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Laying Siege to the Institutions

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on April 5, 2022, during a two-week teaching residency at Hillsdale as a Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Journalism.

Why do I say that we need to lay siege to our institutions? Because of what has happened to our institutions since the 1960s.

The 1960s saw the rise of new and radical ideologies in America that now seem commonplace— ideologies based on ideas like identity politics and cultural revolution. There is a direct line between those ideas born in the '60s and the public policies



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The leftist dream of a working-class rebellion in America fizzled after the '60s. By the mid-1970s, radical groups like the Black Liberation Army and the Weather Underground had faded from prominence. But the leftist dreamers didn't give up. Abandoning hope of a Russian-style revolution, they settled on a more sophisticated strategy—waging a revolution not of the proletariat, but of the elites, and specifically of the knowledge elites. It would proceed not by taking over the means of production, but by taking control of education and culture—a strategy that German Marxist Rudi Dutschke, a student activist in the 1960s, called “the long march through the institutions.”

This idea is traceable to Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote in the 1930s of “capturing the culture via infiltration of schools, universities, churches, and the media by transforming the consciousness of society.”

This march through our institutions, begun a half-century ago, has now proved largely successful. Over the past two years, I've looked at the federal bureaucracy, the universities, K-12 schools, and big corporations. And what I've found is that the revolutionary ideas of the '60s have been repackaged, repurposed, and injected into American life at the institutional level.

Most Americans are shocked to discover this. We've all seen the outrage of parents over the past two years as they learned that their young children were being divided according to their skin color and

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last year’s gubernatorial election in Virginia, and the demographic of the now-widespread voter rebellion shows that it crosses party lines.

The Case of the Disney Company

There has been a similar response following the more recent revelations about the Walt Disney Company—a company founded 99 years ago and associated in the public mind with wholesome family entertainment.

I’ve been reporting on Disney for more than a year, and I have good sources inside the company. I broke a story last year about Disney forcing employees to engage in a critical race theory training program that denounced America as fundamentally racist, had its white employees complete a “white privilege checklist,” and included exercises on “decolonizing” bookshelves.

Disney’s first reaction was to deflect. In response to accusations of racism, the company issued a press release denying the charge. Incredibly, it offered as proof the fact that it had produced the movie *Black Panther*—a kind of corporate variation on “I’m not racist, some of my best friends are black.” This ridiculous response suggests that Disney executives were caught totally off guard. The elites who run our institutions, after all, are not accustomed to being challenged.

Disney eventually deleted information on the controversial training program from its internal website. But all things remaining the same, the

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A much bigger controversy began when the Disney Company waded into a political fight with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. DeSantis had signed a bill, passed by the state legislature, that prohibited teaching about gender ideology, sexual orientation, and sexuality in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade classrooms. Despite the fact that its opponents gave this bill an intentionally misleading name—the “Don’t Say Gay” bill—it is supported, depending on the questions used by pollsters, by between 60 and 80 percent of Floridians.

Acting against its own apparent business interest, Disney—the most famous children’s entertainment corporation in history—came out publicly in opposition to this bill banning discussions of gender identity in elementary classrooms prior to the fourth grade. In an official statement, it declared that the company’s goal was “for this law to be repealed . . . or struck down in the courts.”

Shortly thereafter, my sources at Disney leaked a video to me of an hour-and-40-minute company-wide meeting about the controversy. And what did the video reveal? In a series of unedited clips that I released on social media, an executive producer at Disney said that she had been inserting what she called a “not-so-secret gay agenda” into children’s programming, targeting kids as young as two years old, and had experienced no pushback. A production coordinator said that he had created a tracking program to make sure that the company was including enough transgender, non-binary, and

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Entertainment will come from underrepresented groups.” And a diversity and inclusion manager talked about the company’s new policy of doing away with the terms “ladies and gentlemen” and “boys and girls” at Disney theme parks.

These discussions weren’t taking place in an Ivy League faculty lounge, but among high-level executives at Walt Disney. Americans were shocked, and rightfully so. The unmistakable gist of the video was that Disney was secretly trying to change, in a fundamental way, how children think about sexuality by engineering a narrative based on gender ideology.

Disney executives had marched into this controversy beating their chests, talking trash to Governor DeSantis, and committing the company to the overthrow of the bill protecting young children. But the leaked videos quickly generated over 100 million media impressions, and with public opinion heavily on the other side—not only in Florida, but nationwide—Disney was pummeled. People started canceling their subscriptions to Disney’s streaming service, canceling planned trips to Disney theme parks, canceling Disney cruises, and thinking twice about letting their children watch Disney movies.

Elected officials noticed, too. The Florida legislature and Governor DeSantis have already revoked the special governance and tax status Disney has enjoyed since the 1960s. Disney’s stock value plummeted nearly \$50 billion in less than two

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Congress lets Disney's various copyrights expire next year, it will cost Disney additional multiple billions of dollars.

Doing further research into Disney's track record regarding children and sexual predators, by the way, I discovered that the company has a notorious pattern, going back over a decade, of having a significant number of its employees arrested for child sex crimes such as child pornography, child exploitation, and child rape. And although a company can't be held responsible for everything its employees do on their own time, I was able to find two cases of Disney complicity. In the first, Disney authorities allegedly told a Disney security guard to keep her mouth shut when she discovered that a Disney employee was molesting a young boy on a Disney cruise ship. This allowed the employee to evade arrest, after which Disney flew him back home to India so he couldn't be held accountable. In the other case, I found that the cruise trade association of which Disney is a member had opposed and then helped water down legislation that would have required Disney and other cruise lines to report sexual abuse on their cruise ships in a timely manner.

In summary, Disney's record on the issue of children and sexuality casts doubt on its claim to moral authority.

The lesson I've drawn from reporting on

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long *counter*-march through the institutions. You can't replace bad directors of diversity, equity, and inclusion with good ones. The ideology is baked in. That's why I call for a siege strategy.

This means, first, that you have to be aggressive. You have to fight on terms that you define. In responding to opponents of the Florida bill, for instance, don't argue against "teaching diversity and inclusion," but against sexualizing young children. And don't pull your punches. We will never win if we play by the rules set by the elites who are undermining our country. We can be polite and lose every battle or we can be impolite and actually deliver results for the great majority of Americans who are fighting for their small businesses, fighting for their jobs, fighting for their families.

Second, you have to mobilize popular support. This requires ripping the veil off of what our institutions are doing through real investigation and reporting so that Americans can make informed choices. We live in an information society, and if we don't get the truth out, we will never gain traction against the narratives being constantly refashioned and pushed by the Left.

Less than two years ago, an infinitesimal number of Americans knew about critical race theory. Through investigation and reporting, we've brought that number up to 75 percent. The public now opposes critical race theory by a two-to-one margin, and it is being hounded out of schools and other places. This kind of action is a model for

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Remember that institutions don't choose these ideologies democratically—they don't ask people or employees to vote for them. They impose them by fiat, through bureaucratic, not democratic rule. So it isn't surprising that the institutions lose big when we force their agendas into the political arena.

What politician or campaign manager in their right mind would ignore an issue that is supported by a two-to-one margin? So-called conservative politicians who do ignore such issues—or who oppose bringing them up out of a false sense of decorum—aren't on the people's and the country's side.

With public institutions like K-12 education, another crucial step is to decentralize them. It is centralization and bureaucratization that makes it possible for a minority of activists to take control and impose their ideologies. Decentralizing means reducing federal and state controls in favor of local control—and it ultimately means something like universal school choice, placing power in parents' hands. Too many parents today have no escape mechanism from substandard schools controlled by leftist ideologues. Universal school choice—meaning that public education funding goes directly to parents rather than schools—would fix that.

Conservatives have for too long been resistant to attacking the credibility of our institutions. Trust in institutions is a natural conservative tendency. But conservatives need to stop focusing on abstract concepts and open their eyes. Our institutions are dragging our country in a disastrous direction,

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bureaucracy and teachers' unions, which acted in concert to shut down schools and keep children needlessly masked—and for far too long. As a result, there has been an explosion in homeschooling, as well as in the number of alternative K-12 schools such as the ones Hillsdale College is helping to launch around the country. What is needed is to build alternative or parallel institutions and businesses in all areas. There is no reason, for example, why plenty of high production value children's entertainment can't be produced outside the ideological confines of the Walt Disney Company.

In conclusion, we make a mistake in thinking about politics simply in terms of a Left versus Right dynamic. That dynamic is significant, but where the opportunity really lies today is focusing on a top versus bottom dynamic. An elite class, representing a small number of people with influence in the knowledge-based institutions, are acting in their own interest and against the interest of the vast majority of the American people—those who are still attached to the idea that America is a force for good and who think, to take just one example, that young children should be protected from the imposition of radical gender ideology.

In terms of the top versus bottom dynamic, the choice today is between the American Revolution of 1776 and the leftist revolution of the 1960s. The first offers a continued unfolding of America's founding principles of freedom and equality. The second ends up in nihilism and demoralization, just

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Even those of us who are temperamentally predisposed to defense must recognize that offense—laying siege to the institutions—is what is now demanded.

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