

Billionaire Betsy DeVos funding the extreme right in the lead-up to the 2024 elections

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Trump's former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and her husband, Richard, have poured nearly \$12 million into the 2024 elections supporting the fascist-dominated Republican Party throughout Michigan and nationally.

Among the recipients, according to an exposé this week in MLive, is the extreme right-wing Claremont Institute and specifically its Sheriffs Fellowship. The sheriffs' group is directly associated with Trump's violent January 6 coup and the fascist Oath Keepers. It promises to bring conservative sheriffs into the fight against "the revolutionary Left."

In the immediate aftermath of the failed coup of January 6, 2021, Betsy DeVos resigned her cabinet position. She distanced herself from Trump, citing his "mental place" and "behavior."

Her money trail, however, tells another story.

IRS filings show the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation donated \$800,000 to the Claremont Institute, a far-right ideological think tank, between 2019 and 2022. Specifically, they earmarked \$200,000 for the Sheriffs Fellowship in 2021, with another \$200,000 the following year (the most recent year for which the data is available).

A new book by Jessica Pishko, *The Highest Law in the Land: How the Unchecked Power of Sheriffs Threatens Democracy*, chillingly describes the goals of the Claremont-run Sheriffs Fellowship as creating "shock troops for Donald Trump's plan to win no matter what."

Pishko adds, "It's very hard to read it as anything other than that, given the history of The Claremont Institute and the 'stop the steal' stuff."

The role of the Michigan billionaire family underscores the dark network of financing of the ultra-right. Critically, it reveals the fundamental class interests behind the promotion of Trump and the development of an American-style fascism.

What is the Claremont Institute and its Sheriffs Fellowship?

The Claremont Institute was founded in 1979 in Upland, California as an ultraconservative publishing house, putting out *The American Mind* and *The Claremont Review of Books*. It emerged as part of a constellation of fascist intellectual propaganda operations which include the extreme right-wing Michigan Hillsdale College and its national journal, *Imprimis*. Claremont's president from 1985-2000 was Larry P. Arnn, a current vice-chairman of the organization. He is also currently the president of Hillsdale College.

Historically, Claremont published a range of material, both ideological and policy-oriented, from the ultraconservative to the fascist. However, it tacked to the extreme right beginning in 2016, publishing a piece by Michael Anton (another Hillsdale leader and one-time deputy assistant for strategic communications in the Trump administration), which described 2016 as the "Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die." Anton

wrote, "death is certain" with Hillary Clinton and endorsed Trump.

The confluence between California-based Claremont and Michigan's Hillsdale College (the DeVos family is a longtime donor to both) became strikingly evident in the aftermath of the 2020 elections.

The Claremont Institute and January 6

January 6 coup plotter and wife of the fascist sitting US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Ginni Thomas, was the associate director of Hillsdale's Washington D.C. operations between 2008 and 2009. In the aftermath of Trump's electoral loss in 2020, Thomas demanded Trump's political enemies be "arrested & detained" and face "military tribunals, for sedition." Claremont opined in *The American Mind* along these same lines, charging those who voted against Trump with sedition, accusing Biden supporters of having voted for "mob violence, ruthless censorship ... and bureaucratic despotism."

The essay's author, Glenn Ellmers, went on to advocate for stripping Americans of their rights, saying, "Most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term. They do not believe in, live by, or even like the principles, traditions, and ideals that, until recently, defined America as a nation and as a people. It is not obvious what we should call these citizen-alien, these non-American Americans; but they are something else." It concludes by calling for "a sort of counterrevolution."

The most direct link between Claremont and the attempted overthrow of the US government was John Eastman, a director of its Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence. He was present at Trump's January 6 "command center" and plotted with Steve Bannon, Rudy Giuliani, and the fascist militia to "stop the steal." Eastman used his legal expertise to pressure Vice President Mike Pence to reject Biden's presidential electors.

The role of fascist sheriff organizations

In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, Claremont game-played the role of fascist sheriff groups to prevent Trump from losing again in 2024. In a 2021 fundraising letter, Claremont announced the creation of the Sheriffs Fellowship and explained its focus. "One big thing that the riots, lockdowns, and electoral disaster of 2020 made clear is that America and our nation's conservative movement needs a countervailing network of uncorrupted law enforcement officials."

Pointedly, the Claremont email calls for building the sheriffs'

organization as a bulwark against “the perversion of the justice system by which the revolutionary Left seeks to advance its totalitarian agenda.”

Concretely, the Sheriffs Fellowship is a weeklong program that brings small groups of sheriffs to Huntington, California for “training.” In 2023, MLive relates, they included readings from the Founding Fathers and sessions on “Defeating Critical Race Theory & Dismantling DEI,” “How the Deep State Operates,” and “The Three Pillars of Trumpism.”

“A lot of it was about the intentions of the Founding Fathers,” said Oceana County Sheriff Craig Mast, who took part in the program last fall, though there were also discussions of the Black Lives Matter movement and Antifa and how sheriffs were “deliberately empowered and built ... to be very often the last line of defense on so many different issues.”

Participants are chosen for their political views. Those selected to attend the week’s fully-paid retreat typically have a record of publicly challenging the validity of the 2020 elections, opposition to restriction on guns and participation in rallies against COVID-19 lockdowns.

To this end, the Sheriffs Fellowship draws heavily on its much-larger predecessor, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), founded in 2011 by former Arizona sheriff and founding board member of the overtly fascist Oath Keepers, Richard Mack. The CSPOA’s central message is that sheriffs are more powerful than any state or federal authority and that they can resist “tyranny” by refusing to enforce laws they believe violate the US Constitution.

The Arizona Center for Investigative Reporting says this includes “the possibility that sheriffs in conservative counties might deputize regular citizens into posses to combat post-election lawlessness and that social media would be ‘ablaze with volunteers from Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and Oath Keepers.’”

According to some reports, membership in the CSPOA or support for its views extends to a significant percentage of the nation’s 3,000 sheriffs. Pishko cites a 2022 report by the Political Research Association, a nonprofit that tracks extremist groups, estimating the number of CSPOA-aligned sheriffs at 400. Richard Mack gave Pishko an estimate of twice that number.

The CSPOA and the plot against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer

Among those selected to attend Sheriffs Fellowship sessions was Michigan sheriff Dar Leaf. Leaf is a leading supporter of the CSPOA and was a close associate of Michael Null, one of the men responsible for kidnapping and threatening to kill Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020.

The attack in Lansing had amounted to a dress rehearsal for the fascistic siege of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. A group of Michigan militiamen, dubbed the Wolverine Watchmen, invaded the state Capitol, arms in hand, on April 30, 2020. They intended to kidnap the Democratic Governor and place her on trial for treason; the events transpired just two weeks after a call by Trump to “liberate Michigan.”

Leaf defended the plotters and claimed they were legal, a “citizen’s arrest.” He also admitted to attending militia rallies with two of the plotters on multiple occasions. Leaf attempted to enlist other county sheriffs in an illegal bid to “investigate all acts of voter fraud” by seizing voting machines and overturning the results of the 2020 election in Michigan.

Leaf, the sheriff of Michigan’s Barry County, outlined his views on his Claremont fellowship application, stating the “Civil Rights Act is racist” and that this government is “communism on steroids.”

Perhaps the most notorious member of CSPOA is Joe Arpaio, the former

sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, infamous for his brutality against migrants. In 1993, Arpaio set up a “Tent City”—which he described as a “concentration camp,” in 1995 he reinstated the chain gang, including for women and children. He was convicted on criminal contempt charges for disobeying a court order to stop arresting anyone he suspected might be undocumented and was pardoned by Donald Trump in August 2017.

The DeVos family—from Amway huckstering to billionaire supporters of fascism

The DeVos family fortune stems from Amway, a soap-and-vitamin business pyramid scheme which went global. They have used their riches to bankroll the expansion of the far right in the US over decades, making the destruction of public education a primary aim. Betsy DeVos recently told the *Detroit News* that she would be willing to serve in Trump’s administration again, but “only if it was with the goal of phasing out the Department of Education as we tried to do through budgetary process in the first administration.”

Among the extreme right causes promoted by the DeVos family, in addition to the Sheriffs Fellowship and the Claremont Institute, include, according to MLive, “the Heritage Foundation, the creator of Project 2025; the Federalist Society, which counts at least five of the conservative justices on the U.S. Supreme Court as current or former members; and the James Madison Center for Free Speech, the architect of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision, which effectively removed the limits from corporate election spending.”

Claremont was also part of the advisory board for Project 2025, which aimed to establish the policy framework for Trump’s second term, including a vast expansion of the US military and investments in nuclear weapons, coupled with draconian attacks on immigrants and domestic social programs. Claremont was also credited with orchestrating the national anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) campaign that is reshaping school curricula and state laws.

MLive’s review of tax filings from seven DeVos family foundations reveals that in just 10 years, they collectively gave \$839 million to these causes. These include the gifts by Rick DeVos, the son of Betsy and Richard, to the Claremont Institute and the American Moment, a JD Vance-backed nonprofit “working to recruit conservatives into entry-level positions in the federal government.”

Richard and Betsy DeVos, a right-wing political force across Michigan and nationally, were listed as worth \$5.4 billion in 2016. Betsy’s brother (net worth \$2 billion) is CIA asset and mercenary contractor Erik Prince, who gained notoriety for the role of his Blackwater USA company responsible for the massacre of 17 Iraqi civilians in 2007 in Nisour Square, Baghdad. Four of the American mercenaries were convicted but later pardoned by Trump.

More recently, Prince has launched a WhatsApp network and podcast, Off Leash, which links like-minded extreme right-wingers and fascists internationally. One of Prince’s business partners, for example, called in Off Leash for napalming Hamas’s tunnel network, “I would burn all those bastards, and have everything above ground, everything left of Gaza, collapse into this fiery hell pit and burn!” according to *The New Republic* (TNR).

“And most of all, Iran, which participants agreed with a few exceptions, also needed to be wiped out,” TNR reports. Group members also oppose the universal franchise because “ordinary people are easily manipulated by Marxists,” says Off Leash member Sven von Storch.

The revelations on the role of the billionaire DeVos family sheds light on the social interests behind the turn to authoritarianism. Despite the

many votes Trump will garner, fascism is being driven, not by the working class, but by the financial oligarchy, which is demanding the brutal intensification of the exploitation of the working class. As massive international opposition builds to social inequality and the squandering of trillions of dollars for war, the ruling elites are hurtling towards dictatorship and fascism.



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