

*The New York Times* - Trump's Plan to Crush the Academic Left

Trump's Plan to Crush the Academic Left

Jan. 24, 2025

By Michelle Goldberg

Opinion Columnist

Last year, Chris Rufo, the influential right-wing strategist who spearheaded the campaign against diversity, equity and inclusion, or D.E.I., initiatives, told me about his ambitions for a second Trump presidency. He hoped, he said, to see Donald Trump's administration aggressively investigate Ivy League institutions that, according to Rufo, practice "rampant" discrimination against white, Jewish and Asian students and faculty members, particularly through D.E.I. programs, which aim to boost the representation of groups deemed underprivileged. If they were found to have violated the law, he wanted the schools put under a federal consent decree, "so that the federal government can get them into compliance by force."

More broadly, he imagined a complete transformation of American academia. "If you have the full weight of the White House, the full weight of the Department of Education and a platoon of right-wing lawyers trying to use all of the statutory and executive authority that they have to reshape higher education, I think it could be a thing of tremendous beauty," he told me.

The model for such a multipronged assault, said Rufo, was Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis created an "enormous improvement in the culture." One place to see what this looks like in practice is New College of Florida, where DeSantis made Rufo a trustee. Once a progressive redoubt, it currently offers classes like "The 'Woke' Movement," whose course description says, "What has become known colloquially as the 'woke' movement is best understood as a kind of cult."

Now Rufo, who met with Trump's education team on Inauguration Day, is seeing his vision start to become reality. With one of his first executive orders, Trump set up sweeping investigations into D.E.I. in the private sector, instructing federal agencies to identify up to nine investigative targets among major institutions, including colleges and universities "with endowments over \$1 billion," a category that includes all the Ivies. Another executive order lays the groundwork for deporting foreign students and professors who engage in anti-Israel activism, something Trump promised during his campaign. It calls for ensuring that "aliens otherwise already present in the United States" aren't hostile to its citizens, culture, government or institutions, and "do not advocate for, aid or support designated foreign terrorists and other threats to our national security."

These are two of the opening salvos in a campaign to crush the academic left. "There's kind of a multifront threat right now as to whether or not you can express views that are unpopular with the folks in the White House and executive agencies and continue to enjoy the protections of the First Amendment on academic freedom," said Will Creeley, legal director of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, which fights both left- and right-wing infringements on free speech.

Many Americans, including plenty of people who didn't vote for Trump, won't mourn the end of tedious corporate D.E.I. trainings and have little sympathy for radical student protesters. "I've been talking with executives in Silicon Valley, investors on Wall Street and administrators within the universities," Rufo told me on Thursday. "They're all telling me the same thing: The resistance to Trump's agenda is at an all-time low."

But this climate of liberal resignation only makes the administration's plans more ominous. Under the cover of rolling back unpopular left-wing excesses, Trump's team is trying to assert political control over American higher education, and it seems to be pushing on an open door.

Some of the coming crackdown will be couched as a reaction to campus antisemitism. Rufo described critical race theory, post-colonial studies and D.E.I. as “intimately related ideologies,” of which left-wing antisemitism is but one expression. “They’re nesting dolls. Antisemitism, anti-white hatred and the desire to overthrow the West are all built on the same foundation.” It is that foundation that the administration seems bent on attacking.

Creeley, at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, predicts that many state legislatures, local officials and university trustees are going to enlist, either out of enthusiasm or expediency, in the crusade to bring the academic left to heel. “I think you’ll see professors investigated and terminated. I think you’re going to see students punished, and I think you’re going to see a pre-emptive action on those fronts,” he said. Just look at what’s happened at Harvard this week. On Tuesday it announced that, as part of a lawsuit settlement, it would adopt a definition of antisemitism that includes some harsh criticisms of Israel and Zionism, such as holding Israel to a “double standard” and likening its policies to Nazism. Though Harvard claims that it still adheres to the First Amendment, under this definition a student or professor who accuses Israel of genocidal action in Gaza — as the Israeli American Holocaust scholar Omer Bartov has — might be subject to disciplinary action.

In a further act of capitulation, the Harvard Medical School canceled a lecture and panel on wartime health care that was to feature patients from Gaza because of objections that it was one-sided, The Harvard Crimson reported.

“I think that Harvard likely read the room, so to speak, from a political perspective, and decided to cut their losses,” said Creeley. In this period of capitulation, it probably won’t be the last school to fall in line.