



How MAGA zealotry overtook a conservative think tank: report

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For many years, the Claremont Institute was known promoting traditional Goldwater and Reagan conservatism. The right-wing think tank was founded in 1979 by students of the late Harry V. Jaffa, who had been a speechwriter for Sen. Barry Goldwater during his 1964 presidential campaign. But in recent years, Claremont has taken what critics consider a much more authoritarian turn, wholeheartedly embracing the MAGA ideology of former President Donald Trump and his allies.

Journalist Elisabeth Zerofsky takes a look at Claremont's influence in an article published by the New York Times on August 3. Claremont aren't as well-known as the Heritage Foundation or the libertarian CATO Institute — two other think tanks on the right — but Zerofsky emphasizes that it has become increasingly influential.

“The Claremont Institute is not a conventional think tank.... Yet Claremont's reach is extensive,” Zerofsky explains. “Claremont scholars have collaborated with Ron DeSantis and helped shape the views of Clarence Thomas, Tom Cotton and the conservative activist Christopher Rufo, and the Institute received the National Humanities Medal from President Trump in 2019. When Trump failed to win reelection, some Claremonters accused Democrats of using the pandemic to unconstitutionally change election laws to benefit themselves.”

Zerofsky notes that Claremont scholars reflect “the tenor of the right” in 2022.

“Students of classical texts, Claremont scholars don't always subscribe to the decorum once associated with Republican politics,” Zerofsky observes. “Trump's boorishness is of a piece with what some of them view as the rough-and-tumble nature of political life.”

Claremont isn't shy about publishing controversial articles in its online publication *The American Mind*. For example, Claremont senior fellow Glenn Ellmers, in 2021 wrote a highly controversial essay in which he argued that the 80 million Americans who voted for President Joe Biden in 2020 were “not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term.” And Claremont's Charles R. Kesler has argued that the U.S. is experiencing a cold civil war.

“The view that America’s founding principles are being fatally undermined by progressives seems to be at the root of what Kesler and others at Claremont find so disastrous in the presidency of Joe Biden,” Zerofsky writes. “Kesler does not participate in some of the more bellicose performances of his colleagues and did not attend a recent panel discussion they organized titled ‘The Lies of the Ruling Class.’ He told me that he disagreed with how Ellmers, the Claremont senior fellow, had characterized Biden voters as ‘non-Americans’ and told him so. But he shares in the moral battle they see at the heart of today’s conflict.”

Zerofsky notes that Jaffa, who died in January 2015 at the age of 96, “didn’t live to witness the rise of Donald Trump.” And one of Jaffa’s sons, 70-year-old Philip Jaffa, argues that his father wouldn’t like what Claremont has evolved into.

“He is adamant that the Claremont Institute has turned against his father’s teachings,” Zerofsky reports. “He cited an essay by Christopher Caldwell about Robert E. Lee that The Claremont Review ran last spring, which called Lee the ‘moral force of half the nation.’ Philip noted that this directly contradicted his father’s teachings. ‘I have come to watch the Claremont Institute embody the very things that my father criticized in the conservative movement,’ Philip Jaffa told me when I spoke with him.”