

The Fairfield Prep Political Awareness Society presents:

# Zeitgeist



**Spirit of the Times**

**March 2018**

## **The Fairfield Prep Political Awareness Society**

President: Michael Cardona, Class of 2018

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### **About the Society**

In a matter of years, our generation will be the status quo. We will be running the businesses and casting the votes and contributing to the culture that will serve to identify our country for decades to come. As such, it is our duty to cultivate a devotion to political curiosity and vigilance so that we can shape this future in the most well informed manner possible. The Political Awareness Society is a part of that cultivation, providing an environment for students to discuss and debate what is going on in the world and develop their own unique perspectives that they can carry with them into the adult world. We meet every Thursday afternoon in Mr. Szablewicz's room (B407). All are welcome to attend.

**Note:** The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the contributors and are in no way intended to reflect those of Fairfield Prep as an institution.

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# Mrs. Thomas' Thoughts on ...

By Michael Cardona '18 and Adam Julio '19

*Mrs. Alecia Thomas has served on the Prep faculty as both a social studies teacher and currently as Director of Diversity and Academic Support Services. On March 6th, Political Awareness Society President Michael Cardona '18 and contributor Adam Julio '19 interviewed her about her thoughts on "Resist" and the importance of diversity in popular culture and the political discourse.*

**The Oscars took place this past weekend which have been criticized in recent years for a lack of minority representation. What role should diversity play in the film industry and do you think this previous academy awards has rectified the problems?**

I watched the Oscars on Sunday, and it has been the most pressing issue on my mind this past week. I have been contemplating whether the Oscars truly fit the description of racial diversity or whether they overdid it and became it a ridicule. I believe that the lack of diversity in the film industry is a real problem, and while I am glad they are recognizing it, I do feel that they could have used a more serious attitude when addressing the issue. I was really impressed with the host, Jimmy Kimmel, who spoke about Black Panther, Wonder Woman, and the role that minorities play in the film industry. However, some of the celebrities' presentations, such as Tiffany Haddish, who came out without shoes, and presented alongside Maya Rudolph, I thought made the situation too light-hearted in tone.

As a person of color, I was happy to see the release and promotion of Black Panther, a film with a primarily black cast. However, I would like to see more movies better represent those not usually represented in the film. I believe the film industry is still lagging behind in this regard, and that there should be more characters played by people who do not fit into the mainstream view of society and who can serve as positive role models for all viewers.

**American political representation is also often criticized for not being particularly diverse. What do you think is the importance of diversity in politics?**

What's funny to me is that America is a country that is made up of immigrants, some of whom were forcibly immigrated as slaves. Slaves were the people who were building the buildings, tilling the soil, and who were really the backbone of our economic strength for many years. In the present day, we have a country which claims to be democratic but who's democratic institutions are not representative of the whole population. When you look at Congress, it's almost all white, very wealthy, and very male. To me, it is not representative of our population. You can see this in the way in which the recently passed tax overhaul was structured and the groups that were favored by the new legislation. Overall, I do not think our government is representative of our people, and unless we take steps to fix this problem now, then we might always be faced with this issue.

**In the Academic Center, you have a “resist” poster prominently displayed. “Resist” as a political message is somewhat controversial and can mean a variety of different things. What does “resist” mean to you?**

The fist in the poster means to stand up to all forms of injustice. You do this by searching your conscience, and I believe that every single person in our society has a conscience. There's that voice inside of us that tugs at us and tells us what's wrong and what's right. When there are things being done in an inhumane way, then you must go to your conscience.

Resist to me means to resist the norm, to be your own individual, form your own opinion, and if there are things in society that you feel are not working, or that go against basic human dignity, then you have the right to fight against them. Not physically, of course, I am a believer in the principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, but there are certainly non-violent ways to resist. I put it in the academic center because, while it is a safe space, it is also a place of struggles, battles, and overcoming adversity. To me it's not necessarily a positive poster; it's not saying we have overcome because we have not yet overcome. That's what the fist stands for: it is saying that the struggle is still real, and we must continue to press on.

Liam Woods '19

### Common Sense on Gun Reform

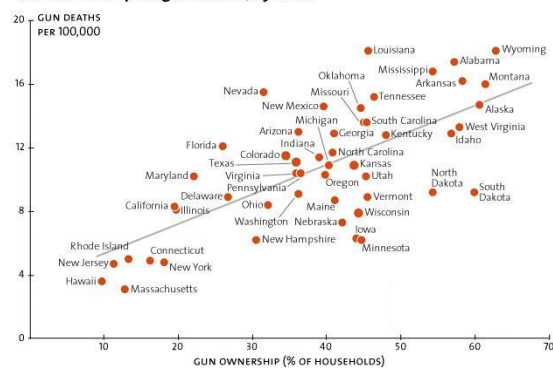
Modern America is plagued with divisiveness. Unfortunately, the issue of gun ownership and the place of the Second Amendment in the 21st-century is no exception to this truth. It seems as if one were to look anywhere today in the United States, even before the tragedy in Florida, gun control debates threaten to split the country in two.

I am a liberal. I have always been a liberal. I respect the right to bear arms, however, I believe that there are instances in which this right should not be extended to certain individuals. Such a sentiment should fall within the realm of common sense, but unfortunately, it seems as though the Freedom Caucus, the NRA, and large sectors of the right-wing electorate intend on broadening the 2nd Amendment beyond all reasonable limits. Nonetheless, to elaborate upon this fair and reasonable idea of placing restrictions on gun ownership, I believe that a mentally ill individual should not be allowed to purchase a gun, an individual with

a violent criminal record should not be allowed to purchase a gun, any individual who resides with either of the two previously mentioned cases should not be allowed to purchase a gun, and that threats made in person and on social media should be grounds for the confiscation of their firearms.

I also believe that any argument made on the subject of gun ownership in the United States should be preceded with the knowledge of another basic fact: that there is a clear link between gun ownership and gun deaths per capita. This link is made painfully obvious in the graph below.

Gun ownership vs. gun deaths, by state



Sources: *Pediatrics*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Thankfully, our state of Connecticut rests far below the trend line, and this is no accident. Connecticut has for years had some

of the strictest gun laws in the nation, as is the case with the other four states with the lowest number of gun deaths per capita, Massachusetts, Hawaii, New Jersey, and New York. Conversely, the five states with the highest number of gun deaths per capita — Louisiana, Wyoming, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas — are all generally Republican and have relatively lax gun laws.



The results of large-scale efforts to limit the number of guns at large have been, in terms of historical examples, successful. In 1996, Australia had one of the worst mass shootings in the past 50 years. Directly afterward, with party lines put aside, Australia's government banned the sale and usage of semi-automatic firearms and enacted extremely strict licensing procedures,

even offering to purchase the now illegal weapons from their owners. Since then, Australia has had no major mass shootings. In that same period of 22 years, the United States has had nearly 80. What could possibly be the purpose of delaying action yet again?

One preeminent pro-gun argument is that an armed populace can deter someone who intends to harm by using a firearm, and thus the solution to mass shootings is more guns rather than less. While there are certainly cases of such events happening, these are far overshadowed by the times there was no one there to stop a mass shooting. Additionally, even in cases where a perpetrator is stopped by another individual carrying a firearm, it's often the case that numerous innocent people are wounded or killed before such a perpetrator can be stopped, such as in the 1981 Reagan assassination attempt, the 2007 Colorado YWAM and New Life shootings, and the more recent massacre in Sutherland Springs last year. The better solution is clearly to prevent mass shooters from obtaining their weapons of choice in the first place, rather

than hoping a “good guy with a gun” will be there to save the day.

Year after year, mass shooting after mass shooting, the American public is growing increasingly weary of hearing that more schoolchildren, movie-goers, church-goers, and simply innocent people have been killed at the hands of a gun. Congress must stop dawdling and take action against the atrocities that are happening right here in America. It is their constitutional duty to promote our general welfare, and in their failure to do so, as shown recently with the Parkland Massacre, they are failing the same document whose words advocates of gun ownership seem so incessant on defending.

Robbert van Batenburg '18

### **Evaluating the Trump Economy**

Just prior to the 2016 Presidential Election, a Pew Research Center poll determined that 84% of likely voters found the issue of the economy “very important” in making their choice on Election Day. The strength of the nation’s economy, or lack thereof, has proved critical in elections

throughout history, and this should hold true as President Trump seeks reelection in 2020. Luckily for Trump, much of the economy has boomed since he took office about 400 days ago. However, risks, both inherent and attained, continue to threaten the progress made under his administration.



Almost immediately after the news of Trump’s election broke, the economy jolted into overdrive and hasn’t really looked back since, despite predictions to the contrary. While significant economic gains had been made during the final two years of the Obama presidency, the stock market and metrics like the Consumer Confidence Index (CCI) only began their noticeable upward trend after Trump’s election and into 2017. Since November 8th, 2016, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has risen nearly 40% and



the CCI has moved from 98.6 to its highest point since 2000 at 130.8. While these metrics are more forward-looking than anything else, they indicate that Trump's presidency has brought renewed confidence to both business owners and consumers, confidence without which, economic growth would prove impossible.

The surge in these forward-looking metrics received vindication, however, with the passage of the comprehensive Tax Cuts and Jobs Act by Congress late last year. In short, the reform reduces the exceptionally high nominal corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%, limits itemized tax deductions while expanding write-offs for corporate and small business investments, and lowers the nominal personal income tax burden for most Americans. More money will be freed up for reinvestment back into the economy, personal savings, or capital expenditures such as new software, factories, or equipment. From American Airlines to Bank of America to Comcast, companies have had already offered their employees hefty bonuses as a direct result of the new tax plan going into

effect. In addition, Apple announced a \$350 billion U.S. investment project in January. While there are certainly some questionable provisions and overlooked specifics in the massive tax overhaul, as a whole, the tax bill will provide part of what's needed for the U.S. economy to extend its post-2008 recovery.



Employment and job creation are aspects of the economy that Trump staked his campaign on. These numbers indicate tangible growth and better prospects for the average American, those who need this growth the most. Under Trump, the unemployment rate has continued its steady decline to 4.9%, and during 2017 it's estimated that the U.S. economy created 2.1 million jobs. While short of the targets initially set by the Trump administration, this growth is indicative that the policies enacted

during the last year have been able to sustain and build on the economic recovery that began under the Obama administration.

However, despite the signs of economic health under President Trump, an element of risk under the commander-in-chief remains. While the President campaigned on the idea of revitalizing the American economy and worker, part of this promise included imposing protectionist tariffs on certain industrial goods and commodities. Trump fulfilled this promise earlier this month with the announcement of tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, as well as other Chinese products. Foreign governments who the tariffs are expected to affect have threatened retaliatory measures in response, and economists worry about the possibility of a damaging trade war, something that President Trump has called “good and easy to win.” Finally, many of Trump’s nominations for the Federal Reserve’s Board of Directors indicate a departure from the Yellen doctrine of slow and methodical increases in interest rates. Experts have expressed concern that a

speedier tightening of monetary policy could slow economic growth. With a President like Trump, known for his receptiveness to quick and unannounced changes in policy direction, the possibility of a minor or even sizeable economic downturn looms large despite great economic performance.



Since the end of 2017, this threat of an economic hiccup has appeared increasingly real. The stock market has reacted more negatively than usual to news of interest rate hikes, changes in tariffs and trade agreements with China, or even the odd Trump tweet. In addition, with the economy growing just 2.5% during 2017, real GDP growth has remained anemic and far short of the 3% benchmark set by the President during his campaign. Overall, while the economy has exceeded most expectations as a whole, the same shakiness that plagued the

economy under Former President Obama is still very much there. If President Trump would like to give his party any chance of retaining the House and Senate in this year's midterm elections, he will have to avoid making waves in markets and look to maintain the steady economic progress he has made so far during the first year of his presidency.

Michael Cardona '18

### Lessons from 2018's Government Shutdowns

In 1982, Congress passed the Anti-deficiency Act, a law that prohibited the federal government from operating without appropriated funds, essentially shutting down the government if a congressional funding deal is not met. This idea of the federal government shutdown is exactly what happened in the famous cases of 1995, 2013, and now 2018. When Congress fails to agree by their set deadline on what to fund and how to fund it for the next fiscal year, some or all non-essential offices of the federal government are forced to close until appropriations are approved. Sometimes, like

in 2013, this can take weeks. While agencies necessary for the normal and safe operation of government such as the FBI or the TSA will remain open, agencies like the National Park Service or the Department of Energy typically close, causing headaches and costly unpaid salaries, the sums of which can often run into the hundreds of millions.



The dual funding crises of this year, on January 19th and February 9th, centered specifically on the immigration debate, a hallmark issue for President Trump as well as many legislators in the House and Senate. House Republicans, as well as President Trump, were looking to set aside large amounts of money for increased border security, notably a border wall with Mexico, a major campaign promise of the President. Republicans were hoping to secure a sum of

\$25 billion over 10 years for the funding of this wall and heightened border security. Democrats, on the other hand, were insistent upon a permanent renewal to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, commonly known as DACA, which had been nullified by President Trump in late 2017 and stuck with a March 5th deadline until the legal status of those in the program expired. While Republicans have majorities in both the House and Senate, they lack the 60 votes needed in the Senate to pass legislation on budgetary matters without risk of filibuster. It appeared initially as though members of the two parties would compromise, however, negotiations fell through and Congress was forced to eventually approve a last-ditch plan that included neither funding for increased border security nor an extension of the DACA program.

2018 marks the first time in which one party has controlled the House, Senate, and the Presidency and the government still shut down. It is a rare occurrence that occurred only as a result of an overly weighty

demand from the executive branch: Trump's border wall. Democrats (and some Republicans) balked at the \$25 billion price tag of taxpayers' money for such a project.



Unfortunately, as a result of the political goals of both the Republicans and Democrats, the government shut down yet again this year, dealing a blow to the midterm hopes of both parties and their ambitions in terms of future legislation. While President Trump has claimed victory on this year's two shutdowns, it remains to be seen how the 700,000 young people in the DACA program, the border wall, and largely Congressional and even Presidential reelection hopes will fare in the coming months of 2018.

Cole Simons '18

## Puerto Rico: A Territory Betrayed

Puerto Rico, you've been a part of the United States for one hundred twenty years, why must we still treat you like a child? Like the state of Florida, as well as parts of Alabama and Mississippi, Puerto Rico was originally acquired from the Spanish Empire in 1898. However, unlike these states, Puerto Rico was never allowed to move beyond its territorial status and into statehood.

Over a century later, the territory continues to receive treatment akin to that of a nineteenth-century colony. While those born in Puerto Rico are entitled to United States citizenship, these islanders lack some of the basic the rights afforded to citizens of the fifty states. "Island citizens" cannot vote in presidential elections, Puerto Rico does not elect any voting members of the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate, and the territory receives a fraction of the same federal monetary attention and grants that would typically be provided to a state of similar size.



Many argue against Puerto Rican statehood on account of its geographical, linguistic, and cultural differences with the rest of the United States, as well as its perceived lack of economic resources and strength. However, Puerto Rico lies just under a thousand miles off the coast of Florida (about half the distance between California and Hawaii) and has a population larger population than that of twenty-six states, including Connecticut. Additionally, Puerto Rico lays claim a strong and growing economy in the tourism sector, and like most U.S. territories, boasts strong contributions and support of U.S. military personnel and veterans. Finally, while it's true that the island's culture and language are obviously Hispanic, the Constitution does not bind states to any specific official language, and the fact is that every day, the number of



Spanish speakers on the U.S. mainland is increasing.

With all that Puerto Rico already contributes to the United States and all that it could contribute if made a U.S. state, it seems like common sense that the territory and its citizens should be allowed to pursue statehood and the rights to which they are entitled as U.S. citizens. And while Puerto Rico has its share of problems, notably its own public debt crisis, post-disaster management and rebuilding, and a “brain drain” situation, the outlook on these problems would significantly improve with statehood and all the resulting benefits of that change in status.



As it seems with all things, unfortunately, the status of Puerto Rico

happens to be incredibly political and in this case, much of the issue actually comes down to direct power in the two houses of Congress. In the Senate, adding two more seats would bring the total number to 102, which would slightly decrease the relative power of each of the states already represented. The House of Representatives would have to accommodate as well; while the number of representatives is fixed at 435, it's likely that Puerto Rico would require five representatives, all of which would have to come from other states, thus weakening their power of representation within the House significantly.

Additionally, making an exception for Puerto Rico to become a state would threaten the status quo with respect to the territorial system the United States has implemented, as territories such as the Virgin Islands and Guam could pursue their own claims for statehood with far more legitimacy. Finally, economists project that the addition of Puerto Rico to the union would raise the amount of federal money allocated to states annually by \$20 billion. All

under the shadow of President Trump, not one to spend big on territories as we've seen with Maria, who would likely come out against any measure to lift constraints on the status of Puerto Rico.

If the beleaguered federal response to the island's crisis following last year's hurricane Maria is any indication, it's clear that addressing the U.S.-inflicted problems of Puerto Rican debt, lack of voting rights and lack of much economic future must be brought to the attention of both politicians in Washington and the American public. Last year's referendum showed that support for statehood on the island at an all-time high. Whether Puerto Rico's problems should be addressed through statehood or some other avenue, it's clear that that, while Puerto Rico may be far removed from the minds of those who grace the halls of Congress, the island is home to U.S. citizens who are every day disenfranchised by inaction from the mainland, and are prevented from deciding their own future by an antiquated system.

Aryaman Sharma '20

### **Give the Rohingya a Chance**

For decades, the country of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) has subjected the Rohingya ethnic group to discrimination, religious violence, and gross abuses of human rights. Since 1982, Myanmar has refused to accept the Rohingya as citizens and has viewed the group as immigrants from Bangladesh who entered the country under British rule. The 2014 census conducted by Myanmar didn't even include the Rohingya; those who registered as part of the group were told to register as Bengali and indicate that their origins were in Bangladesh. Myanmar has also imposed a two-child limit on Rohingya families and has restricted interfaith marriage.



Over these decades, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya are estimated to have fled to neighboring countries, most notably Bangladesh. Since 2015, following a string of ethnicky-motivated attacks and crackdowns on the Rohingya by Myanmar security forces, it's estimated that 600,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh as refugees. Thousands more are believed to have died on the treacherous oversea journey.

Already one of the most densely populated countries on Earth, in January, Bangladesh made an agreement with Myanmar for the return of some of these refugees, despite some concerns raised by international aid groups. "We have proposed to repatriate 15,000 Rohingyas every week but they [Myanmar] did not agree to it," Bangladeshi Ambassador to Myanmar Sufiur Rahman said last month, according to the Dhaka Tribune. "They [Myanmar] have taken some preparations for the Rohingyas. They have agreed to take back 300 Rohingyas per day. Some 1,500 Rohingyas will be sent back in a week."



While Bangladesh's concerns regarding the number of foreign refugees inside their small country are understandable, in making this decision, Bangladesh fails to recognize the decades of pain and suffering that the Rohingya have endured in their home country. Repatriating these refugees to the nation from which they have fled is far from an acceptable solution, and one that the international community should do everything in their power to prevent from being carried out.

In the past, during crises similar to the one involving the Rohingya and Myanmar, not just one, but many countries have stepped up and taken in refugees. This occurred during the Syrian Civil War, when countries such as Germany, Sweden, and Canada all offered major refugee



resettlement, thus alleviating the burden on neighboring countries like Lebanon and Jordan. For the sake of the lives of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, Bangladesh should appeal to the world for assistance in dealing with the massive numbers of refugees that have arrived in recent years, rather than send the Rohingya back to a country that has essentially declared war upon their people.

Jason Palladino '20

### **The Mixed Fate of the Middle Kingdom**

China, one of the world's top global powers, has been dealt a geographical hand that has both allowed the country to become the most advanced nation in the world. However, this same geographical hand has also plagued the country for centuries with a fractured ethnic makeup and a number of difficult-to-control outlying provinces. Throughout China's long history its citizens have taken advantage of the land's blessings and reconciled its shortcomings to create the monumental force that is China today.

China's is the third largest nation in the world, which almost guarantees that it would have an incredibly diverse geographic makeup. China's boasts a large, central core that houses a majority of the population in megacities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Xian. This core has been integral to China's success as a civilization since its inception five thousand years ago. The land of this core can be roughly split into two areas: the north, which contains flat, expansive plains that extend from central China to the country's periphery at the Gobi Desert, and the south, a fertile but mountainous region that boasts many coastal cities and islands.



This core, today one of the most productive economic regions on the planet, would be nothing without its solid network of transportation. Historically and even in the modern day, China's most important form of transportation is aquatic transportation. By geographic luck alone, China sits on two of the arteries of the global trade network: the South and East China Seas. Thousands of ships pass in, out, and through these bodies of water on a daily basis and in addition to the country's overland routes, this easy access to transportation has allowed China to assume its role as a global trading juggernaut whose influence can be seen significantly on every continent.

China's ability to act as an export giant is also enabled by the country's river connections through the Yellow, Yangtze, and Pearl Rivers, as well as its Grand Canal, which connects its fertile heartland with the country's seaports. These inland arteries both promote internal trade as well as an easy distribution of food, goods, and amenities. China has taken advantage of its trading

capabilities for its entire history, and this shows no signs of stopping. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the 21st-Century Silk Road Economic Initiative, a massive project that looks to incentivize trade a number of small, landlocked Eurasian nations and facilitate overland transportation between China and the European continent.



The effects of China's geography can be seen in the demographics of the country. With over 1.3 billion people, China's massive size and fertile land have permitted the country to maintain the world's largest population, though it will likely soon be passed by India on this metric. China is also home to a myriad of different ethnic and linguistic groups. One weakness of China's geography is that features such as the

Himalayas and Gobi desert have served to isolate certain ethnic minorities such as Tibetans or the Uyghur people, minorities that have occasionally resorted to terrorism in attempts to free themselves from the grip of Chinese authorities in Beijing, thousands of miles away.

Regardless of the problems that may arise from China's massive size in both geographies in population, it is in the country's best interest to reach out to the global community and establish connections for the future of its commerce. China must also seek to increase the standard of living enjoyed by its citizens and seek to solve its problems such as air and water pollution and the integration of all its people into the fabric of the nation.

## Fairfield Prep Student Body Poll Results

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, members of the Political Awareness Society set up a booth at both lunches where students could make their vote count on some of the day's most relevant issues.

The question posed at both lunches was:

“Should the state and federal governments pass stricter laws on gun control?”

	Yes	No	Other	Total
Freshman	20	4	2	26
Sophomore	21	5	2	28
Junior	43	12	3	56
Senior	37	20	4	61
Total	121	41	11	173
Percentage	69.9%	23.7%	6.4%	

