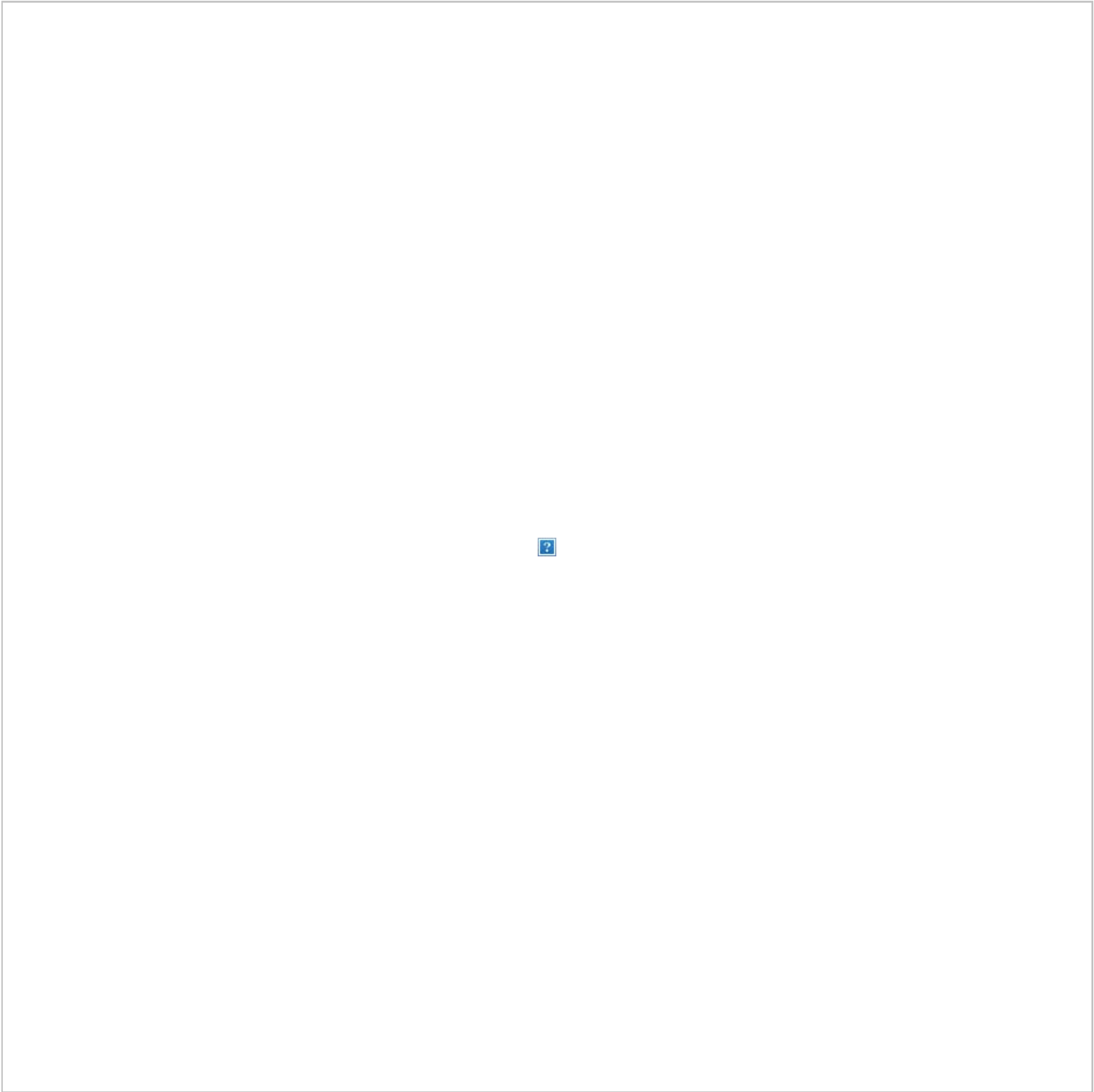


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# Betsy DeVos's Golden Age

Betsy DeVos has spent a fortune to influence education policy. If she is confirmed as education secretary, for the first time, she can do it for free.

by Branko Marcetic



BetsyDeVos.com

**I** magine if Charles Koch was a conservative Christian who believed he was fighting something akin to a religious war. Now imagine he's been given a cabinet position. That's Betsy DeVos.

DeVos, who had her confirmation hearing for education secretary earlier this week, is preparing to step into the position that will give her immense power over the facet of American life she's dedicated herself (and much of her billions in wealth) to more than anything else: education. DeVos has spent a lifetime

spending untold amounts of money to influence education policy in the United States; if she is confirmed as education secretary, for the first time, she'll be able to do so for free.

## Family Ties

**N**ot unlike the marriages between two powerful clans in feudal times, the marriage of Betsy and Dick DeVos three decades ago represented a merging of two wealthy, Christian conservative families: the Princes and the DeVoses.

The Prince fortune is rooted in patriarch Edgar Prince's automotive supply company, Prince Corporation, which he founded in Holland, a small town in west Michigan founded 150 years ago by a conservative Dutch Protestant sect.

DeVos's early upbringing sounds reminiscent of the movie *Footloose*. She was under the thumb of both a strict, conservative community and an even stricter, more conservative church. According to *Mother Jones*, there was no whistling between 11 PM and 7 AM, no grass clippings over eight inches, no restaurant sales of alcohol on Sundays, no dancing or watching movies — and of course no learning about evolution. The Christian Reformed Church, which operated the schools Betsy DeVos attended and in whose tradition she was raised, believed education was the domain of families, not the government.

The Princes were well connected in the world of the evangelical Christian right. They were friends with figures like Gary Bauer, president of the conservative Christian American Values organization, and James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council. The Princes were more than just friends however: their foundation has given \$5 million to Focus on the Family, and in a letter written shortly after Edgar's death, Dobson outlined how Prince "helped guide the development of the Family Research Council from its earliest days," serving as a founding board member and putting up the seed money to get the organization off the ground. (Betsy DeVos's brother, Erik Prince, has become infamous in recent years for founding the private security company formerly known as Blackwater.)

The other side of the family is no less auspicious. The DeVoses made their name with Amway, a pioneer of multi-level marketing that is in some ways a forerunner to the modern gig economy, and one which Betsy DeVos briefly worked for, according to her pre-confirmation hearing questionnaire, first as a

marketing analyst and then as an “Amway Independent Business Owner.”

Amway was investigated and cleared of being a pyramid scheme in 1979, but its business model sure sounds similar to one. Most of its employees (sometimes derisively called “Ambots”) would work in their spare time for the company, as “distributors” selling overpriced merchandise like soap, vitamins, and home goods, and acting as “sponsors” for other distributors. The more people they roped in as “distributors” — family, friends, neighbors, who would rope in people of their own, and so on — the better they did, as distributors needed to buy products from sponsors. As the *Atlanta Constitution* reported in 1983, most Amway workers made only \$300-\$500 a month — about \$720-\$1,200, in today’s dollars.

So what kept employees around? “To motivate people, we sell the dream,” the company’s wealthiest distributor told the newspaper. Although only a small few would ever reach such heights, Amway’s distributor success stories were paraded in front of new employees in introductory meetings and training sessions, along with literature promising a life of luxury.

The company’s model fit with the ethos of Richard DeVos, the company’s co-founder. “Underachievers begin to undermine, undercut achievers because they resent and are jealous of the achievers’ success,” he told an assembled group of sixteen thousand life insurance agents in 1977. “Poverty is not a virtue. Poor people cannot help other poor people.”

This Social Darwinist attitude pervaded the company. Distributors who only sold \$100 worth of products a month were told by the distributors above them that their failure was their own fault. “Those who really want to succeed, succeed,” insisted DeVos, “and the others didn’t try hard enough.”

Amway didn’t just sell the American Dream, however. One political science professor determined that Amway was a quasireligious “hybrid economic and social network” selling “belongingness” to those alienated by modern industrial societies.

At the heart of this were the company’s regular sales meetings and conventions, which started with the Pledge of Allegiance and ended with “God Bless America.” Observers described them as similar to “revival meetings,” and DeVos himself was likened to preacher Billy Graham.

“I didn’t see one person who reached high levels who didn’t acknowledge the

Lord and give Him credit for the success,” one distributor told the *Charlotte Observer*.

Just as Betsy DeVos enjoys a status as a Republican “megadonor” and held various posts in the Michigan GOP over the years, her father-in-law has been one of the GOP’s most ardent, big-money supporters. He was chairman of the party’s national finance committee in the early 1980s until he was forced to resign in 1982 after saying that the then-recent recession “has been a beneficial thing and a cleansing thing for this society,” since unions had to take cuts in wages and benefits.

Even after his ouster, DeVos and Amway continued to funnel money to the GOP, including a then-record \$2.5 million to the RNC in 1994, an anonymous \$1.3 million donation to the San Diego tourist bureau to help air the 1996 GOP convention (viewed at the time as a sneaky attempt to circumvent donation limits) and millions more dollars of soft money. By one estimate, as Sen. Bernie Sanders referenced in DeVos’s hearing, the family has given as much as \$200 million to Republican lawmakers over the decades — a figure Betsy DeVos said was “possible.”

## Talking out Loud

**B**etsy DeVos is arguably the single most prolific campaigner for charter schools and school privatization, pouring her enormous wealth into a vast network of organizations — PACs, think tanks, pressure groups — that seek to separate government from education. We can get a closer idea of her specific views by looking at DeVos’s public statements, including the dozen or so “publications” she authored that are listed on her questionnaire, dug up by one enterprising blogger.

One column, in 1994, had her endorsing Michigan Republican Spencer Abraham for the Senate, explaining that Abraham would defend “the Judeo-Christian values that made us what we are, but which are under attack from the liberal elite here at home,” and praising him for “willing to abolish the welfare system” and put “Washington’s sacred cow, entitlements, on the table.”

In another column, from a September 1997 issue of *Roll Call*, DeVos defended her family’s “soft money” contributions and denied the charge that Republicans had slipped a provision into that year’s budget aimed specifically at benefiting

Amway in reward for the family's generosity.

"I have decided, however, to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence," she wrote. "Now I simply concede the point. They are right. We do expect some things in return." She elaborated:

We expect to foster a conservative governing philosophy consisting of limited government and respect for traditional American virtues . . . Furthermore, we expect the Republican Party to use the money to promote these policies, and yes, to win elections.

Amway and DeVos complained in 1999 when *Mother Jones* ran only the first part of the quote, arguing it made her denial seem to be an admission. However, even in full, while less damning, DeVos's quote makes an equally worrying point: while she denies using money to tilt the political system toward personally benefiting her, she makes no bones about the fact that she expects her donations to help advance conservative policies she favors.

Or as DeVos put it in 2002, when her PAC the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP) was in the midst of raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for that year's election season: "Anything we can do which turns the tide in favor of Republican officeholders who embrace various measures of education reform, we would consider that effective."

At her confirmation hearing, DeVos refused to categorically rule out defunding or privatizing public schools when repeatedly asked, saying she wouldn't "characterize it in that way." It's a stance consistent with previous statements she's made.

In a 2015 speech on education reform at SXSWedu, she declared that "government really sucks," arguing that it favors one-size-fits-all solutions from "central command," fears new ideas, and stifles innovation. (Oddly, to back up this last point, she cited a hypothetical "good military strategist" who knows you have to improvise beyond the first engagement. The military, of course, is a government-run institution that issues orders from a central command).

In a 2013 interview DeVos did with the Philanthropy Roundtable (an organization she would later chair), she gushed about the fact that the school choice "movement's growth is accelerating," and that she's "never been more

optimistic.” “Traditional public schools are not succeeding. In fact, let’s be clear, in many cases, they are *failing*,” she said. “That’s helped people become more open to what were once considered really radical reforms.”

Given that DeVos refers to public schools as “government-run schools,” it’s not hard to connect the dots. Government ruins everything it touches; public schools are government schools; ergo, public schools are failing by virtue of the government’s involvement.

Her use of this term is not accidental. In a 2002 speech to the Heritage Foundation, her husband explained that he was now using the terms “government schools” and “government-run schools,” because “public schools” is a “misnomer.” He justified this on the basis of the inconvenience of school zoning, but it’s no doubt also influenced by the fact that policies tend to be less popular when described as government-run or government-administered.

The ultimate goal of all this, according to a 2001 interview obtained by *Politico* that the DeVoses took part in at “The Gathering,” an annual summit of wealthy Christians, is to “advance God’s kingdom.” According to the DeVoses, the church has been “displaced by the public school as the . . . center for what goes on in the community.” Through education reform, they hope more churches will become active in education.

## A Pair of Invisible Hands

**I**n pursuing this goal, the DeVoses turned themselves into a two-person funding arm for a phalanx of right-wing organizations and individuals pushing for education reform.

They funded think-tanks like the Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE) which pumped out research and created an intellectual bedrock for a host of reform policies, from school vouchers and charter schools to digital education. They gave money to candidates that supported these same policies. They bankrolled nonprofits and activist organizations that further pushed this agenda. And they funded American Federation for Children, a dark money group that has spent millions on hundreds of races over the last few years without disclosing its donors.

It’s part of a strategy that Dick DeVos outlined in his 2002 speech to Heritage. The education reform battle would have to be waged at the state level, he

explained, with locally constructed groups. “It will not be as visible,” he said, given that anything that happened in Washington tended to get a fatal amount of attention.

“And in fact,” he went on, “to the extent that we on the Right, those of us on the conservative side of the aisle, appropriate education choice as our idea, we need to be a little bit cautious about doing that,” to avoid ruining its bipartisan appeal.

The state of the school system in Michigan is a good preview of what’s to come if DeVos gets her way on the national stage. The DeVoses were wildly successful in pushing their educational vision onto their home state, playing a role in successfully passing the 1993 law that allowed charter schools in Michigan and another law eighteen years later that lifted a cap on them. (The DeVoses could also fall short, however — most prominently, in their failed attempt in 2000 to amend the state constitution to allow school vouchers).

Less successful were the actual results of the experiment, with Michigan, particularly Detroit, faring abysmally in education rankings in the decades since charter schools were allowed to proliferate.

This wasn’t the only rightward shift the DeVoses were able to achieve in Michigan. During the 2012 lame duck session, a group of wealthy businessmen led by Dick DeVos poured money into the state to get “right-to-work” legislation passed, funding huge amounts of advertisements on every possible platform and distributing talking points to GOP lawmakers. Dick DeVos personally phoned a number of lawmakers on the fence, including Republican governor Rick Snyder, who had said he wouldn’t sign any such law — and eventually reneged on that promise.

The result was that a blue state that gave birth to industrial unionism narrowly passed a law decimating unions. At the same time, hitting the unions had the knock-on effect of cutting into the funding of Democrats in the state, helping pave the way for future education reform efforts.

## Extreme Affiliations

**B**etsy DeVos’s impact and beliefs extend past just the battle over education reform. One must also look at the various think-tanks and foundations that she and her family have funded or directed over the years and the views they’ve espoused.



Take the Acton Institute for instance, a Christian free-market think-tank on whose board DeVos served for ten years. In [one blog post](#) that made waves last year, the author appeared to exalt early-twentieth-century child labor, praising photos showing one-legged and hunchbacked children and children smoking cigarettes and finishing midnight shifts as representing “the faces of those who are actively building enterprises and cities, using their gifts to serve their communities.”

Other pieces [debated](#) whether the minimum wage — or “requiring that employers pay their lower-skilled workers more than they might otherwise pay them” — was consistent with biblical notions of justice (the answer, you may be surprised to learn, is no), and [fretted](#) that “our political way of life would be impoverished and unbalanced by muzzling corporations.”

The Family Research Council, which DeVos's father helped get off the ground and has received [\\$6.1 million](#) from the Prince Foundation (which DeVos was listed as the vice president of for thirteen years) is [listed](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-LGBTQ hate group. The organization has repeatedly advanced the claim that homosexuals have a higher proclivity to pedophilia, wants to roll back abortion rights, [supports](#) conversion therapy (which it prefers to call “sexual reorientation therapy”), and its president called the “It Gets Better” campaign “disgusting.” (Betsy DeVos herself denies being homophobic.)

Focus on the Family, which received \$5.1 million from the Prince Foundation, is also an eager advocate for conversion therapy, devoting an entire section of its website to “[Leaving Homosexuality](#).” The process of ending “unwanted homosexuality,” in the parlance of Focus on the Family, is a hugely traumatic affair that has been known to involve [physical and psychological abuse](#) and drive “patients” to [depression and suicide](#).

The organization also believes society is in thrall to a “[radical homosexual agenda](#),” that anti-bullying legislation is used to “[promote homosexuality to kids](#),” and that allowing gay marriage will lead to [the end of civilization](#). In light of this, DeVos's push for school privatization — and her [refusal](#) to confirm that she would enforce federal civil rights laws in schools — is doubly sinister.

These stand alongside the more mainstream right-wing think-tanks like Heritage and the American Enterprise Institute which the family has supported for years, and on the latter of which DeVos served on the board of trustees. These

organizations may appear less extremist, but nonetheless advocate everything from slashing entitlements and rolling back environmental regulations to a more bellicose foreign policy.

The prospect of Betsy DeVos being in charge of anything related to public education — let alone having the ear of the president of the United States — is worrisome to say the least. Unless you happen to be a fundamentalist religious zealot who hopes to undermine public education. If so, then the next four years may prove to be something of a golden age.

Rachel Johnson contributed reporting to this piece.

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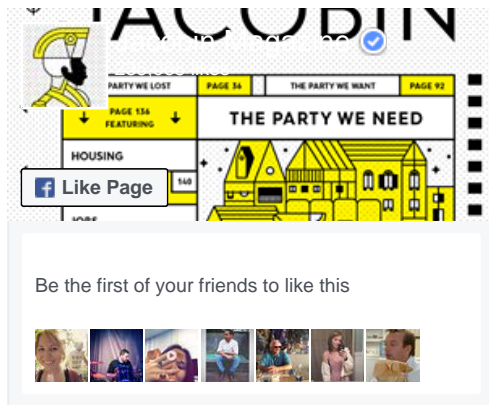
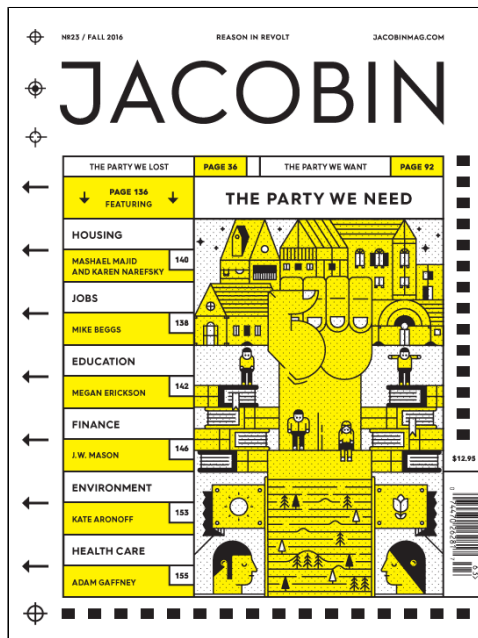
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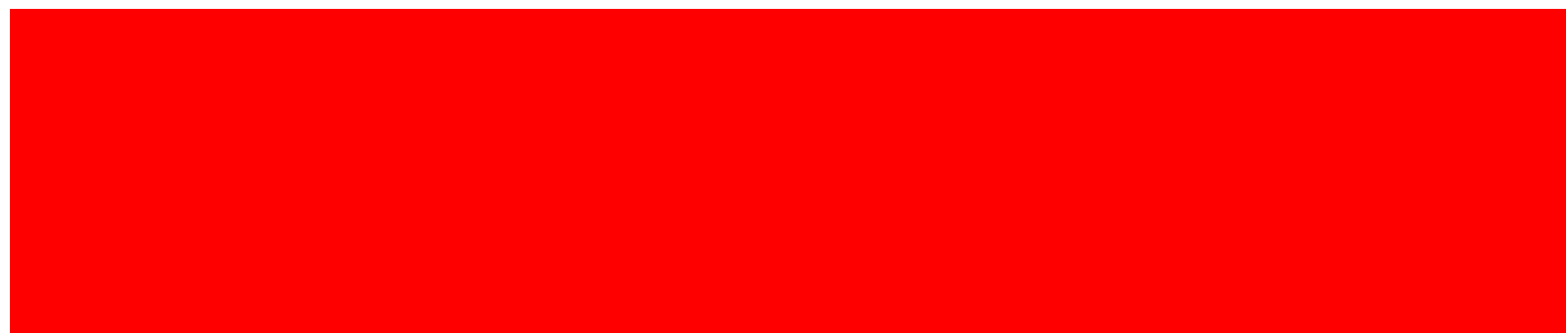
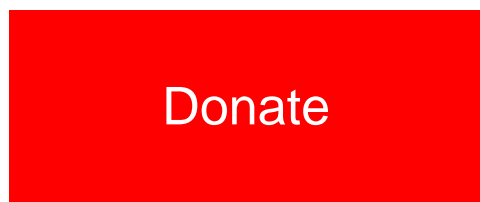


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