

The End of the University as We Know It
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By Meghan O'Rourke

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The rumors had been building for months: The Trump administration was coming for the universities. In the weeks after the president issued his first executive orders in January, the effects rippled through my academic world: A Rutgers conference on H.B.C.U.s was canceled; graduate students on visas asked a professor I know if it was safe for them to travel; a colleague at a public university texted about an undergraduate crying in his office, worried about the job landscape. There was news of endangered climate projects, grant pages disappearing (and sometimes later reappearing) as people were applying to them and forestalled scientific programs of all kinds, including one at Columbia's maternal health center studying how to reduce America's maternal mortality rate.

A meeting at Yale, where I teach, to discuss the impact of the Trump administration's policies had to be moved to a larger auditorium because so many concerned faculty members showed interest in attending. After listening to a bracing description of the financial implications of the government edicts, we milled about, stunned. The reality was much worse than we had imagined. I run a small program for students who want to be editors and writers. In the grips of uncertainty, I stayed up late that night to figure out which parts I would have to kill if my budget was cut. I finally realized there was no good solution; in that scenario, I would have to cancel the whole thing.

Conservatives have been trying to reshape the American university since the federal government began funding it in earnest in the mid-20th century. But now the Trump administration appears prepared to destroy it. The administration has issued sweeping executive orders and deployed the so-called Department of Government Efficiency to slash funding; dismantle diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives; and intervene in university policy. On March 7 the administration announced it was pulling \$400 million in federal grants and contracts from Columbia University, alleging "continued inaction" to protect the civil rights of Jewish students on campus during the protests against the war in Gaza. The result, if all goes through, will be nothing less than the permanent diminishment of research universities and an upheaval of the free speech principles at the core of the country.

This attack on higher education has been a long-brewing project for Trump-aligned conservatives. Christopher Rufo, a key architect of the assault, has been explicit about the strategy: use financial pressure to put universities into what he called “existential terror,” making compliance seem like the only viable option, forcing them to dismantle programs and reshape hiring and curriculums. Mr. Rufo, who was invited to Mar-a-Lago to discuss higher education overhauls shortly after Donald Trump was elected again, views universities as having been “captured” by leftist ideology and rejects the idea that diversity is a worthwhile goal. He envisions a radical restructuring of the humanities, replacing current frameworks with what he confusingly calls a “classical” model while bringing in more conservative faculty members.

This assault isn’t happening in a vacuum, of course. Decades of conservative attacks have primed the public to see universities as elitist indoctrination centers. These attacks date at least to the Red Scare in the 1950s, when suspected Marxist professors were forced to testify before the Senate (and the F.B.I. leaked disparaging information about 400 teachers and professors to their employers). But more recently these attacks have evolved into a strategic, well-funded campaign. As Ellen Schrecker, a historian who studies higher education and political repression, noted in a 2023 essay: “During the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s ... right-wing philanthropists poured millions of dollars into demonizing higher education as infested by ‘political correctness’ whose advocates supposedly purveyed a dogmatic brand of left-wing identity politics while suppressing free speech and conservative discourse on their campuses.”

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Mr. Trump and his allies have hammered home that message, fueling Republican distrust in academia, even as soaring tuition costs put private institutions ever more out of reach and the pandemic deepened skepticism in expertise. Gallup polls found that in 2015, 57 percent of Americans had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education, a figure that had dropped to 36 percent by 2023. Among Republicans, it cratered from 56 percent to 20 percent. Some of this distrust stems from the fact that since the late 1990s, the number of university faculty members who identify as liberal has risen, while the numbers of moderates and conservatives have declined. But it’s also the product of the right’s campaign against universities, which has caricatured them as breeding grounds for a narrow-minded woke ideology that brooks no dissent, rather than the large, complicated places they are. While there have been instances of a campus left that was hubristically convinced of its own point of view, the reality for most

of us who teach on campus looks nothing like the distorted portrait that the right has painted.

Indeed, it's crucial to acknowledge the qualitative difference between any excesses the left has committed in the enforcement of campus norms and speech and the federal government's decision to use the full force of state power to prevent people from saying things it doesn't like. As Hari Kunzru, a novelist who teaches creative writing at N.Y.U., put it to me recently, "The notion that this is a justified response to the excesses of the left is not a legitimate framing." The destruction underway is not a considered reaction to allegations of civil rights violations or a fine-tuned reform of university policy. Instead, it is a hammer smashing a very complicated mechanism. It will have real, damaging consequences across party lines. It will dismantle expertise that benefits America and its status in the world. Cancer research. Maternal health. Climate-related technology. All this will be materially worse off. The economic impacts will be enormous. But so, too, will be the cultural ones. What is really happening here is an attack on the American faith in knowledge as a value and a public good that has served us well.

For much of its history, the American university has stood at the intersection of knowledge production and national interest. The Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant universities, was one of the first federal efforts to expand access to higher education, aligning colleges with the needs of a growing industrial economy. In 1890, the Second Morrill Act brought funding to historically Black colleges and universities and reinforced the idea that higher education was a public good, one that served not only individuals but also the broader needs of the nation. But it was World War II and the Cold War that fundamentally transformed universities into engines of state power, binding research to military and technological supremacy. The war effort had demonstrated the strategic value of academic research. Universities played a crucial role in projects like the Manhattan Project and the development of radar, showing that scientific breakthroughs created by university research could determine military superiority. In 1945, Vannevar Bush, a key wartime science administrator, argued that the federal government should sustain this partnership in peacetime, leading to the creation of the National Science Foundation in 1950. From then on, higher education was integral to American dominance on the global stage.

By the 1960s, in the wake of Russia's launch of the Sputnik satellite, America was seized by a national fervor for scientific and technological education. Federal R & D funding skyrocketed, supporting not just engineering and military projects but also the social sciences,

humanities and the arts. Universities became hubs of government-backed knowledge production. In 1957, funding from the National Science Foundation stood at \$40 million; by 1968, it had climbed to nearly \$500 million. These investments fueled space exploration, medical research, literary magazines and global diplomacy. Knowledge in this era was not partisan; it was a national asset.

Yet this arrangement also carried contradictions with it. While the university thrived on public funding, the presence of left-wing voices among its students and faculty members made it a target for conservatives, who, as evidenced by the Red Scare, were already profoundly distrustful of left-leaning academics. Ronald Reagan targeted Berkeley's free speech movement in his campaign to become governor of California. In the late 1960s, President Richard Nixon's administration debated cutting university funding over Vietnam War protests on campuses. Though it never followed through, more than 100 people without tenure were fired for their political activities, and states considered bills to criminalize participation in campus protests. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush attacked "political correctness" for restricting "enterprise, speech and spirit" and leading to "bullying." But on a broader level there seemed to be a tacit sense on the right that for all of its problems, the modern research university was of real value — even a great strength of America, a reason people come here, an instrument of soft power and, indeed, a branding tool. As Nixon himself originally put it, when he rejected House-proposed legislation to end federal funding to universities that allowed campus protests of the war, doing so would be "cutting off our nose to spite our face." The responsibility, he insisted, "should be on the college administrators."

Not now. What is distinctive about what is happening is that the very concept of the research university as an autonomous institution is under direct attack. The shift is stark. If, during the Cold War, the government funded universities as a way of strengthening America, Mr. Trump's second administration treats them as a threat to be dismantled. The real question driving their "reforms" is not whether federal support for universities should continue but whether universities deserve to exist in their current form at all.

If the university has always been politicized one way or another, why should conservatives care about protecting the intellectual freedom currently housed in what are predominantly liberal institutions? The answer is earnest and aspirational: because the serious, reflective work of scholarship benefits us all. Because academic freedom makes it possible to critique institutionality from within at a time when institutions rule our lives. Because it permits intellectuals and scientists to question realities we have become complacent about. Because it creates space for values that live outside the capitalist

marketplace. Because it houses art and artists. Yes, the university can be, like any community anywhere, divisive, censorious, sometimes too ideologically homogeneous. But when it works, it trains people to think critically, powerfully and unflinchingly. The strongest critiques of the National Institutes of Health I've heard, for instance, have been voiced not by Mr. Trump or Elon Musk but by academics who understand its workings and have the theoretical framework to imagine how to reform it.

The Trump administration's orders arrive at a precarious moment in America — a moment of transformative technologies, escalating climate crises and global instability. It's a moment that demands more from universities, not less. "The core mission of the humanities is more important than ever," Robin Kelsey, a former dean of arts and humanities at Harvard, told me. As he explained, the humanities as we know them emerged in response to the violence of the two world wars, precisely because those conflicts revealed that scientific progress does not guarantee moral progress. A humanist education teaches us to question dominant narratives, to recognize how certain ways of thinking rise to prominence while others fade from view.

Dr. Kelsey warned against abandoning the humanities precisely when their lessons are most needed. "One of the contradictions at the heart of the humanities," he said, "is that they are supposed to practice the same skepticism, open inquiry and refusal of dogma that science is known for — while also addressing questions about meaning, virtue and ethics, which had long been the domain of religion." That contradiction has made the humanities both essential and vulnerable, open to attack from those who see them as frivolous or politically suspect. But what is now more clear than ever is that Mr. Rufo and other Trump-aligned ideologues actually know how important the humanities, and the civic and aesthetic values they explore, are. That is precisely why so much effort is being spent on trying to impose a set of nostalgic, premodern views at the heart of the university.

The defunding of Columbia and the threat of future cuts has sent a chill through the halls of academia. If the battle over universities were only about budgets, the fight might be different. But what is being targeted is something more profound: the ability of institutions to sustain the freedoms that form the foundation of our democracy. Mr. Trump campaigned on free speech: "I've stopped all government censorship and brought back free speech in America," he told Congress on March 4. But make no mistake: His administration is trying to force universities to conform — and to make its faculty members quite literally stop saying or studying things that they don't want said out loud or studied. Most egregiously, the acting U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, Ed Martin, recently wrote the dean of the Georgetown University Law Center, a

Catholic institution, saying that it was “unacceptable” for the school to “teach D.E.I.” (whatever that means) and declaring that until Georgetown revised its curriculum, his office would refuse to hire — that is, would blacklist — its students.

The obvious threat here is that institutions will fall in line with the administration’s broadest goals in order to preserve their funding. But beyond that, there is the deeper threat that the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz identified in “The Captive Mind,” his exploration of how intellectuals adapt to authoritarian regimes. Living under Soviet rule, Mr. Miłosz observed that artists and scholars, without direct coercion, anticipated the regime’s desires, adjusting their behavior before the government even had to intervene. Fear reshaped their internal weather, dictating what they would — and wouldn’t — say.

That fear, or one like it, is settling now into American institutions. Last week, it became more difficult to get affected professors and university administrators to talk to me, whereas before, many had been eager to weigh in. The silence was instructive. In a faculty meeting I attended recently, in a high-ceilinged room with carved wood and delicately painted windows, anxiety reverberated. We were warned of funding cuts. But the real wound ran deeper: the quiet, creeping sense that something larger — the very idea of the university as a place of free inquiry — was slipping away. In an era when both the right and the left have had their moments of speech policing and ideological rigidity, some hope this moment will force universities to rethink their own commitments to open inquiry, that it will serve as an invitation to resist the intellectual and moral narrowing that happens not only through government decree but also through the hardening of internal orthodoxy.

But the more likely outcome is that this moment will close, rather than expand, the range of what is possible. Because what we are witnessing is not just an attack on academia or a set of fiscal reforms or a painful political rebalancing. It is an attack on the conditions that allow free thought to exist. We may not yet know its full cost, but we will feel its consequences for decades.

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