax bill. Now they have to confirm a new FBI director. There is a lot on their plate her and they can't agree on this healthcare bill. The chances of something that comes out that will become law are not looking too good right now.
Bonnie Erbe: Alright. From healthcare to sexual assault.

Lisa Maatz: Feels like something is rotten in Denmark doesn’t it?

Bonnie Erbe: The American Association of University Women says new data about sexual assault on campus doesn’t tell the whole story. In the survey 89% of college campuses reported zero incidences of rape in 2015. AAUW says if that were true, that would be cause for celebration but with stats showing one in five college women is going to be sexually assaulted, something is wrong.

Lisa Maatz: To be fair it is a crime that is under reported for all kinds of reasons that your viewers know. But the reality too though is that because of the Clery Act, colleges and universities are supposed to report basic crime statistics and we are concerned when you have this many zeros when you know it's happening that there is in fact something wrong with the system. That individual colleges don't have basically the infrastructure in place nor potentially the welcoming attitude that encourages students to report.

Bonnie Erbe: Lisa Maatz says the information is important. It’s used to plan for violence prevention response and assistance for sexual assault survivors. That’s why data collection expanded under the Violence Against Women Act.

Lisa Maatz: This is the second year that we are collecting new information on the incidents of domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. And we know that is happening at epidemic levels on college campuses as well but we are seeing zero reports. So, the reality is we are not just talking about campus sexual assault, but the whole range of violence against women that needs better attention on campus.

Bonnie Erbe: So 89% of campuses reporting no sexual assault and then you look at the news and it's all campus rape, campus rape, you know. It seems like there is lots of it going on at every school. How do you put those two together?

Erin Manson: Well, it's clearly wrong. Right. So, there is no way that we can believe that nearly 90% of our nation's universities had zero sexual assaults occurring on campus. This is not hysteria. The focus that has been on sexual assault on campus, in fact it’s typically around one if five women in college will experience some form of sexual assault. So I think what we really need to do is schools need to step up. They need to create a more welcoming environment for reporting. There need to be consequences for reporting. They need to look at the way they're collecting the data. A lot of times the ways that we ask the questions can lead to the wrong scenes answers coming about. They also need to look at how they're reporting out their statistics. We need to see a big change. Admitting a problem is the first step that we have to correcting a problem.

Bonnie Erbe: Anneke.

Anneke E. Green: I'm very interested in making sure we have the right data and that it is reliable. One of the things I have been concerned about is when I’ve read that some of the data on campus rapes isn't right. Like the one in five statistics that came about from a Department of Justice survey that extrapolated based on only 1.7% of respondents filling out the full survey to what if they had completed the survey. What would they have said? Now we have one in five women on campus who will be raped. That creates a climate of fear and can obscure when there really is a problem and a woman really has experienced a sexual assault.

Bonnie Erbe: So why the difference then?

Anneke E. Green: The difference in statistics?
Bonnie Erbe: Yeah.

Anneke E. Green: Well I think that it's tricky. First of all it's extremely personal and I think when someone experiences that, a lot of the studies say the woman feels a lot of shame and blames herself and a lot of victims don't want to report. Then I think this isn't necessarily the case on college campuses. I think it varies campus by campus, but I know that in the judicial system the prospect of: How a victim is going to be handled, how she's interviewed, debriefed; Is her rape kit processed; Is she going to have to face this person in court; can alone keep people from going through with the process even if they report it in the first place.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: This is not going away the way we are going at it. I don't think the universities are lying. I do not believe the women are coming forward. There is no deterrent. There is no enforcement. When it is reported countless incidents of nothing happening to the man. I think women, instead of relying on forces outside of themselves, are going have to take this unto themselves. Just this week five Howard University students sued the University because they had been raped or assaulted by fellow students or even by staff. Unless women come forward and take ownership of this problem, the problem is going to remain with us, Bonnie.

Bonnie Erbe: But how about the difference in the data? Where did do you think that's coming from? From shame about reporting or universities not doing their job and collecting it?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I think it's coming from the fact that we don't have anonymous surveys. If you were to do a survey you wouldn't have to put your name to it. That's when I think you would get the best data. We need every university to do these anonymous surveys and see what we come up with.

Bonnie Erbe: Do you think there is any chance that because of the huge publicity this topic has been getting in the last... I mean 2015 was the year that we are talking about, that the survey was based on. But is there any chance stats are going down now because there is so much more publicity on this topic?

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton: I see the stats going up and then of course this is only judged by the day to day reports. But it looks like predators are getting bolder. Show me the enforcement. I don't see much of that. When you have as widespread a crime, and that's what it is, as rape and sexual assault is. You've got to have the only deterrent that the law knows. And that is you do it at least some of you, will, in fact, be held accountable for it.

Francesca Chambers: I think as, speaking as a reporter here, the difficulty is if someone isn't reporting a crime and you are a reporter who covers crime, like I was in college. I did that for a semester and I had to cover this very issue, that's all that you can go off of. You can only go off the police reports or as you were saying surveys at the universities would be doing or department of justice statistic whether or not you think that is right. And so-

Bonnie Erbe: Did you do any digging to find out, particularly on this topic whether women were reluctant to come forward.

Francesca Chambers: And absolutely you can, but then you also get into the fact of whether or not as a reporter you are able do something that I would consider scientific, if you go up and ask 100 people on campus. But also I think that an anonymous survey would be a lot more, something that people would be willing to answer rather than telling a reporter “Oh yes, by the way, I didn't want to talk to the police about this, but I'll talk to you about it” So that's why I think all the things that everybody said at this table are things that I think would be helpful.
Bonnie Erbe: Alright, terrific. That's it for this edition. Please follow me on Twitter and visit our website, pbs.org/tothecontrary and whether you agree or think, to the contrary, see you next week.

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