

Capitulation at Columbia: The Democrats enable Trump's assault on free speech

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Last week's capitulation by Columbia University to the Trump administration marks a major milestone in Trump's effort to assert control over major American institutions. It underscores the cowardice and complicity of the Democratic Party establishment, whose guiding principle in the face of authoritarianism is surrender.

The deal finalized last Wednesday includes an unprecedented \$220 million payout by Columbia and paves the way for suppressing academic freedom under the fraudulent pretext of combating antisemitism. It effectively hands control of the university to a fascist-led government, creating conditions where criticism of Israel's genocide in Gaza—or any opposition to US imperialism—can result in expulsion or firing.

Fresh off Columbia's surrender, the Trump administration is moving to extract similar terms from other elite universities. This week, the *New York Times* reported that Harvard is open to a deal, offering as much as \$500 million—more than twice Columbia's payout—to settle federal investigations.

Columbia administrators did not wait for the agreement to be formalized before putting it in practice. In the days leading up to the deal, the university suspended nearly 80 students for participating in a May anti-genocide teach-in. Now it plans to launch an indoctrination program using “training materials to socialize all students to campus norms and values more broadly.”

Under the settlement, the Trump administration will have authority to monitor course content and oversee university admissions and hiring. Columbia also agreed to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's definition of antisemitism, which equates all political opposition to Zionism and Israel's oppression of Palestinians with antisemitism.

In exchange, the Trump administration agreed to restore most of the more than \$400 million in research grants it had held as ransom since March. The executive branch's

withholding of congressionally appropriated funds, much of it intended for medical research, is itself unprecedented and a repudiation of the Constitution's separation of powers. The deal flouts the standard procedures in federal civil rights investigations meant to provide due process.

Columbia University has deep ties to the Democratic Party. Its board of trustees includes leading figures from the corporate and financial elite as well as former top Democratic officials such as Obama's Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson. The vote to approve the settlement was unanimous.

Larry Summers, treasury secretary under Bill Clinton and former president of Harvard, went so far as to declare the day of the agreement, “the best day higher education has had in the last year.” One can only imagine what he would say about the repeal of the First Amendment—“a banner day for American democracy,” perhaps.

Another former Democratic cabinet secretary, Donna Shalala, expressed the prevailing outlook of her political cohort. “For Trump,” she said, “the details are less important than getting the deal and getting the win. So if you know that when you go into a negotiation that it's less ideological than it is getting a win, then you can get a win on both sides.”

In other words, capitulate to Trump, declare it a “mutual victory.”

While Democrats like Summers and Shalala may object to some of Trump's methods, they share the same basic political objectives. Under the Biden administration, the Democratic Party worked hand in glove with fascist Republicans to weaponize antisemitism by equating it with opposition to Israel and its genocidal assault on Gaza.

This bipartisan campaign included congressional hearings and federal investigations into Columbia and other campuses for supposedly failing to repress pro-Palestinian protests with sufficient force. The campaign

escalated with New York City's Democratic mayor, Eric Adams, ordering the police to violently arrest hundreds of students and dismantle campus encampments.

The social layer that administers the major universities has no genuine commitment to democratic rights. It is composed of privileged upper-middle-class functionaries who have been politically and morally corrupted by decades of attacks on the working class, coupled with personal enrichment tied to a soaring stock market fueled by financial parasitism and corporate criminality.

The Columbia deal is meant as a blueprint for a sweeping right-wing transformation of academia. Education Secretary Linda McMahon—bringing all the intellectual integrity of a former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment—hailed the university's surrender as a national model.

"For decades," McMahon declared, "the American public has watched in horror as our elite campuses have been overrun by anti-Western teachings and a leftist groupthink." The agreement, she boasted, was a "roadmap" that would "ripple across the higher education sector and change the course of campus culture for years to come."

Fresh off Columbia's capitulation, the Trump administration has escalated its assault on higher education. In addition to the expected deal at Harvard, federal agencies launched a new wave of investigations this week targeting several major universities.

On Monday, the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services opened an investigation into Duke University for allegedly discriminating against non-minorities, threatening to cut funding for Duke Health. That same day, the Justice Department began investigating George Mason University over its Faculty Senate's support for DEI programs.

On Tuesday, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division accused UCLA of failing to protect Jewish students from supposed antisemitism after the start of the Gaza genocide. Attorney General Pam Bondi vowed the university would "pay a heavy price," adding that investigations into other UC campuses were underway. Cases are also pending against Cornell, Northwestern and Brown.

The efforts to bring colleges and universities to heel mirror Trump's actions in other sectors. In a foretaste of what was to come in academia, Trump extorted at least nine top law firms, securing around a billion dollars in pro bono work for the "crime" of representing political opponents. In the cultural sphere, the media conglomerate

Paramount, which owns CBS, agreed to pay Trump \$16 million in damages and last week announced the cancellation of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, a critic of Trump.

Meanwhile, the attempt to cover the reality of the US-backed genocide under a pile of lies is collapsing. Images of starving children in Gaza and Israel Defense Forces massacres of desperate Palestinians expose the historic scale of the slaughter. Two prominent Israeli human rights organizations, B'Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, this week broke the official taboo in Israel itself by recognizing what is taking place as a genocide.

It's not only the genocide in Gaza that is triggering widespread opposition. The domestic policies of the Trump administration are deeply unpopular, from the brutal crackdown on immigrants to the evisceration of Medicaid.

Trump is reckoning with the deteriorating economic position of the United States, its massive indebtedness, the growing threat to the dollar, and unsustainable levels of social inequality. This intensifying political crisis is speeding up Trump's moves to dispense with decades, if not centuries, of institutional norms.

Trump's attempts to assert absolute control over academic and cultural life reflect a ruling class that has reached an impasse. It is at war with science, culture and all progressive thought. Above all, it is at war with the working class.

At Columbia, the administration's capitulation stands in stark contrast to the views of the vast majority of students and faculty, many of whom have taken courageous action against dictatorship and war, risking their academic careers and personal safety.

But the defense of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to university administrators or any section of the ruling class, which offers no resistance to the growth of authoritarianism. The fight against dictatorship must be rooted in the working class, the only social force capable of uniting broad layers of society in a conscious political struggle for democratic rights, political power and socialism.



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