

GUEST ESSAY

JD Vance Wanted to 'Aggressively Attack' American Universities. His Wish Has Been Trump's Command.

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Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C., on politics, demographics and inequality.

Gregory Conti, a political scientist at Princeton, is not a left-wing academic. He is a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute and the editor at large of Compact, a heterodox online magazine that leans to the right.

In the case of Trump v. Harvard, Conti believes that the university “is close to being an appendage of the Democratic Party.” Harvard and units within it, Conti wrote in Compact, have

issued numerous public statements during the Great Awakening that aligned the organization with left-wing causes (a practice which Harvard has since ended). Self-censorship is generally prevalent on campuses across the nation, but is much higher among conservatives, who rightly sense that the university is largely hostile to their views.

Despite Conti's indisputably conservative credentials, he has come to believe that the Trump administration's approach to higher education — and toward Harvard in particular — not only violates due process but threatens to destroy the reputation of the United States as an international center of learning.

"It now looks like the administration has decided," Conti wrote in a more recent essay in *Compact*, "A Dangerous Turn in Trump's War on Universities," "that it will simply bludgeon Harvard, inflicting a lot of senseless damage until the latter makes a 'deal' of some sort."

As a consequence, Conti continued, "it is now within the realm of possibility that a fate I never thought I would see may come about: an end to American pre-eminence in science and scholarship. Such a result would be a tragedy not only for scholars, but for all patriotic Americans."

In an email, Conti described the revocation of Harvard's certification to participate in the Student and Exchange Visitor program as a "capricious and illiberal action, which one might fairly say borders on the nihilistic."

I asked Conti whether the administration wants to bankrupt Harvard and other Ivy League schools as a demonstration of conservative muscle.

Conti's reply:

Within American conservatism as a whole, I suspect that is far from the majority view. I do think there is a significant part of the right that thinks the whole higher education sector needs to be vastly cut down from its present (as they see it) bloated size, and that some probably wouldn't mind bankrupting Harvard *pour encourager les autres*.

A virulent hostility toward America's most elite universities underpins the Trump administration's assaults on higher education.

President Trump and his appointees have capitalized on vulnerabilities that academia is currently struggling to reform — including ideological conformity and past failures to restrain antisemitism on campus, adopting sledgehammer policies

that threaten to financially cripple one or more of the nation's internationally renowned institutions of research and learning.

On April 24, Trump wrote on Truth Social that Harvard University is a “threat to democracy,” adding:

Harvard is an Anti-Semitic, Far Left Institution, as are numerous others, with students being accepted from all over the World that want to rip our Country apart. The place is a Liberal mess, allowing a certain group of crazed lunatics to enter and exit the classroom and spew fake ANGER AND HATE.

At an April 30 cabinet meeting, Trump justified cutting off federal grants to Harvard because, in Trump's telling, “The students they have, the professors they have, the attitude they have, is not American.”

Vice President JD Vance is the most florid member of the administration voicing this hatred of academia. Take, for example, the extraordinarily broad brush Vance used to describe institutions of higher learning in an address at the 2021 National Conservatism Convention: “Universities in our country are fundamentally corrupt and dedicated to deceit and lies, not to the truth,” Vance said, adding for good measure: “Universities do not pursue knowledge and truth. They pursue deceit and lies.”

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Insofar as fellow conservatives “want to do things for our country and for the people who live in it, we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country,” Vance declared.

Vance concluded his speech by quoting President Richard Nixon: “The professors are the enemy.”

In a 2021 interview with the conservative podcaster Jack Murphy, Vance described the wide scope of what he believes conservative leaders ought to do once elected and empowered:

We should seize the institutions of the left and turn them against the left. We need a de-Baathification program, a de-wokeification program. Basically my strategy is to deinstitutionalize the left, reinstitutionalize the right. It's very hard. It will require men and women of incredible courage. But I don't see another way out.

Stanley Feldman, a political scientist at Stony Brook University, basically agrees with Vance's description of the MAGA agenda, but displayed a distinctly different spin: "It's perfectly clear," he said by email,

that the Trump administration's original argument for pressuring universities — protecting Jewish students from antisemitism and cracking down on violent protest activity — was just a ruse to implement longstanding, right-wing plans to reduce the influence of universities and remake them as conservative institutions.

Right-wing distaste for universities has been evident for quite some time. It has become a central component of the conservative culture war to diminish the influence of liberalism in American society.

Feldman pointed me toward the recent comments of Linda McMahon, the secretary of education, on CNBC: "Universities should continue to be able to do research as long as they're abiding by the laws and in sync, I think, with the administration and what the administration is trying to accomplish."

The federal government, Feldman countered, "has no right to demand that universities conduct research or structure courses that are 'in sync' with the administration's political ideology."

Sean Westwood, a political scientist at Dartmouth, shares some of Conti's concerns over the "progressive excesses" at major universities. At the same time, Westwood has his own critique of policies adopted by the Trump administration: "To advance social justice, universities continue to openly ignore the Civil Rights Act, tolerate

antisemitism and cultivate contempt for conservative views, but these failures are neither a justification nor an excuse for the illegal and cruel actions of the Trump administration.”

The administration’s offensive, Westwood continued by email, “is an imprecise flogging of a core source of American economic growth and soft power.”

Slashing National Science Foundation grants and barring international students, Westwood argued,

will scarcely touch tenured ideologues who could never plausibly get government grants and who don’t oversee (or depend on) large enrollments.

To believe that budget cuts in distant, ill-understood departments could sway an unfireable cadre of activists is profoundly naïve. Many such faculty openly frame their efforts as a war against tyranny, where the institution’s complete demise is a more acceptable outcome than the abandonment of their core convictions.

Westwood noted that the Trump administration’s demand that colleges and universities hire more conservatives directly contradicts Trump’s commitment “to dismantle Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives,” adding that “the remedy for ideological imbalances is not to mandate the token inclusion of conservatives within academic departments, rather, the solution is an unequivocal rejection of the premise that merit should ever be secondary to ideological alignment or demographic considerations.”

There are at least three reasons the penalties the Trump administration has imposed on Harvard — cancellation of millions of dollars in grants to its researchers, barring international students and the elimination of tax-exempt status — are more than egregious.

First, these punishments have been imposed without even a gesture toward due process; second, many of the burdens will fall on innocent victims, including scientific researchers and foreign students; third, many of the institutions, including Harvard, have been actively engaged in reforms since well before the Trump administration began its assault.

Greg Lukianoff, president and chief executive of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, an organization that has been highly critical of Harvard, wrote on May 30 in *The Atlantic*, in “Trump’s Attacks Threaten Much More Than Harvard”:

The government first sent an official notice of an intent to withdraw Harvard’s student-visa certification on Wednesday [May 28], beginning the process a week after informing Harvard of the outcome.

The administration justified its actions by invoking Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the federal law that prohibits colleges and universities from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. However, the proper enforcement of Title VI requires an investigation, an attempt to negotiate a resolution, a formal hearing, and 30 days’ notice to Congress before a single dollar is yanked.

The Trump administration took none of those steps before announcing the intended outcome.

The extreme focus on Harvard has prompted varied speculations about the Trump administration’s ulterior motives. Lukianoff, for example, argues that administration initiatives

appear to have a discernible objective. The idea is to destroy the left’s institutional power centers — media, pro bono law practices, and higher education — to assert dominance and control. Each new executive order put out by the Trump administration swings that partisan wrecking ball a little wider, while Congress does nothing to stop it.

In a May 23 editorial, “Is Trump Trying to Destroy Harvard?,” *The Wall Street Journal* wrote:

The Trump administration has frozen billions in federal grants to Harvard University, threatened its tax-exempt status, and sought to dictate its curriculum and hiring. Now the government seems bent on destroying the school for the offense of fighting back.

Theda Skocpol, a professor of government and sociology at Harvard, contended in an email that Trump's approach to higher education "is a cultural power grab with no serious goal of improving higher education. Harvard is to be attacked, especially because bringing it to humiliation is seen as key to controlling U.S. higher education as a whole."

Skocpol shares Westwood's view that administration proposals that universities seek out and hire conservative professors violate the principle of merit hiring: "The 'remedies' they propose are in any event efforts to define new group preferences, not to defend freedom and meritocracy. Ideological balancing is a Stalinist goal for any institution."

Harvard had initiated internal reforms well before Trump took office, Skocpol argued:

There was a robust transpartisan movement to strengthen free speech and place limits on identity politics well before Trump won in 2024. Trump's outrageous punishment campaign can only hurt, not help, and no one around here is confused that he and his anti-university crusader allies favor academic freedom or free speech.

Skocpol adamantly rejected charges that Harvard is antisemitic: "Let me just say out front loud and clear: there is and has been no systematic problem with antisemitism at Harvard."

Instead, she argued, "The problem Harvard and many places had after the terrible terrorist attacks on southern Israel on Oct. 7 was not antisemitism, but out-of-control protests and counter-protests about an international war crisis."

In addition to the critique of administration pressure to hire conservative academics as a violation of the principle of merit, others I wrote to questioned the authenticity of Trump's concerns about antisemitism in higher education.

"The sincerity of the administration's stated motive is doubtful," Dennis Chong, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, wrote by email, "as Trump hasn't condemned antisemitism among his own supporters, and has been

comfortable socializing with white supremacists and Holocaust deniers and keeping government officials who have ties to antisemitic extremists.”

Chong noted that “Trump’s actions also have not convinced Jews of the sincerity of his motives. A recent poll of American Jews found that a majority believe that Trump himself is antisemitic.”

The May 2025 National Survey of Jewish Voters sponsored by the Jewish Voters Research Center found that 52 percent of respondents “believe President Trump is antisemitic,” 72 percent think “Trump is dangerous” and 64 percent “disapprove of the job Trump is doing to combat antisemitism.”

The administration effort to control universities, Chong wrote,

is aimed at punishing opposition and dissent. There is no logical connection between stopping funding for scientific and medical research and addressing antisemitism.

Attacking Harvard and other Ivy League schools is a way for an authoritarian administration to flex its powers and intimidate other universities to get into line. Already it has, without any semblance of due process, cut off research funding and disrupted the status of international students, demanded student records, revoked student visas, and detained students and visiting scholars at the border because of their political views.

Chong pointed out that

the barrage of criticisms against universities has affected public attitudes. A 2024 Pew study found that 45 percent of the public say that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country (67 percent of Republicans and 25 percent of Democrats).

A 2024 Gallup poll found that the percentage of Americans with a great deal of confidence in higher education has dropped from nearly 60 percent to only 36 percent in the past 10 years, while the percentage who have little or no confidence has tripled from 10 percent to 32 percent.

Chong is not optimistic about the long-term outcome of the confrontation between Trump and the nation's colleges and universities, pointing out that "the government has so many weapons at its disposal and appears ready to employ all of them against a noncompliant institution such as Harvard."

Universities nationwide, Chong wrote,

are undoubtedly relieved that Harvard is standing up for academic freedom and challenging the government's actions, not least perhaps because it is deflecting attention from themselves for now. In the meantime, universities have begun to organize and band together in collective defense pacts.

Despite these positive developments, I'm less confident they that will go to the mat and forgo efforts to negotiate with the administration if they are targeted, having seen the repeated blows and costs and consequences that Harvard is enduring in the early rounds of its fight. It's hard to predict where this is headed, but we may never return to the status quo.

It is, however, clear that Trump is determined to prevent any return to the status quo. His repeated attacks on adverse judicial rulings, his orders that specific individuals be subject to criminal inquiry and his demands that he be free of legal restraint reveal his profound ignorance of the law and particularly of due process in the administration of justice.

Vice President Vance shares some of Trump's preoccupations, but he is also something of a different case.

A graduate of Yale Law School, Vance is fully cognizant of the meaning of due process. Nonetheless, he has been a willing partner in Trump's continued recalcitrance, his churlish and spiteful defiance of foundational legal principles.

The Vance statement quoted verbatim above — "Universities in our country are fundamentally corrupt and dedicated to deceit and lies, not to the truth" — is far from a simple caricature of belligerency. It is something more, something described by Hannah Arendt, the 20th-century historian and philosopher who specialized in totalitarianism, as the "substitution of lies for factual truth" so that

“the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world — and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end — is being destroyed.”

In seeking to wrest control of American universities and colleges, Trump, Vance and administration loyalists have taken a page from Viktor Orban, the autocratic premier of Hungary.

“Hungary has witnessed a serious erosion of academic institutional autonomy, with universities being taken out of public control and supposedly ‘privatized,’” Gabor Halmai, professor emeritus at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, and Andrew Ryder, director of the Institute of Political and International Studies there, wrote in January.

These institutions, they point out, “are now managed as foundations overseen by boards of trustees. However the term privatization is a misnomer as these boards consist of government appointees chosen for their loyalty to the Orban government.”

The Trump administration has not sought to mask its intentions through devices such as boards of trustees, but has instead sought to gain the power to directly oversee internal university teaching, hiring and disciplinary policies.

In an April 11 letter to Harvard, Trump administration officials at the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services and the General Services Administration not only demanded that Harvard adopt a long series of changes in hiring, discipline and admission policies, but also that:

No later than June 30, 2025, and every quarter thereafter during the period in which reforms are being implemented, which shall be at least until the end of 2028, the university shall submit to the federal government a report — certified for accuracy — that documents its progress on the implementation of the reforms detailed in this letter.

“The extreme letter sent to Harvard,” Skocpol wrote in her email, “frankly demanded to take outside ideological control of all admissions, all faculty appointments, curriculum, and governance. It proposed a more sweeping system of control by outside ideological MAGA deciders than anything even Communists install these days to control universities.”

Trump, Skocpol concluded, “is a would-be patrimonial corrupt ruler. The oldest kind in the world.”

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