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Opinion

National Parks for the 1 Percent

[Timothy Egan](#) NOV. 3, 2017

America's Best Idea is now just another commodity. A president who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, as Oscar Wilde had it, wants to make it prohibitively expensive for many to enter the most popular national parks.

You may have missed this, between the indictments, the terrorist attack, the Civil War revisionism. But the Trump administration has proposed nearly [tripling the entrance fees](#) to select national parks, to \$70.

The man who loves nothing so much as his gold-plated bathroom fixtures wants to gouge people who want to experience something that all of Donald Trump's minions could never create. It's a teardrop in the federal budget, but is emblematic of the ocean of wrong coming from this president.

First, we already own these parks — Glacier, Olympic, Mount Rainier, Zion, Yellowstone, the names themselves music to lovers of magic in the natural world. They are a birthright of citizenship.

Second, the Trump administration wants to jack up the price of admission to our most spectacular public lands while moving to *cut* the Park Service budget by almost \$300 million. The new fees would add \$70 million. Go figure. His attacks on the parks would be the biggest cut to the agency since World War II.

Third, he not only wants to make it more costly to get into beloved public places, he also plans to [take away land](#) already protected in ways similar to national parks. He told Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah he's going to shrink two extraordinary national monuments — “for you, Orrin.” It's a corrupt-sounding gift to a senator, and a giveaway of a public trust. No drain of this swamp.

But this is the Trump ethos. There's always a velvet rope — coming soon, at the rim of the Grand Canyon — a place for V.I.P.s, deal-makers and insiders, and too bad for everyone else.

It may sound like no big deal — raising admission fees in the 17 parks targeted for price gouging — when Trump's government is running a \$660 billion deficit. You'd pay \$107 to get into Disney World. But national parks are not theme parks, market-driven to match the latest entertainment blockbusters.

All national parks should be free, like the great museums of Washington. We should care for these special places with a budget commensurate to their value, treating them like the [huge income generators](#) they are, producing \$34 billion to local businesses. Instead, we starve them nearly to death.

In the bizarro world of this administration, taxpayers are being asked to [subsidize a dying industry](#), coal mining, while their government is slashing the budget for a growing one that is responsible for four times as many jobs.

We saw again this week how confused so many people are about basic elements of our history. When a general, the Trump chief of staff John F. Kelly, doesn't even have a grade-school understanding of the Civil War, you know we need more park-uniformed historians.

Kelly should visit the national battlefield at Antietam, site of the bloodiest single day in our history. Or walk up the slope of the national military park at Fredericksburg, Va. There, the Union Army's Irish

Brigade was slaughtered by the slaveholding forces of Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The park service keeps that vital history alive. Trump's budget would drastically cut money for historic preservation, and eliminate more than 1,200 full-time employees.

It's too bad that the statue of Teddy Roosevelt in front of the American Museum of Natural History was recently defaced, which a handful of extremists took responsibility for. Roosevelt was a founding progressive voice who saw parks and public land as a basic right.

National parks are "as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical," wrote Dayton Duncan, a parks historian and a co-writer of many a Ken Burns documentary.

Ryan Zinke, the thin-skinned and very strange secretary of the interior, says the price hikes for select parks are necessary to ensure their preservation. Yes, the parks have a huge backlog of things that need to be fixed. Broken toilets, pockmarked roads, untended trails. And yet, there were 331 million visits to these much-loved and abused places last year — a record.

The solution is not to make it more difficult for those who are financially struggling to see their parks. Yes, again, *their* parks.

We could, for instance, not build Trump's nonsensical border wall, which looks like it will cost upward of \$20 billion, more than eight times the entire proposed budget for the Park Service. (Wait — wasn't Mexico supposed to pay for that?)

Or we could keep the estate tax, which affects only about 1 out of every 500 people who die every year, and raises \$20 billion as well. The bigger question, after all, is about inheritance: What would we rather pass on to our children?