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Why Trump is Waging War on Academia



Photo by [Abhinav Bhardwaj](#)

There are a multitude of reasons why Donald Trump and his supporters are waging war against colleges and universities. But among the reasons is a simple one—historically conservative reactionary regimes hate intellectuals.

Trump and his supporters hate higher education for obvious reasons. Those with college degrees are not his supporters and voted against him in 2024. Colleges are full of students and professors who vote for Democrats and they have visibly protested against his policies or embraced issues such as opposition to Israel’s war against the Palestinians, support for transgender rights, or DEI in general. One could argue that Trump’s populism is rooted in what historian Richard Hofstadter labeled “anti-intellectualism” in American life. Americans generally hate smart people, labeling them as Alabama Governor did as “pointy-headed

intellectuals,” or in the words of Vice-President Spiro Agnew who lumped them together with the media to call them “An effete core of impudent snobs.”

But there is something here and it is the traditional hatred of intellectuals by reactionary regimes. There is a story regarding the trial of Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci who was part of the opposition party in the parliament to Benito Mussolini and the fascists. Gramsci was arrested and at his trial the prosecution declared: “For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning.” Gramsci’s crime was providing the intellectual ideas to challenge the ruling power. Despite his punishment. His Prison Notebooks were secretly written and disseminated.

Gramsci’s thesis was that the battle against fascism was in part an ideological fight for the hearts and minds of the people. Battles for power may take place in parliament or in the streets but they are also fought in mass pop culture as well as in universities and colleges to influence and counter the propaganda of the ruling class and government. Controlling intellectuals and what they think and say is part of how the fascists, the nazis, and other authoritarian and reactionary regimes maintain power.

Education and learning are about critical thinking. It is about subjecting power and dogma to truth. It is about questioning, challenging, and imagining alternative realities or unmasking facades. It is as philosopher Immanuel Kant declared: “Dare to Know.” College is where one learns to reject authority for the sake of authority, to ask “Why not?” in response to “Why?” It is to reject what is accepted as a matter of fact and suggest that what is traditionally accepted as truth may not be so. If done right, a liberal arts education is inherently subversive and in the spirit of John Dewey, that task is not to produce the next generation of docile uneducated workers, but instead to foster the next generation of democratic citizens. By its very nature, higher education should produce the antithesis of political passivity and blind obedience.

This is why every authoritarian regime seeks to control what people think. It does that in its school curriculum and via book bans. But it also does that in terms of who is hired to teach and what they teach. It is a battle over indoctrination. Universities and intellectuals, for Gramsci, lead the charge to counter this battle for hearts and minds. It should come as no surprise why Trump and many Republicans before him have hated higher education. Arguing that there are more than two sexes, that gender roles are socially constructed, that perhaps capitalism exploits workers or that the rich do not deserve their fortunes, is not what they want to hear. Education is not to serve the interests of democracy, self-discovery, or personal enrichment, it is to teach subservience to the status quo.

Trump's efforts to eliminate the Department of Education and crackdown on higher education may be intensely personal and vindictive. But it is also part of a predictable agenda to control and eliminate the intellectual seeds of opposition.

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