

Episode 205 - "Confronting the K-12 Racist Star Chamber" with Sahar Tartak

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to The Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people, interesting things.

Bill Walton ([00:25](#)):

Welcome to The Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton. A month ago, the Wall Street Journal published an op-ed by Yale Freshman Sahar Tartak. She wrote about how illiberal her liberal high school had become and the way she and other students were berated, bullied, and insulted for voicing dissent towards the school's race essentialist policies and programs. The story is that in 2021, Great Neck North High School on Long Island directed the student government to give \$375 of student funds to a quote racial equity group to speak to the student body about systemic racism. Sahar was the student government's treasurer and she felt they didn't know enough about the organization and its mission to disperse the funds, so she refused to sign the check. So joining me today is that very courageous Sahar Tartak. In addition to being a freshman at Yale, she's also a fellow at the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism, also known as FAIR. So Sahar, welcome.

Sahar Tartak ([01:41](#)):

Hi, Bill. Thank you so much for having me.

Bill Walton ([01:43](#)):

Yeah. So tell, what's the backstory here? You're a junior in high school, they come to you with this. You're the student treasurer. Why don't you take it from there?

Sahar Tartak ([01:54](#)):

Sure. Okay. So there are some clarifications that I like to make. The first one being that when the school approached student government asking for like \$400 for this presentation, my central issue was not with the contents of the presentation. My central issue was actually with not knowing what the contents of the presentation were going to be. So when somebody approaches me, or I think in general when we're approached and we hear somebody say, "I'm going to present to you about systemic racism," we actually might have no idea what that means. Because there are so many different ways that that can be navigated and there are so many different narratives of systemic racism. I wouldn't even call it a spectrum. I would call it a color wheel of how we can define systemic racism in America and what conclusions we can draw from there.

([02:46](#)):

So as a consequence of that lack of knowledge, I asked for more information before signing off on the check. And the teachers in charge of student government, under the instruction of the school administration, berated and bullied me at our next meeting. They actually brought in one of my current teachers at the time, so two people who had control over my extracurriculars and one person was control over my grades, and the three of them over Zoom with my parents as witness in the dining room, made various insults and accusations about me as a human being. So for instance, "Sahar, do you find slavery debatable?" "Sahara, would you have questioned us bringing in a Holocaust survivor to the school?" My grandfather is a Holocaust survivor.

Bill Walton ([03:37](#)):

Talk about your family background as well too, because I think that it bears on this because you're probably the last person somebody would think of as being racist.

Sahar Tartak ([03:46](#)):

Sure. So my mother escaped revolutionary Iran in 1979 as a teenage girl because the Ayatollah wouldn't tolerate a young Jewish woman, particularly one with ambition. She came to the United States, learned the language and became a doctor. But by herself, it's a pretty fantastic story. And my grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, so he lost his family to a firing squad, and he was lucky enough to escape and came to the United States on the Berlin airlift with his dad, and he had lost his mother and his siblings in Poland, and he also made a life for himself here. So that is to say that my family is very familiar with racism and persecution. My mom also has a scar on her eyelid from an antisemitic hate crime. Somebody threw a rock at her when she was living in Iran. We know what this is to say the least.

Bill Walton ([04:49](#)):

So cutting back into the Zoom session, they're sitting there right with you and they're listening to these teachers, these administrators, tell you how terrible they were. I mean, did they react on screen or was this a family affair? You just sat there? I'm curious, what was the dynamic?

Sahar Tartak ([05:11](#)):

Sure. So my parents were just in the room, but they weren't on screen because arguably they weren't supposed to be. At the same time when the level of, I guess, bullying is that extreme, I thought it was appropriate that they were there. So yeah, they were in the room, they were listening, but for the most part they let me take it on myself. And they took notes and made sure that we had evidence and everything that was being said. So they were writing everything down and essentially listening in horror. And then at the end of the Zoom call, I broke down crying because as a teenager, you're not necessarily prepared to be bullied by adults with authority over you. I think now I'm probably stronger, but back then I wasn't.

Bill Walton ([06:01](#)):

You were 16, 17?

Sahar Tartak ([06:03](#)):

Yeah. And that's not to lament and call myself a victim because, no, the idea here is that we are not victims and that it's worth being courageous if the worst that can happen is you get bullied. Even if the worst that can happen is that you actually do lose your job, stuff like that happens, but it's not even a question to me. It's worth it. This is about speech. This is the values that we protect and the reason my family came to this country.

Bill Walton ([06:34](#)):

So what happened as the call wound up, what was the resolution?

Sahar Tartak ([06:38](#)):

There was no resolution.

Bill Walton (06:40):

Yeah. So your next step was you decided to go talk to the school board?

Sahar Tartak (06:46):

Oh, no. Going public with the school board was not the next step. There were a lot of administrative meetings after this between me and the administration and my parents and the administration, which also resulted in nothing.

Bill Walton (07:00):

So the other students involved in this, were they with you or did you have a codery of people that were like-minded?

Sahar Tartak (07:09):

I would say that they were on my side, but I was certainly spearheading this and that it was largely silent support. Although one of my peers, the president of student government at the time, she stood up for me during the meeting. But in the aftermath it becomes a lot more personal between me and the administration over your employees did this to me.

Bill Walton (07:31):

So in the aftermath, you mentioned you had a teacher responsible for your grades and you also had somebody who was important to your extracurricular, did they take any actions against you?

Sahar Tartak (07:45):

No. No. None that were visible.

Bill Walton (07:47):

Okay.

Sahar Tartak (07:47):

That's thing is that it's actually really hard for that to happen and that's actually a good thing. And it does happen and when it happens, it's horrifying. But you can't really ignore, for instance, grades. My grades were not debatable.

Bill Walton (08:03):

I bet your grades were pretty good. Am I correct about that?

Sahar Tartak (08:11):

Sure, yeah.

Bill Walton (08:14):

You said you objected not because you of the substance, but because of the way it was done. You didn't know what was in the document. But after you learned what the substance was, what was your take?

Sahar Tartak (08:25):

Okay, so that's a good question. I would say the substance of basically this presentation was moderately partisan, definitely debatable, stances on racism in the United States. So for instance, the organization cited Nikole Hannah-Jones, who controversially authored the 1619 Project.

Bill Walton ([08:54](#)):

In New York Times.

Sahar Tartak ([08:54](#)):

Yeah, the 1619 Project is a framework of the United States, which the thesis states that racism and slavery are baked into our foundations as opposed to democracy and forming a more perfect union.

Bill Walton ([09:11](#)):

Yeah.

Sahar Tartak ([09:11](#)):

So that-

Bill Walton ([09:12](#)):

1619 was the date America was founded according to them, not 1776.

Sahar Tartak ([09:20](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Because 1619 is when slaves were first brought here.

Bill Walton ([09:23](#)):

Yeah.

Sahar Tartak ([09:24](#)):

And listen, that's not to say this isn't a dialogue that should be had. I want people to go back and forth and debate about this. And debate is really important because it gets us better answers. Right? When I get questioned, I actually am forced to find more evidence to support what I have to say. My problem was that nothing here is being framed as a debate. This is now an opinion framed as a mandate, particularly when it's supposed to be a presentation given to the student body as opposed to a dialogue with the student body. So I understood that that was going to be an issue. And again, even prior to knowing the contents of the presentation, I understood that at the end of the day, if you present something to someone like a big group of people about racism, a bunch of people will be unhappy with it.

Bill Walton ([10:17](#)):

Well, this was an eye opener for you, wasn't it? I mean, there's a feeling here where it seems like you didn't know that much about this part of the curriculum or what was included. And didn't this spark you and some other students to take a look at what else was being taught in the high school?

Sahar Tartak ([10:35](#)):

Yeah. So my dad actually investigated this by submitting a Freedom of Information Act request to the school. And this is a really interesting process because legally they are obligated to tell you what they're teaching the kids. And so my dad and I dug through that. We didn't do it alone either. We had some help with the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism, an institution that has lawyers and helped us submit that request. So we basically dug through it and we found a lot of interesting lessons. One of them was literally entitled, A Critical Race Theory Approach to The Great Gatsby.

Bill Walton ([11:16](#)):

Finish your story, but then I maybe want you to share what that was about?

Sahar Tartak ([11:24](#)):

Obviously, not obviously, this is my journal article, but I'm telling you right now that in my social studies class, the 1619 Project was presented to us. There was a really controversial slideshow presentation that actually exploded in my hometown that was not submitted to us in the FOIA request. The FOIA request process, I haven't said this on any of my interviews, the FOIA request process was pretty bad. They took way too long to give us the information that we wanted and then they gave it to us the day before a highly controversial school board election. So had we had that information a month ago, had we had those presentations and that curricula, it probably would've been used well to show that the school board isn't doing what it should be doing and that there's a lot of controversial curricula in front of us. But because they took so long to give it to us, we couldn't use it for school board elections, which is good public information to have before an election that largely has to do with curricula. So that was one interesting story related to the FOIA request, Freedom of Information Act.

([12:37](#)):

And also something that we found when I did ... This didn't even require much digging. I was sitting in class and my friend shows me a presentation that he's being taught and he is like, "Sahar, am I supposed to be learning this in school?" And I'm like, "Okay, let's see this presentation." And it's again, very, very partisan stuff. These are quotes. America is as racist today as it was 200 years ago. It instructed students to consider their own white privilege. And I think some of the recommended reading was *White Fragility*, which has this thesis that white people get defensive when they're called racist because they're fragile and want to uphold current systems of racism. And again, I'm actually not interested in shutting down any opinions right now, that's a debate to be had. But at the end of the day, I asked him, "Was this presented to you as fact or as opinion?" And he said, "As fact." And then he showed me a pledge at the end of the presentation requiring students to pledge to commit themselves to the lifelong process of anti-racism as defined by the presentation. And I said, "Did you have to take this pledge?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "That's not acceptable."

Bill Walton ([13:53](#)):

Well, you're pretty tough minded and it sounds like you've got a good family to support you. It seems like the other kids in your school didn't have this kind of resilience thought. Didn't most people just agree to knuckle under and sign just to go along?

Sahar Tartak ([14:09](#)):

Yeah. People in general don't want to take risks with their personal life for out there, kind of distant intangible ideological purposes. So yeah, I received a lot of silent support from people.

Bill Walton ([14:29](#)):

But it was brutal. You've got a quote in your Wall Street Journal op-ed, where one of your teachers cut you off and they said, "If you're not on board with systemic racism, I have trouble with that girlfriend."

Sahar Tartak ([14:43](#)):

Yeah. So at the same time, there was a lot of bullying going on. And the reason I stood up against it was because I just didn't want it to happen to anybody else. And not as many students have that experience. To be fair, it's hard to join a fight that isn't close to you. Some people do though. Some people are even, I would say, even more courageous than I am. My close friend actually ran for student government the next year to back me up on this for no reason. It was like a thankless job. But he knew something needed to be fixed and he ran for office with me, which was cool. But for the most part, kids weren't super interested in standing up. They were on my side. They were really happy with what I was doing. But essentially, nobody wants to risk being a martyr.

Bill Walton ([15:32](#)):

Did you look a little further at all the other high schools and what they're doing? I mean, my impression is that this kind of curriculum's being taught in every single high school in the country.

Sahar Tartak ([15:42](#)):

I think it definitely trickles in.

Bill Walton ([15:47](#)):

Well, you were in a very progressive, well, not progressive, I mean your school's very interesting in Great Neck. It's about half immigrants and people who've fled from totalitarian regimes like your mother did from Iran. I mean, there's a lot of sensitivity to multiculturalism and what that really means in your community. Is that not true?

Sahar Tartak ([16:13](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And actually a lot of the people who have those experiences were the ones most staunchly opposed to the nonsense happening in my school. So for instance, my close friend, another close friend whose parents left a communist regime in China, looked at the presentation that my friend showed me and said, "Sahar, this is so creepy. This is what my mom learned in school. It ends in an ideological pledge." So that level of familiarity basically with the importance of speech and democratic ideals makes a lot of immigrant children feel unfavorably towards this stuff.

Bill Walton ([16:55](#)):

So what happened at the board meeting when you presented? And I believe the video of that's on YouTube, isn't it?

Sahar Tartak ([17:05](#)):

Yeah. So it is. I think it's one hour and 34 minutes into the board meeting because it's a full recorded board meeting.

Bill Walton ([17:13](#)):

We'll have to clip it.

Sahar Tartak ([17:14](#)):

So I found out about this board of Ed meeting, I think maybe the day of or the day before and what was going to be happening and what a lot of parents in particular were coming to protest. So I decided that this was really going to be my opportunity to speak up about other things that were happening in the school and really let the rest of the community know that there was a lot going on. That the school administration had basically been sponsoring this mandated learning of controversial ideas to the kids and was also sponsoring intimidation to get there. So I wrote up a speech basically detailing what happened with student government and also just included this question of really this presentation, the very controversial Google science presentation, it's been being taught for years. How could the people in charge here have not known about this and how could they not have been so transparent? It was a problem. It's an issue that our school was enforcing ideologies with an iron fist, rather than a gentle hand.

([18:23](#)):

I'd also to note that I personally fear serious academic repercussions from this speech due to the aforementioned political environment of our school. Speaking from personal experience, this is no discussion, this is not critical thinking, this is intimidation and division. Please don't allow this to be promoted.

([18:42](#)):

That video was very popular. Basically, I presented my case, a lot of what I just told you, and I received a standing ovation. A lot of, again, silent support, emails, texts, teachers, parents, students, thank you, a lot of that stuff. I had outreach from the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism, whom I mentioned earlier and they made a documentary with me and my dad about this story. And then I would say, I guess maybe it was a year, about a year later, I published in the Journal.

Bill Walton ([19:21](#)):

Well, let's talk about Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism. Where's it based and who's involved with it and what's its mission?

Sahar Tartak ([19:31](#)):

Sure. So FAIR is a civil rights organization that's essentially dedicated to making sure that everybody can say their piece and that we don't look at each other on the basis of our immutable characteristics such as race, sex, gender, stuff like that. So FAIR does advocacy work across the United States and has many chapters across the United States where people basically get involved in a variety of ways. So for instance, they have a legal department and that was the legal department that helped my dad file a Freedom of Information request. They have media. They basically do a lot of publicity stuff, so making sure that people know that this message is out there and trying to make sure that people are involved. They have trainings, how to have a good dialogue with people, how not to attack the other side, and people who you disagree with. They have a board with a lot of well known names of people who believe in this cause.

Bill Walton ([20:47](#)):

Well, you've got Ayaan Hirsi Ali who fled from, I think, did she flee from Ethiopia, whatever. Various countries where she was systematically abused. But I love the organization's statement that they are pro-human and then they define it. And I love the definition, advocating for one human race, universal civil rights and liberties and compassionate opposition to racism and intolerance, rooted in dignity and

our common humanity. And it seems like the political world now more than ever, impossibly more than ever, is rooted in intolerance. It's rife in identity politics and sowing the seeds of division so as to Hoover up votes and gain power. Seems like this is an organization devoted to stopping that and letting us all think about ourselves as human beings rather than as member of some identity group.

Sahar Tartak ([21:52](#)):

Yeah, FAIR is really cool because their values are extremely nonpartisan. And once you read them, they're popular on both sides of the aisle. So FAIR has a lot of people on the board who would consider themselves liberals, who would vote Democrat, which isn't necessarily expected because nowadays we have this really divisive dialogue about critical race theory where you either believe that it's being taught in schools or you believe that it's a legal theory and that this is a [inaudible 00:22:21] lie led by right wingers, whatever. That's basically where the divide is. And FAIR does this thing where they're like, We don't care what side you're on, we have these pro-human values, they apply to you, you, you, and we'll move forward from there. And I think that even avoid the term critical race theory because they know that it divides people.

Bill Walton ([22:48](#)):

So you're in your dorm room at Yale and you've been there for about two or three months. And did Yale know that you were an advocate for this before they admitted you? Or does this come up on the radar screen during the process of admission? Because Yale, as we know, is pretty woke.

Sahar Tartak ([23:08](#)):

Sure. So that's a great question. I will tell you what my admissions process looked like related to this controversy. I wanted to tell them that I was making a documentary with FAIR because it's a big deal in terms of college to make a documentary with a national advocacy group. So what I did was I framed it, and I felt this was quite honest, I framed it as a nonpartisan civil rights documentary relating to open speech and dialogue. Because again, there's no need to touch the words critical race theory if it immediately causes division. And also that was all the information I had to give them by then was just the documentary. I hadn't been in the Journal yet. So I actually reported that to my colleges. It was an application update, I told them and everything and I don't think it hurt me.

Bill Walton ([24:06](#)):

Well. So I'm glad you're there. So what are you doing at Yale now that you're there? Will you be bringing these ideas and this mission to the Yale campus?

Sahar Tartak ([24:19](#)):

Yeah, that's also a great question. So I'm obviously a freshman, so I'm still finding my way. There's a lot of good places here for dialogue. I'm checking out some of the debate societies, but I also spend a lot of time not related to Yale extracurriculars, doing stuff like this, talking to people and getting the message out. But here at school, I'm probably going to major in something related to politics and probably get more involved with the debate team here. Basically, we'll see it. Honestly, it's a good place for dialogue. It's better what people think it is because here and there are these controversies that look and are horrible. But when you're not in those controversies, then you're usually just with normal people who are tolerant and interested in talking about stuff and inquiry and truth, again, across the aisle. People are normal.

Bill Walton ([25:21](#)):

I'm feeling very parental. Are you going to join the debate club? There's a lot to explore at college and it's not all political activism and you have time now to explore a lot of truth and beauty and poetry and music and all that. I mean, there's all that there. I mean, there's a whole culture that's pretty rich and interesting and Yale teaches a lot of that. What's your going to be your approach to that?

Sahar Tartak ([25:52](#)):

Yeah. So no, I figured you wanted to hear about debate, which is boring and competitive. I didn't even apply for the debate team. I think they make multiple rounds of cuts.

Bill Walton ([26:05](#)):

Oh, that's too bad.

Sahar Tartak ([26:06](#)):

There is a lot of great stuff here. So I'm pretty involved with Jewish Life on campus, which is really lovely. What else am I checking out? There's a lot of nice human things that you can do here. So for instance and I'm going to start, I haven't been good about this because first semester is rushed, but there are programs where you could do swim lessons with special needs students. And there's another program where you could do swim lessons with students and faculty at Yale who don't know how to swim. So maybe I will teach people some swimming. I have a really nice dorm, so dorm social life is actually really cool. Somebody knows how to play the guitar, somebody can sing. So sometimes we play the guitar and sing and we have dance parties and movie nights in our room. It's actually a lot of the kids here, myself included, are trying to unwind from years of hyper ambitious high school.

Bill Walton ([27:03](#)):

Yeah, I mean, you start when you're two years old getting into Yale. I expect you can now breathe a sigh of relief for a little bit.

Sahar Tartak ([27:12](#)):

Yeah, there's a big piece of me that just feels like I'm going to get my degree and it'll be fun. I still have the urge, of course I want perfect grades.

Bill Walton ([27:24](#)):

Well, but when I was hiring people out of college, I didn't really ask what they got in their freshman year.

Sahar Tartak ([27:33](#)):

Thank you. Thank you for saying that.

Bill Walton ([27:34](#)):

It was not all that relevant. There are many other things that are. Well, you've got a great, great story and we're up against some really, I don't want to label it too much, but the freedom of speech on campus, whether it's in college or high schools or on the campuses of big corporations now even, you're not allowed to say certain things and you're supposed to take the approved philosophy and incorporate it. And I think there are a lot of us that are pushing back against that. I think your voice is going to be very powerful, although I don't want it to track too much from the parties in the dorm.

Sahar Tartak ([28:19](#)):

Yeah, we have a good time here. No, even my dorm knows that I do this activism. They're totally. They just think it's cool. Hey guys, Fox News is in the common room. Please be quiet.

Bill Walton ([28:35](#)):

Well, we'll wrap up now because I'm sure you'll have another adventure we can have you back on. Any last words that you want to share? I mean, you've got a great story.

Sahar Tartak ([28:45](#)):

Oh, thank you so much. And thank you so much again for having me today. I think that it's really important to be courageous and not to live in fear and not to do it alone. So please reach out to me on LinkedIn if you are fighting this fight or-

Bill Walton ([29:03](#)):

What's your handle? What are all your handles? I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Sahar Tartak ([29:06](#)):

No, it's literally my full name and I only use LinkedIn because social media is a sewer.

Bill Walton ([29:14](#)):

So, Sahar Tartak, S-A-R-A-H T-A-R-T-A-K.

Sahar Tartak ([29:18](#)):

S-A-H-A-R T-A-R-T-A-K.

Bill Walton ([29:19](#)):

Yeah. Okay.

Sahar Tartak ([29:21](#)):

Yeah, no, I'm totally open to talking to people. And get in touch with the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism. They will help you. Don't fight the fight alone, but please do fight the fight. It's important. And right now, we're really lucky that the risks aren't that high.

Bill Walton ([29:40](#)):

Sahar, I'm thrilled to be talking with you and it's great to talk with people of courage and intellect and you're one of them.

Sahar Tartak ([29:46](#)):

Thank you.

Bill Walton ([29:47](#)):

And I'm looking forward to your path through life. So just want to thank everyone else for joining and listening in to this really great story. This has been The Bill Walton Show. And as always, you can find us on all the major podcast platforms and YouTube and Rumble. And we're also on CPAC Now on Monday

nights and soon to be coming probably on Thursday nights. So a lot of ways to tune in. Please send us your comments to thebillwaltonshow.com, our website, because we try to get ideas from everybody about who we ought to be talking to and what we ought to be talking about. So anyway, thanks for joining and we'll talk with you next time.

Sahar Tartak ([30:25](#)):

Bye-bye.

Bill Walton ([30:28](#)):

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