The war on DEI is a smoke screen

Violent metaphors abound for what's happening in Washington: Elon Musk and his allies have taken a "slash-and-burn" approach to the government and a "sledgehammer" to government institutions, doing away with supposed waste and excess while leaving the fundamental structure intact. All of this is being done with the stated goal of ridding the federal workforce of the scourge of wokeness and "DEI" — diversity, equity, and inclusion, a term that has become a catchall for anything Musk and other MAGA insiders don't like. USAID is DEI. The National Institutes of Health is DEI. The National Endowment for the Arts? Obviously DEI. We can probably all agree that the woke word cloud at the FBI Academy in Quantico is DEI. Major broadcasters are pushing DEI on their viewers; public school teachers are using it to indoctrinate impressionable young students. The only solution to this is, of course, to defund and dismantle everything.

The war on DEI is a smoke screen; it's an opportunity to unite various conservative factions under a single rallying cry, giving them a common enemy on which to blame their myriad concerns. It unites recent converts to the cause, like Musk, with more mainstream conservatives whose criticisms of federal overspending look quaint in hindsight. Musk's success is part tactics, part branding. His Department of Government Efficiency has indeed been efficient, tearing through the federal workforce in a manner critics say is clearly illegal.

Under normal circumstances, dissolving the US Agency for International Development would require an act of Congress. Instead of doing that, Musk ordered his army of cracked zoomer

coders to block funding, while the White House alleged that the agency was using taxpayer money to push a woke agenda overseas. Musk benefits from the nebulousness of “DEI,” a term that has come to encompass everything from corporate diversity trainings and hollow brand PR statements to teaching children about the horrors of slavery.

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The public’s negative polarization against DEI in recent years is no accident; it’s the product of a yearslong campaign led by a coalition of right-wing think tanks, which in turn were funded by deep-pocketed conservative donors. It began with academia: organizations like the Manhattan Institute and the Claremont Institute accused universities and grade schools of pushing “woke” ideology onto children in the form of “critical race theory” and, more recently, DEI. While “critical race theory” failed to take off — perhaps because of its academic connotations — DEI conjured images of overbearing HR departments, Raytheon Pride swag, and elite prep schools touting their commitments to diversity and inclusion, making it an ideal target for populist ire. Worse still, they say, the problem extended far beyond bland, consultant-crafted DEI statements, infecting every level of the federal bureaucracy.

Rather than being used to help Americans, we were told, our tax dollars were being wasted on woke. In the weeks leading up to Trump’s inauguration, right-wing media stirred up excitement for DOGE’s government takeover by drawing attention to obscure research projects that had received federal funding: $600,000 to study why chimps throw feces, $240,000 to study the effect cocaine has on honeybees, $1.3 million to put shrimp on tiny treadmills. It didn’t matter that some of these projects were decades old, or that they had actual scientific merit (the shrimp study was actually measuring how shrimp react to changes in water quality), nor did it matter that the

five to seven figures researchers received from the government amounts to a rounding error in terms of the overall federal budget.

Given the speed of Musk's government takeover, it's easy to forget that, in practice, ending "DEI" means advancing longstanding Republican priorities like gutting the Department of Education and, yes, slashing funding for USAID. At the same time, the war on DEI allows more pernicious ideologies that were once relegated to the conservative fringes – like racism and eugenics – to seep into the mainstream, as figures who have explicitly advocated for doing away with protections enshrined in the Civil Rights Act and similar legislation are elevated to positions of power within the movement.

Other conservatives have picked up on the fact that deriding policies they oppose as products of DEI could encourage the White House to go after them next. Writing in *City Journal*, the in-house publication of the conservative Manhattan Institute, Daniel Di Martino encouraged the Trump administration to "end DEI in immigration" by scrapping both the diversity visa lottery and ending family-based migration. Neither of these policies is related to recent "DEI" efforts: Congress created the diversity visa lottery in 1990, and family reunification has been the cornerstone of legal migration since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which overturned the national origins-based system that had been in place since the 1920s. Anti-immigrant groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform have sought to end both the diversity visa lottery and abolish the 1965 Immigration Act for decades; while they haven't succeeded yet, they have gotten other items on their wishlists, including a halt in refugee resettlement. At the same time, the Trump administration has pledged to take in white "Afrikaner refugees escaping government-sponsored race-based discrimination" in South Africa.

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“DEI pilots” to explain the spate of recent plane crashes

Some of the most ardent opponents of DEI see it as not only financially wasteful but politically — and materially — dangerous. Christopher Rufo, the Manhattan Institute fellow who led the campaign to oust Harvard president Claudine Gay, has also pushed the narrative that DEI policies at Boeing are to blame for the company’s recent safety failures. Last year, he published a Q&A with a “Boeing insider” who called DEI policies “anti-excellence” and implied that the company’s DEI initiatives prevented it from hiring on merit. Other conservatives have baselessly invoked the specter of “DEI pilots” to explain the spate of recent plane crashes, a claim Trump echoed after the fatal aircraft collision in Washington, DC. The fact that there’s no evidence for any of this is irrelevant; more reasonable explanations, like Boeing’s cost-cutting measures, are politically inconvenient for a group of people who are committed to deregulation above all else. Blaming DEI pilots, on the other hand, stirs up the base.

These comments reveal far more sinister motivations for the war on DEI. Rufo has repeatedly stated his opposition to policies that promote “equal outcomes,” which he has said should be replaced with a system that promotes “equal opportunity.” That anodyne language obscures the fact that many prominent critics of DEI — Rufo included — have hinted at or outright stated that equal outcomes are impossible under a meritocratic system. This worldview stems from their belief that people are not created equal. Rufo has encouraged his Substack followers to subscribe to *Aporia,* a “sociobiology magazine” that regularly publishes articles on the links between race and IQ, a phenomenon widely disputed by reputable scientists. Richard Hanania, another prominent anti-woke activist, previously described himself as a “race realist” in blog posts published under the pseudonym Richard Hoste. Hanania apologized for the posts, claiming to no longer hold those views. Hanania’s views on race are slightly more complex

than those of popular racists like David Duke, but they're still generally in keeping with those of scientific racists who believe that race and IQ are inextricably linked. As an advocate for "elite human capital," Hanania was on the (relatively) pro-immigration side of the tech-right's civil war over H-1Bs. At the same time, he has called for explicitly racist policies like "more policing, incarceration, and surveillance of black people" as a means for reducing crime.

Hanania's 2023 book *The Origins of Woke* reveals the endgame of the war on DEI. In it, Hanania argues that "wokeness" originated with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a provocative argument that is not exactly novel on the right. Former *Weekly Standard* editor and current Claremont fellow Christopher Caldwell put forth a similar thesis in his 2020 book *The Age of Entitlement*, in which he wrote that the Civil Rights Act gave progressive groups – and the people they represented – "an iron grip on the levers of state power" that allowed them to discriminate against white men in the name of reversing historical wrongs. Writing for the *Claremont Review of Books*, right-wing political theorist Angelo Codevilla described the Civil Rights Act as "the little law that ate the Constitution." Rufo, for his part, has accused "DEI activists" of hijacking the landmark civil rights legislation "to justify active discrimination against supposed 'oppressor' groups."

Far from harmless, the crusade against DEI has been a way of laundering racist policies into the mainstream. The anti-woke right's public focus on hollow cultural signifiers obscures their actual goal: undoing the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement. In this worldview, "DEI" goes beyond woke indoctrination, serving as a mechanism to elevate biologically inferior people to positions of power at the expense of the true elites. More than a racist project, it's a *racialist* project – one whose leaders believe that traits like intelligence are racially determined. Hanania is one of the few activists willing to admit this publicly, but he's far

from the only one that believes it.

For activists like Rufo and Hanania, ending “DEI” policies is an ideological project that goes beyond austerity. No wonder, then, that Musk’s DOGE is staffed with people who pal around with white supremacists online and have expressed support for “eugenic immigration policies.” Musk tried to explain away the posts as old jokes. Others said his views shouldn’t matter as long as he’s good at his job. But those are one in the same, aren’t they? The work of slashing and burning the social safety net furthers the racialist right’s agenda.

https://www.theverge.com/politics/613660/war-on-dei-smoke-screen-civil-rights-racism-eugenics