

Betsy DeVos: Religion and profit in the war on public education—Part 2

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Earlier this month, President-elect Donald Trump chose Betsy DeVos for the cabinet position of education secretary in his incoming administration. DeVos is a virulent opponent of public education who has long promoted religious obscurantism and bigotry. This is the second part of the political profile of DeVos and her family. The first, published on December 13, can be found [here](#).

“The New Right” and the Council for National Policy

On the other side of Betsy DeVos’s family tree, her father-in-law Rich DeVos, Sr., was the co-founder of the Amway Corporation. He is largely credited with establishing “The New Right” in 1970s and funding it over decades. During this period, DeVos played leadership roles in a wide range of right-wing groups, including Focus on the Family (designated as a “hate-group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center for its “font of anti-gay propaganda”), the American Enterprise Institute, Alliance for School Choice, and FreedomWorks Foundation.

The elder DeVos notoriously served on Ronald Reagan’s first AIDS commission and blamed patients for their illness, saying, “You are responsible for your actions, too, you know. Conduct yourself properly, which is a pretty solid Christian principle.” He also denounced dying people for “requests for special treatment.”

Rich DeVos, Sr. was also an early funder and past president of the Council for National Policy. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) describes the group as a little-known club of a few hundred of the most powerful conservatives in the country, an organization so tight-lipped that it tells its people not to admit membership or even name the group.

Included in the shadowy alliance of the CNP, containing both the Prince and DeVos families, are many of the most right-wing figures in American politics. These include Oliver North (responsible for the illegal Iran-Contra paramilitary operation directed out of the basement of the Reagan White House, as well as Rex 84, a plan for the roundup of immigrants and political activists), former Moral Majority leader and ultra-right

evangelical Tim LaHaye (author of the religious fanatical *Left Behind* series on the apocalypse), oilman Nelson Bunker Hunt (a former member of the John Birch Society’s ruling council), and Paul Weyrich (cofounder of the Heritage Foundation and the American Legislative Exchange Council). It also includes former KKK leader Richard Shoff and televangelist Pat Robertson (who has defended assassination as a foreign policy tool and described Muslims as “worse than the Nazis”), and other proponents of hate politics against gays, Jews, blacks, Latinos, Islam, etc., according to the SPLC.

Blackwater

DeVos’s sole sibling, younger brother Erik Prince, is the former CEO of the mercenary supplier and private military contractor Blackwater, which has played a major role in the criminal wars conducted by the CIA and US military from 1997. It has received highly lucrative contracts from the Clinton through Obama years.

This is of particular significance in that Erik Prince put into practice, in the military, the privatization and profiteering which Betsy has sought to do in education with her bottomless pit of political contributions. It is notable that Erik Prince was an early and generous supporter of Trump, substantially prior to his sister.

Developing the “free enterprise” model in the military, Blackwater created a “parallel” operational force, offering private fighting corps, logistics and security teams to the US government--and being paid handsomely for it. The firm netted \$1 billion in US government contracts and became the largest of the State Department’s three private security companies.

Blackwater provided guards for embassies and bases abroad, and was pivotal in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, where Prince ran more than 100,000 missions. Legally, the mercenary organization was permitted greater latitude in its military conduct than the US military, which made it a prized conduit for US special operations.

In its most infamous action, the firm’s personnel opened fire

with their automatic weapons on stopped traffic in Nisour Square, Baghdad in 2007, murdering 17 Iraqi civilians and injuring another 20. While running Blackwater, Prince was also using his personal wealth and expertise to recruit a worldwide network of spies to track al-Qaeda in “hard target” locations on behalf of the CIA.

Subsequent to his mild legal fallout from the Nisour Square case, Prince sold the lucrative company and was hired by the United Arab Emirates to establish a private army just prior to the eruption of the Arab Spring. He has a new firm, Frontier Services, another highly lucrative publicly-traded corporation involved in worldwide operations, with a specialty in Africa. He presently trains Somalis and is conducting operations in South Sudan.

Jeremy Scahill’s book *Blackwater* documents the close friendship (and financial support from) Prince and his family to some the country’s most militant Christian extremists, such as former Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson, a pioneer of faith-based prisons, and Gary Bauer of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, whose mission is defending “territories that the Crusaders had conquered from the Moslems.”

Prince has roundly criticized Obama for his “half-hearted” strategy against ISIS, demanding that the US should “let the private sector finish the job.”

Privatization and profiteering

In a similar vein, Betsy DeVos’s “education revolution,” which she considers a mission “from God,” is no doubt equally motivated by mammon, specifically the determination to crack wide open the \$600 billion edu-business market.

The blending of politics, religion and profits is a core aspect of Amway, Rich DeVos’s pyramid business, originally based on selling soaps and vitamins. Rebranded as Quixtar, it was named by *Forbes* as the 29th largest private corporation in the US, with annual sales of \$9.5 billion and a presence in over 100 countries. In *The Cult of Free Enterprise*, Stephen Butterfield, drawing on his personal experience, wrote “[Amway] sells a marketing and motivational system, a cause, a way of life, in a fervid emotional atmosphere of rallies and political religious revivalism.”

The family’s “philanthropic” activities are largely made possible by the family fortune amassed in these (at best) sordid enterprises or (at worst) criminal ones. The company was among the first and certainly the most successful to use the labor of “Independent Business Operators” or independent contractors as a means to avoid federal taxes, overtime payments and labor regulations. It has been the subject of numerous federal investigations in its pursuit of profits and political influence.

In 1982 DeVos was forced to plead guilty to a criminal scheme in which he had created dummy invoices on imports into Canada, which defrauded that government of \$22 million in custom duties. In 1994 the DeVos family gave \$2.5 million to the Republican Party, which was the largest known soft money donation from a corporation in the country’s history, raising legal alarm bells. “By 2009, DeVos’s son Dick and daughter-in-law Betsy were ...facing a record \$5.2 million civil fine of their own for violating Ohio’s campaign finance laws,” explained Jane Mayer in her book *Dark Money*.

To push back against her legal difficulties, Betsy DeVos became a founding board member of the James Madison Center for Free Speech to spearhead the effort to end restrictions on soft money in politics. This collaboration, Mayer documents, laid the basis for the infamous 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*. A profound attack on democracy, *Citizens United* gave the oligarchic bourgeoisie a blank check to “purchase” candidates and install them in office.

How is it that such “soft soap” hucksters from Ada, Michigan loom so large in American politics?

A product of the decline of capitalism and crisis of American democracy, the DeVos clan represents the rise of a filthy rich oligarchy determined to eliminate the gains of the working class won over decades and to turn the historical clock backwards. As the WSWS has repeatedly explained, democratic political forms and such rights as access to quality public education are incompatible with the growth of immense social inequality and endless militarism and imperialist wars.

Social opposition will grow as the character of the incoming Trump administration—a government of billionaires, generals and ultra-right opponents of basic democratic rights—becomes clearer to workers and young people. The way forward, however, is not trying to revive the rotting corpse of the Democratic Party—whose pro-business policies, fixation with identity politics and hostility to the social concerns of the working class paved the way for Trump.

Instead a mass political and socialist movement of the working class must be built, based on the irreconcilable defense of social and democratic rights and putting an end to the economic and political dictatorship of the corporate and financial aristocracy over society.



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