

The Educational Perils of “America First”

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Global Research, May 27, 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

During his 2016 campaign, President Donald Trump propagated the reductive slogan America First, which has since translated into the lens his administration uses in framing policy. Perusing the [Issues](#) page of the White House website immediately gives way to showing how the Trump administration articulates governance—nationalistically. This is evidenced with the first two policy areas from which to select: “America First Energy Policy” and an “America First Foreign Policy”.

In his terse, yet erudite article “[A Short History of ‘America First’](#)”, Krishnadev Calamur details why using the seemingly patriotic “America First” slogan matters. Calamur writes:

The phrase in itself might provide comfort for those of Trump’s supporters who have long railed against what they see as lawmakers in Washington catering to special interests, corporations, and other countries at the expense of, in their view, the American worker. But the phrase “America first” also has a darker recent history...

That history descends from the now dissolved “America First Party” that ran Gerald L.K. Smith as its presidential nominee in 1944. Smith’s campaign brimmed with implied notions of anti-Semitism, isolationism, socio-political imperialism, and, most ostensibly, the perpetuation of a dark species of narcissistic nationalism—all views with which he was proud to associate [himself](#).

The party eventually reorganized as the Reform Party in 1992, advocating for traditionally conservative values, including: minimizing the role of government, establishing stronger borders, inculcating Judeo-Christian values, and legislating for English as the national language. In 1999, Trump, a [Reform Party Member](#), was courted by the Party to be its Presidential nominee. However, he eventually removed himself from consideration. This gave way to Pat Buchanan becoming the party’s nominee, whom Trump [called](#) a “Hitler Lover” because of [Buchanan’s view](#) that Hitler presented no serious threat to the United States prior to the US entering World War II.



Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan speaks at a rally at the Tennessee State House in Nashville, Tennessee. Buchanan is campaigning across Tennessee, trying to win the state's primary 12 March. (Source: nationaljournal.com)

Given the checkered historical context of the “America First” socio-political ideology, and President Trump’s associated connections with the party’s 1944 derivative, how these points translate into educational policy is already taking form.

With the confirmation of Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary earlier this year, cultural changes within the department have already caused substantive shifts in educational policy. In February, Secretary DeVos acknowledged her plans for continuing enforcement of the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#); thereby, ensuring states have ongoing autonomy in setting educational policies.

The extent of that autonomy was recently brought into question during Secretary DeVos’ testimony before the House subcommittee on labor, health and human services. Referencing an actual situation, Rep. Katherine Clark (D-Mass) asked whether private schools receiving school vouchers in Indiana can deny admission to a student based on sexual orientation or that of the student’s parents. Her response was to simply acknowledge that schools have broad authority under Title IX to include such stipulations, circumventing the acknowledgement of situations where she would step in to prevent the enforcement of similar discriminatory measures.

She also [said](#) she would cut the “unnecessary” programs within the department to ensure taxpayer dollars are being spent “efficiently and effectively”. How the administration defines unnecessary is now clear with their release of the [2018 Proposed Education Budget](#). As a messaging signal, President Trump’s agenda plainly expresses his vision for funding, administering, and nesting educational policies locally, nationally, and internationally. In sum, his vision requires education funding cuts by [\\$345 billion](#) over the next 10 years, primarily in the areas of secondary, post-secondary, training & employment, and educational research. However, it is the correlation of the proposed budget to the Reform

Party platform and the long-term effects of the proposed cuts that is troublesome.

The philosophy behind the budgetary cuts is in congruent in observing the need for programs that foster multiculturalist experiences in both educational and the workplace settings. Below are three cases-in-point:

- *Elimination of the public-service loan forgiveness program*: This is an economically regressive cut that de-incentivizes graduates to seek a career in public service. Instead of a mix of graduates from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, those with the financial means of repaying their loans and those without loans because of scholarship opportunities or personal means are favored.
- *Elimination of programs that foster foreign language study*: This creates a natural barrier to students traveling abroad in learning the value of the cultural norms of other countries.
- *Substantial reductions in spending for international-education programs and exchanges (i.e. the Fulbright Fellowship program)*: Reducing funding for these programs will discourage some of America's brightest students from applying to partake in opportunities that dually benefit students or researchers as well as the countries where they would otherwise study.

When reflecting on the origins of the "America First" platform, these policies echo a strategy of homogenic isolationism, succeeding only in sponsoring socio-cultural hegemony instead of multicultural diversity. This makes it difficult to foster democratized learning contexts both inside and outside of the classroom. Yet, democratization remains the essence for preserving dynamic and transformative learning environments if students are to succeed in today's diverse professional spaces.

Working-class adults and college/trade school students are also negatively affected by the proposed budget's elimination of more than 24 adult education and vocational training programs. Included among these programs are:

- The Perkins Act: This [law](#) assists states in enhancing and improving trade-focused education and professional development opportunities through issuing quality assurance standards and ensuring the compliance of institutions accordingly.
- Federal Work Study: This [federal program](#) allows students to work at their educational institution for a pre-determined number of hours each semester, while earning money to cover some of the costs of attendance.

During his campaign, and even as President, Trump has repeatedly [emphasized](#) his unwavering support for the working class in their individual and collective plights. However, the proposed budget cuts are seemingly nonsensical in aligning with the needs of President's voter block. In fact, such cuts would mitigate improvements in labor-market preparation and remove [700,000 students](#) from being eligible for working campus jobs. This would leave unemployed and displaced workers needing to re-train/re-educate themselves, and students willing to work towards paying for their education, without the proper financial support to be successful.

The combination of incoherent budgetary cuts and the elimination of multicultural learning opportunities frames an ominous portrait following in the tradition of the Reform Party.

While it is clear the current posture of the nation's educational priorities is seemingly introverted, there is also a lack of clarity in the vision of how education is to be administered, save the expectation of formidable cost reductions. That is why the steps that Congress takes with the President's proposed budget will be the litmus test in determining if America is being placed first.

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